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Research Unit in Health,  
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# Young people, cannabis and family life

This briefing reports on a study of the role of cannabis in young people's lives during their early teenage years. Interviews explored cannabis-related beliefs and behaviour of young people aged 13-15 within the context of their everyday lives. The study took place in 2000/2001 during a heated public debate about cannabis de-regulation; a debate which has culminated in the recent reclassification of cannabis in Scotland and the UK, from a Class B to a Class C drug. This move raises questions, from both health and criminal justice perspectives, about the likely impact of such a change on young people's behaviour. The study drew upon theoretical and policy frameworks which highlight the importance of listening to young people's perspectives and the need to understand young people's risk behaviours in context.

## Key points

- 1 Many young people who use cannabis also smoke cigarettes. Nowadays, some young people start with cannabis and then go on to smoke cigarettes. Using cannabis can also help to keep young people smoking cigarettes - for example, they may use cigarettes as a substitute if cannabis is not available.
- 1 Boys in particular seem to get some positive things from their cannabis use - for example, it gives them something to do, helps them to feel part of the crowd and sometimes makes them feel good about themselves. This is especially true for boys who spend a lot of their leisure time hanging out on the streets.
- 1 Older siblings sometimes encourage their younger brothers and sisters to try cannabis - they may give them their first joint or lend them money to buy cannabis. Young people also learn about cannabis from their older brothers and sisters or those of their friends.
- 1 According to some young cannabis users, parents adopt a proactive, harm reduction approach to their alcohol use. With cannabis, however, it seems that some parents either fail to acknowledge their children's cannabis use, or hold an ambivalent attitude to it. In practice, this means taking a reactive approach, responding only if they catch their children using cannabis.
- 1 Most young people think that the laws relating to cannabis are too strict and should be relaxed - but there should still be some rules.



## The study

The study came about in response to research evidence showing that since the early 1990's there has been no decline in regular smoking rates among 12-15 year olds in Scotland and a considerable increase in cannabis use among teenagers, with around 40% of Scottish 15 year olds reporting that they have used cannabis (Miller & Plant, 1996). Few studies have explored young teenagers' own views and opinions on cannabis. The current study addresses this gap by investigating young people's cannabis-related beliefs and behaviour from their own perspectives, and against the background of their everyday lives. This approach recognises the importance of acknowledging young people as competent, interactive members of society, whose voices should be heard in the framing of policy and practice in all areas affecting their lives.

Fifty nine young people aged 13-15, both boys and girls, with a wide range of cigarette and cannabis use experience, took part in the study. The participants were recruited from youth clubs in four contrasting localities in the east of Scotland. This approach reflected the researcher's previous career as a youth worker and allowed the participants more freedom and autonomy than might have been possible in a school-based setting. At an early stage, the researcher consulted groups of young people to work out the best approach to take and the sort of questions to ask. Thereafter, participants were given a choice of taking part in an individual interview or in a paired interview with a friend of their choice. Choosing to be interviewed with one or two close friends proved to be very popular and very few young people who were asked declined to take part. Each interview lasted around forty five minutes, and a loosely structured topic guide was used in conjunction with an 'agree-disagree' card game. The interviews explored young people's cannabis-related beliefs and behaviour as well as different aspects of their lives, including where they live, how they spend their leisure time and their views and experience of other risk behaviours, such as smoking and drinking. With the participants' permission, all of the interviews were tape-recorded and fully transcribed.

## Findings

### Cannabis and cigarettes

Some of the links between young people's tobacco and cannabis use are now well established. We know that most cannabis users also smoke cigarettes, and that, for some young people, tobacco may act as a 'gateway' to cannabis (Miller & Plant, 1996). Data from the current study suggest that this 'gateway' effect may also work in reverse, with cannabis introducing some young people

to tobacco and subsequently to cigarette smoking. For some young people, their tobacco and cannabis use are intertwined - for example, being a smoker 'equipped' them with the paraphernalia required to have a cannabis session. Others expressed a prior dislike of cigarettes, yet did not hesitate to smoke cigarettes as a substitute when cannabis was not available. For a few young cannabis users, being a cigarette smoker offered the additional advantage of conserving cannabis supplies:

*'It's just like if you're wanting to hang on to a little bit and you've got fags, you can keep some'*

Nathan (13)

*'Just leave a bit for the morn's morning or something, or a bit for your sleep. That's what's good about it, puts you straight to sleep - nae hassles'*

Neal (14)

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### Cannabis and street-based leisure

For some young people, cannabis played an important role in street-based leisure cultures. For example, many boys used cannabis as a way of combating boredom. Others used cannabis as a vehicle for creating excitement, for example by taunting the police. Cannabis also played a role in helping some boys to acquire certain types of social identity. For some boys, particularly those whose friendships appeared to include a strong competitive dynamic, cannabis offered an opportunity to maintain or improve their standing with their peers. These boys engaged in exaggerated boasting about how much cannabis they smoked, and their expertise in using different methods of smoking cannabis, and they routinely made fun of others who were not able to demonstrate the same level of expertise:

*'See me and my mates are always smoking hash, like, have competitions and stuff, it's crazy. Me and my mates can take a hell of a lot, like, I'm not bragging, but we do take a hell of a lot. And if somebody comes into the group and, like, has one bong and coughs a lot, it's just like, you slag them'*

Bruce (15)

By contrast, the girls in this study, including the cannabis users, tended to be more 'alcohol oriented' and spent their leisure time in more structured pursuits.

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### The role of older siblings

Twenty four participants (40%), sixteen boys and eight girls, identified themselves as cannabis users in this study and half of these revealed that older siblings had

played a role in shaping their cannabis-related beliefs and behaviour. In some cases, this meant introducing them to cannabis. More commonly, older brothers and sisters supplied the cannabis, sometimes providing a credit facility. Older siblings also exerted influence in more subtle ways, often acting as 'lay experts', possessing knowledge and experience relating to various aspects of cannabis use. For example, beliefs about the supposed health benefits of cannabis, in particular, the idea that cannabis somehow acts to combat, or even reverse, some of the detrimental effects of smoking, sometimes gained currency in this way:

Robert (14):

'Smoking hash is better for you than smoking actual normal fags, well folk say so'

Interviewer:

Yeah? Why do you think that is?

Rose (15):

'Cause it clears your airways or something. I dinnae ken, that's what I got telt'

Interviewer:

Where did you hear that from?

Rose:

'My brother, that's what he says to me'

In other instances, older siblings exerted a positive influence, helping young people to draw sensible boundaries, and actively discouraging their involvement in 'risky' behaviours.

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## Parents, alcohol and cannabis

One Scottish study which investigated the health-related views and needs of young people reports that many participants provided accounts of their parents adopting a harm reduction approach to their alcohol use, perhaps in an attempt to protect them from exposure to other, more serious risk behaviours (Shucksmith & Hendry, 1998). In practice, this means that some parents 'accept' that their children will drink and that the best way of helping them to achieve this safely and in moderation is by initiating them into drinking within controlled and acceptable limits. Many participants in the current study provided similar accounts in relation to alcohol, but, in contrast, some young cannabis users implied that parents may prefer to turn a blind eye to their cannabis use. Parents may 'know' that their children are using cannabis, but will not respond unless they actually 'catch' their children:

Interviewer:

So what do you reckon your folks would make of it if they knew you were smoking hash?

Nicol (15):

'My dad would kill me, well my dad kens, but like, if he caught me'

Ben (15):

'My dad found out 'cause he seen a rockie-bundle all over my jacket from joints and that. He just laughed actually, he just said, "rocket man", so I said, "aye", and he goes, "just as long as I dinnae catch you". 'Cause he probably used to dae it when he was young as well'

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## Cannabis and the law

The study took place within the context of a public debate about cannabis de-regulation, and many young people volunteered their opinions on this issue without being prompted. Most participants in the current study, cannabis users and non-users, favoured legal reform, although most emphasised that any change in the law should be accompanied by controls of some sort. Three broad positions emerged. Some participants favoured a relaxation in the law, but only for medical purposes, while others felt that this should be extended to allow cannabis to be used recreationally. Many participants drew attention to the adverse social consequences of alcohol as their main justification for supporting cannabis reform. A few participants, some cannabis users, others non-users, presented arguments which were opposed to reform. These non-users tended to hold exaggerated beliefs about the risks associated with cannabis, whilst cannabis users shared a concern that legal reform would make cannabis use more widespread. In particular, high academic achievers expressed concern about cannabis reform having an adverse effect on their school work, whilst others living in less advantaged circumstances worried about being exploited by local shopkeepers:

'Like, you can have a fag and then still do, go in and do school work. Whereas if you do cannabis, trying to do work, I mean, you just laugh, it's just really, I don't think it'll ever be, well I hope it'll never be'

Mel (15)

'And I think they're gonnae legalise it, and it's gonnae become a big trouble. That's what I was saying, ken, we'll end up, ken some shops will sell, say, like a joint an' that, like the shop doon the street. I think that's what'll happen. 'Cause then that's how they'll make their money'

Rose (15)

## Implications for research, policy and practice

- 1 Exploring young people's risk behaviours in context is a useful approach, contributing to the important policy goal of addressing life circumstances as well as risk behaviours.
- 1 Services which address young people's risk behaviours should be much more co-ordinated, for example, smoking cessation and drugs education practitioners should work more closely together.
- 1 Drugs education programmes should seek to reduce the impact that older siblings may have in supporting young people's cannabis use.
- 1 The implementation of cannabis deregulation presents a timely opportunity to explore the impact of this change on how young people and their parents understand cannabis and its risks, and how this may affect behaviour.

## References

Miller, PM & Plant, M (1996) Drinking, Smoking and Illicit Drug Use Among 15 and 16 Year Olds in the United Kingdom, *British Medical Journal* 313, 394-397.

Shucksmith, J & Hendry, L (1998) *Health Issues and Adolescents*, Routledge, London.

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