

Cautionary tales

Using a story to promote discussion is a useful way of teaching young people about the dangers of alcohol as Márianna Csóti explains.

When teaching PSHE, it is important not to judge and not to moralise so it can be difficult to give important messages, such as the dangers of alcohol misuse, to young people.

Using a story to stimulate discussion on alcohol takes the spot light off individuals and any decisions about appropriate and inappropriate behaviour are made, not by someone in authority, but by others in their own peer group.

Understanding the dangers resulting from alcohol misuse and how alcohol affects their health encourages young people to take personal responsibility at a time when taking risks can be part of their drive for independence. As well as understanding the risks of binge drinking, young people need to know that regular heavy drinking can lead to alcoholism.

Preparation

If the children have learning difficulties explain what the story, *I Don't Remember*, is about first. Depending on the children's ability, use the questions following the story to form the basis of a discussion or to provide information on drinking alcohol in a more formal way. Children with Asperger Syndrome, for example, may appreciate facts more than discussion.

Suggestions to answers, where appropriate, have been given to help if ideas run dry, to challenge viewpoints and to spark further discussion.

I Don't Remember

The bouncers at the door frisked Richard and Mark before they went into the disco. After a casual look round the disco, which was well underway, Richard went to the men's toilets. They were empty. Mark stood guarding the door to the toilets in case someone came. Richard went into a cubicle, locked the door and climbed on to the toilet seat to open a small window at the top. Simon was outside and climbed onto the windowsill to hand Richard a bottle of whisky. Then he walked round to the entrance to be checked by the bouncers.

Throughout the evening the bottle of whisky changed hands and frequent visits were made to the toilet to drink from it. The bouncers hadn't spotted it this time.

The boys danced, oggled girls and drank. An occasional cigarette was lit.

At the end of the disco, the three of them left with the rest of the crowd. Another bottle of whisky waited for them by the big steel rubbish bins outside. They had hidden it earlier. Simon was staying the night at Richard's place but as Mark had to get home, they walked in the direction of Mark's house. Richard's mum didn't wait up for him so he and Simon had plenty of time.

They swigged as they went and staggered and laughed. It was a great night.

As they passed the gates of the primary school, they decided to climb in. They wandered round the playground and smashed the empty bottle against a wall, watching it scatter glass. Then they walked round the buildings, peering in and trying doors but they were locked. Mark stayed back to climb a wall.

Richard and Simon found themselves back at the gates and automatically scrambled back over and lurched their way to Richard's house.

Mrs Collins was woken early by a knock at the door. Her heart sank when she saw the blue uniform framed by the glass panel of the door, wondering what Richard had been up to this time. He was nothing but trouble.

The policeman explained his purpose and Mrs Collins led him upstairs to where Richard and Simon were sharing a room.

'I'm trying to trace the whereabouts of Mark Stanton. Mrs Stanton seems to think Mark was out with you last night. At a disco.' The policeman found it hard to breathe in the stuffy room. The smell was stomach-churning.

Richard rubbed his eyes. He felt sick and his head hurt. 'Yeah. He was.'

'Can you tell me where you last saw him?'

Richard thought but his last memory was of them leaving the disco together. Hadn't Mark gone straight home? 'I don't remember.'

'This is important, he's been reported missing. What about your friend? Was he with you too?'

Simon was just as confused as Richard. Hadn't Mark gone home after they'd split up? But Simon didn't even remember where they had split up.

The policeman sighed. 'Which way did you come home from the disco? Can you outline the route you took - in as much detail as possible?'

Richard's mind was a blank.

'Didn't we go most of the way with him?' Simon asked Richard.

'I think so...' Richard said doubtfully.

'Was Mark under the influence of alcohol too?' The policeman asked, as it was obvious that the boys had hangovers.

'Yes,' they admitted, avoiding Mrs Collins' eyes.

On Monday morning, the school caretaker came across Mark's body at the bottom of a wall. He had fallen off and banged his head. And he was dead.

Author's note: This story is roughly based on an actual event where a young man had been unwittingly left to die by his friends who were too drunk to notice his absence.

Discussion questions

1. What are the effects of drinking alcohol? Group them into positive and negative effects.

Positive:

- It reduces anxiety.
- It can make people feel more confident.
- It reduces inhibitions so that people are more relaxed and outgoing.
- It dilates the blood vessels so that the drinker feels warm.
- Small quantities of red wine have been suggested to have a positive affect on the heart.
- Drinking small quantities of alcohol in some cultures is considered sociable.

Negative:

- Reducing inhibitions can make people enjoy themselves more but it can also make people behave in a way that is uncharacteristic to them when they are sober. For example, someone might have sex when drunk, but regret it the following morning. A reduction of inhibitions also means that someone's conscience is dulled so that the person may commit a crime he or she normally wouldn't have.
- A drunk person may be less able to control his or her emotions, becoming violent and angry or maudlin and weepy.
- Reaction times are slowed, judgement can be poor and control of body movement is impaired. This is very significant for those who drive or operate machinery under the influence of alcohol.
- Speech can become slurred.
- A drunk person can lose bladder and bowel control.
- A drunk person may feel sick and vomit.
- Death can occur from acute alcohol poisoning or from choking on vomit while unconscious.
- The person may not be able to remember what he or she did as alcohol can cause blackouts. (A sort of brief amnesia.)
- Heavy drinking can leave you with a hangover the following day.
- Alcohol can be addictive and the person may become dependent on it, becoming an alcoholic.
- Some medicinal drugs must not be mixed with alcohol as their combined affects are unsafe.
- Large quantities of alcohol reduces sex drive and contributes to infertility.
- In the long-term, the liver and brain may become damaged or cancers of the mouth and throat may develop. It can also cause gastritis, pancreatitis and duodenal disorders.
- It can raise blood pressure and increase the risk of having strokes.

- Heavy drinking over time can damage your brain (memory loss) and can change your personality.

2. What are the signs of alcoholic drinking getting out of control on a daily basis (tending towards alcoholism)?

- Finding empty bottles or cans of alcohol that the person has drunk alone.
- Always smelling alcohol on the person's breath.
- Finding the person drinking in secret.
- The person being unusually aggressive.
- The person having unsteady hands.
- The person needing to drink to perform everyday tasks.
- The person having blood-shot eyes.

3. How were you brought up? Were you allowed alcohol from a young age or was it forbidden at home? Has this affected your approach to drinking now? (Personal responses required.)

4. The legal age limit for buying alcohol is eighteen. Have you succeeded in buying it under age? (Personal response required.)

Why is there an age limit restriction?

To protect young people from drinking in excess and damaging their bodies. It is also easier for young people to become addicted.

5. Think of as many reasons as you can why there are bouncers at discos to check for weapons, illegal substances (drugs) and alcohol.

- To protect all the disco-goers.
- To protect the people working at the disco.
- To prevent the disco from being shut down in the event of negligence being proved.
- To prevent violence.
- To prevent drug dealing.
- To prevent people vomiting all over the place.
- To prevent the risk of collapse from adverse side effects.
- To prevent any deaths from drugs or violence happening on the premises.
- To prevent vandalism.
- To act responsibly.

6. Should someone under the influence of drugs or alcohol be responsible for his or her actions? Give reasons.

Yes: Otherwise who is accountable for what happens? However, courts can look upon someone more leniently if the person was not aware of what he or she was doing. This does not mean that it is OK for offences to be repeated, using alcohol or drugs as a shield.

No: It might be the person's first time getting drunk or trying out an illegal drug and they should not be blamed for effects that could not have been predicted by the person.

7. In Britain, it is socially acceptable to drink alcohol. This is not the case in all cultures. Would you respect a teetotaler's wishes or would you be tempted to 'spike' his or her drink?

(Personal response required.)

Can you think of a situation where it would be very dangerous indeed to spike someone's drink? If someone was on medication, it might be very dangerous to mix it with alcohol or an illegal drug. You might not necessarily know if the person was taking medication. Many drugs are taken regularly by people to keep certain conditions under control; for example, epilepsy drugs.

8. What do girls think of boys who don't drink? How do boys regard other boys who don't drink? Britain is a macho society where men must be men to win approval - have you ever felt pressurised to drink alcohol so as not to feel left out?

(Personal responses required.)

How could you refuse alcohol without feeling stupid?

You could say: 'It's against my religion.'
'I can't. I'm driving.'
'I need to be clear headed to do my homework.'
'Alcohol makes me ill.'
'I can't because of a medical condition (or because of my medication).'
'I can't because I'm training.'
'I don't want a drink. I'm fine as I am.'
'I don't like it, so I don't drink it.'

9. Why do people smash beer bottles in the streets, car parks and children's playgrounds?

- Because they think it's fun.
- Because they feel anti-social and want to fight against authority and good behaviour.
- Because they are thoughtless and do not think of the people who might get hurt or the people who have to clear up after them or the damage they might cause.

Have you ever done it yourself? If so, why?

(Personal responses required.)

10. Do you use alcohol as an emotional prop? For example, many men use alcohol for 'Dutch Courage' to ask a potential partner out.

(Personal response required.)

What is use and what is misuse of alcohol?

Use:

- Drinking socially when you are with others to enjoy the atmosphere and the warm feelings it gives.
- Drinking to celebrate a special occasion.

Misuse:

- Drinking with the sole purpose of getting drunk.
 - Drinking to dull your feelings on a regular basis because you cannot cope with what is happening in your life.
 - Drinking sufficient to make your behaviour offensive to others.
 - It is an offence to drive or operate machinery, mechanical or electrical equipment whilst unfit because of alcohol in the bloodstream. In some countries it is an offence to drive with any amount of alcohol in the bloodstream. In Britain, the maximum amount of alcoholic drink allowed while driving is four units, but depending on your size or sex, even this may be sufficient to fail the breath test. (Women can be more affected than men drinking the same amount because their bodies hold less water and so the alcohol is more concentrated.)
 - It is dangerous to drink alcohol before going swimming or taking part in other active sports.
- (1 unit = ½ pint beer or cider = 1 glass wine = 1 measure spirits)

Other areas of help

Alcohol Concern: 020 7928 7377;
www.alcoholconcern.org.uk
Alcoholics Anonymous: 01904 644026; helpline: 0845 769 7555; www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk
Drinkline: 0800 917 8282
The Portman Group: 020 7907 3700;
www.portmangroup.co.uk

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