

# How children learn to say 'no'

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Binge-drinking is sadly fashionable amongst the under 20-year-olds. But the school-based training and information program IPSY prevents alcohol abuse among school children and adolescents effectively. Credit: Anne Guenther/FSU

Their numbers are rising, but their age is dropping: children and young adults who drink so much that they have to go to the hospital. Binge-drinking is sadly fashionable amongst the under 20-year-olds. But how can adolescents be effectively protected from alcohol and substance abuse?

"Information alone is not good enough", Dr Karina Weichold of the Jena University (Germany) knows. Because even [children](#) know that [alcohol consumption](#) and smoking can cause health damage. "Therefore prevention needs to start somewhere else." This is what the developmental scientists, together with colleagues from the Institute of Psychology and the Center for Applied Developmental Science of the

Jena University, are trying to achieve with their specially developed prevention programme IPSY.

In a new study based on about 1700 school children, aged between 10 and 15 years from Thuringia (Germany), the Jena psychologists were able to show how effective their school-based training and information programme is in the prevention of [alcohol](#) and nicotine abuse among school children and adolescents. The Jena scientists presented the results of their study in the science magazine *Journal of Early Adolescence*.

"IPSY is an acronym for Information and Psychosocial Competence and tries to convey basic life skills", Dr Weichold explains the approach of the prevention programme. As a result, long-term effects can be achieved, the developmental psychologists headed by Professor Dr Rainer K. Silbereisen write in their new publication. "The age-typical increase in the consumption of alcohol and cigarettes is lower in the group of pupils who took part in our programme than in the control groups. Moreover, the initiation age is being delayed", says Professor Silbereisen, who conducts the project together with Dr Weichold.

"With our programme we are aiming at children before their first contact with alcohol and cigarettes", Professor Silbereisen explains. In co-operation with the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture in Thuringia, IPSY has been introduced in more than 100 Thuringian schools since 2003. "The effects of the programme are positive on the teachers as well as on the children who take part in the implementation of IPSY", Professor Silbereisen concludes.

The development psychologists analysed the impact of their programme in various publications. They also wanted to find out if the programme is equally effective for different groups of participants. "Boys as well as girls benefit from our programme", Dr Weichold says. While the self confidence in girls is being boosted, boys' communication skills are

significantly increased. "All in all, IPSY leads to children being less susceptible to peer pressure. And they can more easily say 'no' to cigarettes and alcohol." Another positive effect of IPSY: it strengthens the pupils' commitment to their school. "That leads to a stronger identification of the pupils with their school. They feel at home there and they feel they are being taken seriously", the Jena psychologist points out.

Within the IPSY programme pupils learn general skills such as how to deal with stress and anxiety or with their own self image. For this purpose they work in interactive learning modules on topics like "School and I" or "I and Others" and they discuss their results with classmates and teachers. Role play, movement and relaxation techniques are part of the concept as well. The programme consists of 15 modules of 90 minutes in the class level 5. This is followed by a development phase of seven modules in classes 6 and 7.

**More information:** Weichold K, Brambosch A, Silbereisen R. Do Girls profit more? Gender-specific effectiveness of a life skills program against alcohol consumption in early adolescence. *Journal of Early Adolescence* 2011, [DOI:10.1177/0272431610384489](https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431610384489)

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