

Children and Young People

At Smokefree North West one of our key priorities is to break the cycle of children and young people's addiction and exposure to tobacco. We believe that every child and young person in the North West is entitled to a tobacco-free future. If we are going to break the cycle, and challenge the tobacco industry's recruitment of new smokers, we need to be able to pinpoint when and how children become aware of smoking and when they form their attitudes towards it.

Most of children's exposure to secondhand smoke comes from parents, and occurs in the home.

Although it is generally believed that young people are influenced or become aware of cigarettes from peers in their early teens – and it is at this age that they are most likely to start smoking – research suggests that children actually become aware of cigarettes at a much younger age:

- The vast majority of smokers start smoking before the age of 18¹
- Three out of four children are aware of cigarettes before they reach the age of five whether or not their parents smoke²
- By the age of 15, one in five children have become regular smokers. Trying just one cigarette can make children more likely to start smoking several years later³

It is well known that experimentation at an early age increases the likelihood that people will continue to smoke in later life.

Trends

Statistics from 2004 illustrate that the national percentage of children under 11 who have experimented with smoking fell from 53 per cent in 1982 to 39 per cent in 2004.²

Although the national data showed an overall decline in smoking among children and young people, worryingly, local variations paint a very different picture. In March and April 2009, Trading Standards North West conducted a survey of nearly 14,000 young people which indicated the smoking rates were much higher: 22% of 14-17 year olds identified themselves as smokers and over a third (36%) of 17 year olds were regular smokers. Young females were more likely to say they smoked than young males (26% vs. 17%).⁴ A similar survey released in 2007 revealed that over half (57%) of young smokers said their parents smoked – suggesting a link.⁵

Factors affecting the likelihood of children starting to smoke include one or both parents smoking and parental attitude to the habit. Young smokers are also influenced by their friends and older siblings smoking. Other influences include tobacco advertising and the glamorisation of smoking in films and on TV.²

Secondhand smoke (SHS)

Reducing children and young people's exposure to SHS, including in the womb, is a key priority for Smokefree North West.

Exposure to secondhand smoke causes a range of life long health problems and has more immediate effects on children, increasing the risk of asthma, bronchitis and, in the case of babies, cot death.²

As an adult, breathing in secondhand smoke increases a non-smoker's risk of lung cancer by 24 per cent and heart disease by 25 per cent and can damage almost every organ in the body – so imagine the harm it can cause a child!² Their smaller organs are proportionally more greatly affected.

Foster care and smoking

The overriding priority in foster care must be for the health and wellbeing of the child. Children in care are amongst the most vulnerable in our society and are more likely to be disadvantaged in later life.

Secondhand smoke presents a significant risk to a child's health and an adult role model who smokes greatly increases the likelihood that a child will also take up the habit. In a recent study 99 per cent of 16 year old regular smokers lived with at least one smoker.⁶

Suffering mental trauma as a child also increases the likelihood of smoking in adult life. Two thirds of children in care smoke – far higher than the average.⁷

Smokefree North West believes it is in the interest of all children to be raised in a tobacco-free environment and all fostering services should be moving towards a position where children and young people in care are protected and only placed in smokefree homes.

Prevention

So how do we make a tobacco-free future for children and young people? Changing the way tobacco and smoking are perceived in society will go a long way to reducing the take up of smoking among young people. It is Smokefree North West's aim to make tobacco less acceptable in society, so that smoking is not viewed as normal behaviour.

In October 2007 the age limit for buying tobacco products was raised from 16 to 18 in England, Wales and Scotland. This includes cigarettes, cigars, 'roll your own' tobacco and even rolling papers. A special information website for young people was established at <http://www.tobacco18.co.uk>. Shopkeepers found selling cigarettes to young people can face fines of up to £2,500. Although this is a major step forward, legislation alone is not enough. A wide range of tactics must come into play, including cultural change, better education about the harm caused by tobacco, and enforcement.

Smokefree North West wants to work with our partners to promote positive messages about the benefits of not smoking as opposed to allowing smoking to become an 'illicit' – and therefore cool – activity. By educating children about the ways they are exposed to smoking, including through advertising and movies, and supporting them to take their own action, we can better equip them to make informed choices about smoking so that they can enjoy a smokefree future.

Youth advocacy – the active involvement of young people in challenging the social norms and the tobacco industry in particular – plays a major role. There is an effective youth advocacy movement in the United States with organisations such as Reality Check and Truth challenging the tobacco industry and the way it targets young people. In the UK the North West is leading the way through organisations such as D-MYST and ATYC.

Smokefree North West has commissioned Our Life to manage a film competition called Smoke & Mirrors, which provides young people with the opportunity to express their opinions on the tobacco industry. Log on at www.seethroughtheillusion.co.uk.

Smoking statistics – children and young people

- Smoking while pregnant can result in babies with low birth weight and susceptibility to ear and chest infections.
- Babies born to women who smoke during pregnancy are more likely to die during the first four weeks of life.
- Children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of second hand smoke because of their smaller, immature and developing organs.
- Second hand smoke is a preventable cause of conditions including glue ear, bronchitis, pneumonia and increased asthma incidents in those with a pre-existing condition.²
- Child smokers are particularly susceptible to negative health effects of smoking – coughs, increased phlegm, wheeziness and shortness of breath – and they miss more days of school.²
- 22% of 14-17 year olds claim to smoke in the North West.⁴
- Young women are more likely to smoke than young men.⁴
- The vast majority of smokers begin smoking before they are 19.¹
- 50% of teenagers who continue smoking long term will be killed by their habit.⁸
- Young people are three times more likely to smoke if both their parents smoke.⁹
- Young people are more likely to smoke cigarette brands that are advertised and promoted heavily.¹⁰
- 10% of 14-17 year old smokers in the North West regularly buy their cigarettes from vending machines.⁴

References and information sources

¹ General Household Survey 2007

http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_compendia/GHS07/GHSSmokingandDrinkingAmongAdults2007.pdf

² ASH: Essential Information on: Young People and Smoking

http://www.ash.org.uk/files/documents/ASH_108.pdf

³ Cancer Research UK. Smoking and cancer: Children and smoking

<http://info.cancerresearchuk.org/healthyliving/smokingandtobacco/childrenandsmoking/>

⁴ Young Persons Alcohol and Tobacco Survey Report, TSNW, 2009

⁵ Young Persons Alcohol and Tobacco Survey Report, TSNW, 2007

⁶ The Liverpool Longitudinal Study on Smoking: Experiences, beliefs and behaviour of adolescents in Secondary School 2002-2006, Roy Castle Lung Foundation 2008.

<http://www.roycastle.org/Resources/8/x/a/llsreport2008.pdf>

⁷ ONS The Mental Health of young people looked after by local authorities in England, 2002/2003.

⁸ ASH: Essential Information on Smoking Statistics: Illness and death

http://www.ash.org.uk/files/documents/ASH_107.pdf

⁹ ASH

http://www.ash.org.uk/ash_9tccgnrs.htm

¹⁰ Smokefree Action Coalition

<http://www.smokefreeaction.org.uk/point-of-sale-display.html>