

Self-help groups

Self-help groups are based on the premise that people with similar problems can help each other overcome them. But they need facilitation; since sniffing is predominantly a young person's habit, groups for sniffers may need extra help to get off the ground and maintain momentum. It is a difficult balancing act for a professional to at the same time provide the support a group requires while abdicating the leadership role in order to enable the participants to take control.

Self-help groups need not be thought of only as curative but also as preventive. Taking control of some part of one's life is likely to increase self-esteem; since low self-esteem is a predisposing factor in drug and solvent use, redistributing resources towards activities operated by young people themselves may be a useful preventive strategy. On the other hand, it may mean that resources do not reach the most disadvantaged groups since these may find it harder to operate in self-help 'mode'.

Support for professionals

Referral to another agency is often a necessary part of any treatment programme. Somewhere in the network of agencies help may be available for the person being referred.

But often it is not; in any case, the best person to deal with a youngster with a drug or solvent problem is likely to be the person who knows that youngster best (this is not always understood, or people do not want to believe it). What is crucial is the relationship between people, rather than knowledge about drug effects. Professionals need help and support in their work with drug or solvent using clients and this should be structured into any contract they make to work with such a client.

Social action

Use of drugs and solvents cannot be attributed only to individual pathology; neither can it be blamed on the functioning or dysfunctioning of a particular family or community. Mike Shooter put it like this:

"Some children and their families are abusing solvents or alcohol because there is precious little else for them to do. Unemployment and an ever-decreasing faith in the relevance of the education system to their lives has reduced some kids to social isolation. These kids can't afford to get to the leisure centres that are being built in most big cities and couldn't afford to make use of them if they could... get there.

"They are reduced to hanging around, getting their kicks, with other similarly down-beaten individuals, and solvent or alcohol abuse is about the cheapest, most easily available relief from the boredom and despair of their general lives... To do something about that is a general political task and not a psychological/therapeutic one."² ■

Solvent misuse is still the UK's biggest youth drug misuse problem

Surveys of solvent misuse in the UK in the 1980s confirm that, after cannabis, solvents are the most widely misused substances. There has been no discernable drop in usage over the decade; typically 4 to 8 per cent of secondary school-age children have tried sniffing, with wide regional variations. Some surveys show the proportion of girl users as high as or higher than boys.

Richard Ives

The author is consultant to the National Children's Bureau solvent misuse project and a freelance consultant and trainer specialising in young people and drugs.

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SURVEYS OF SOLVENT sniffing in the United Kingdom since 1982 have consistently found that solvents are the next most commonly tried substance after alcohol, tobacco and cannabis. If we consider physical harm including ill-health and death, solvent sniffing would almost certainly climb above cannabis.

In most of these studies, secondary school-age pupils have been asked to complete a questionnaire in school time. Nearly all have asked a question which sought to establish whether the respondent has ever sniffed. What do they tell us about the dimensions of one of Britain's most serious drug problems?

Most young people know of solvent sniffing. In 1983, a Department of Education survey found that 97 per cent of a sample of young caucasians were aware of glue sniffing.¹ Nevertheless, only a small proportion of young people have sniffed. In Scotland's Lothian region, 5.4 per cent of the men aged 15-16 and 4 per cent of the young women surveyed said they had sniffed solvents.²

At the other end of the country, a study of 7343 11 to 18 year-olds in nine secondary schools in East Sussex found that 8 per cent reported having tried solvent sniffing.³ Similarly, 8.5 per cent of 525 pupils in seven Berkshire schools admitted to having tried solvent sniffing.⁴

Two parallel studies in Macclesfield separately surveyed school pupils and YTS trainees. Six per cent of the sample of 1729 11 to 18 year-olds in ten secondary schools had sniffed. However, as many as 14 per cent of the 294 16 to 17 year-olds on YTS courses reported having tried sniffing.⁵

A study carried out early in 1985 questioned 807 pupils from three schools in Bournemouth and three in Southampton, finding that in excess of 8 per cent had tried solvents.⁶

A survey of 4501 comprehensive school pupils in 28 schools in South Glamorgan was done at about the same time.⁷ In four schools home visits were made to survey the non-attenders. Just over 6 per cent of all the

THE FAD REFUSES TO FADE



Leeds Health Education Unit/Health Education Authority

Sniffing solvents: as many as 8 per cent of youngsters try it and every year over 100 die

pupils surveyed had tried solvents but were not sniffing at the time of the survey, and a further 0.7 per cent were currently sniffing. Among children aged 15 to 16, nearly 9 per cent had sniffed or were currently sniffing. However, 58 per cent of the sniffers had tried sniffing before the age of 13.

In a study of 900 young people in schools in the West Midlands a similar proportion (6.6 per cent) were found to have tried sniffing.⁸

Late '80s studies

Two more recent studies have found very different levels of solvent sniffing. In 1986 to 1987 in Pontefract, just 1.5 per cent of 1882 fourth-year pupils in 10 schools reported experimental sniffing.⁹ However, 11 per cent of 3073 11 to 16 year-olds in six

inner London schools said they had tried sniffing.¹⁰

A recent review article discusses some of these studies and suggests that 3.5 to 10 per cent of young people have experimented with sniffing and 0.5 to 1 per cent are current users.¹¹

In 1988 a large-scale (but non-random) survey of young people's health behaviour found that among 11 to 16 year-olds in schools throughout the country, only 1.6 per cent (of 15,071) said they had used solvents.¹² One striking finding was that a higher proportion of fourth- and fifth-year girls reported having used solvents (2.5 per cent) compared to fourth-year boys (1.6 per cent).

This comparatively low proportion of sniffers was confirmed in a more recent survey where (at 2.1 per cent) the overall proportion of girls reporting sniffing was higher than boys (1.7 per cent).¹³

A survey of 1063 pupils and students aged 11 to 19 in Portsmouth and Havant found that 4 per cent of respondents claimed

to have tried solvent sniffing.¹⁴ Surprisingly, over 7 per cent of 11 year-olds said they had done so.

However, the authors were not convinced that the sniffing reported in the survey was always of the kind that leads to intoxication. "Pupils... may have felt some guilt about their experimental sniffing of the glue or cleaning fluids kept in their own homes – and reported it to the survey as solvent sniffing."

Most of the surveys cited so far were school-based: another place to contact young people is youth clubs. A high level of experimental use was found among 212 people aged between 9 and 28 years old in eight youth clubs or centres in the London borough of Tower Hamlets.¹⁵ Almost a quarter of the males and over a fifth of the females interviewed had tried glues or solvents.

This suggests that young people who attend youth clubs may be more likely to sniff solvents than the general population of young people surveyed through schools. ■

Use persists despite media neglect

The surveys cited in this article span the '80s. The absence of any discernable trend shows that, despite the wax and wane of media attention, the actual proportion of users has not varied a great deal – users have simply been more or less visible.

This conclusion is supported by Anderson and colleagues' study of solvent-related deaths reported elsewhere in this issue of *Druglink*. Deaths from solvent-related causes increased over the '80s although the extent of media coverage implies that the problem had peaked in 1983.¹⁶

A further important finding is that while proportionately fewer girls than boys use solvents, there is less difference between the sexes

than is usually thought.

We can conclude that a small proportion of children in every secondary school will have tried sniffing. While this proportion may vary by sex, ethnicity, region and so on, it will most likely lie somewhere between 4 and 8 per cent. At any one time a proportion of these children who have tried solvents – perhaps a tenth – will currently be using sniffable products to achieve intoxication, and some will be heavy users.

Most experimenters with solvents will survive the experience and will stop sniffing, but some will carry on for many years, and some will die sniffing-related deaths.

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