



# WHAT WORKS IN YOUTH VAPING EDUCATION CAMPAIGNS?

Summary of an evidence review

**AUDIENCE**  
social marketing

## Introduction

### **YOUTH VAPING: A MAJOR PUBLIC HEALTH CONCERN**

Vapes are intended for adults who want to quit smoking cigarettes - and it's illegal in UK for those under 18 to buy them.

And yet the number of young people vaping in England has increased notably in recent years, raising concerns among some experts that the nation is heading towards an 'epidemic' and 'sleepwalking into a crisis.'

Almost 1 in 10 young people (aged 11-15) in England are frequently using vapes, while a quarter have tried them (NHS England 2024) Vapes are less harmful than cigarettes, but they're not harmless - especially for young people as their lungs and brains are still developing.

Evidence shows the short-term effects on young people could include:

- headaches, dizziness and poor concentration.
- cough, sore throats and other effects on the respiratory system.

**The long-term impacts are not yet known.**



## A MAJOR REVIEW OF YOUTH VAPING EDUCATION CAMPAIGNS

At present there is no national campaign educating young people about the facts on vaping in England.

However there is engaging work being delivered in some local communities and also in other nations.

The key is to evaluate, and learn from, existing campaigns to build a stronger communications evidence-base.

That's why we commissioned Alma Economics to review the key research papers on what's working, (and what's not working) campaign-wise in encouraging young people to quit or resist the habit.

A [full report](#) is available, including full referencing and a bibliography.

### METHODOLOGY

The review initially sourced 182 research papers. This number was honed down to a short list of 27 research papers that met the inclusion criteria – for example:

The studies needed to centre on vaping campaigns:

- targeting young people 10-18 years (although papers looking at 18–24-year-olds were also considered).
- that were written up in a key academic journal or major document (for example a peer-reviewed research journal rather than a newspaper article or dissertation etc).
- with evidence of robust evaluation.

The results have also been translated into a web-based interactive 'Evidence Map' accessed [here](#).



## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

### WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE VAPE?



#### Peer influence

Having friends who vape can increase the possibility of a young person trying and sustaining the habit. There's also a strong link between parents who smoke or vape and their children vaping.



#### Smokers are more likely to be vapers

Young people who have smoked cigarettes are more likely to vape and this acts as a barrier to quitting as well.



#### The power and influence of social media

Social media provides a fertile environment for young people to develop positive perceptions about vaping – posts from friends can promote the habit and also communicate the idea that vapes are harmless.

So, vaping can be seen as a relatively risk-free act of rebellion which is socially acceptable and easily integrated into their social lives. And appealing posts from vaping brands can also reinforce some of these messages.



#### Seductive industry products and marketing

The wide variety of vape flavours offered is attractive to young people. And appealing vape adverts can really work – studies show that when young people perceive a vape advertisement to be effective, their intention to start vaping increases.



## WHAT MESSAGES WORK AND WHY?

Studies show that it's vital to integrally involve young people in the design and development of messages and campaigns. They will then be more fit for purpose and likely to be effective. It's also critical that messages – especially on the health effects of vapes – are based on the most current and robust scientific evidence.

12 of the reviewed papers discussed effective messaging. Follows are the messages that worked the best in engaging young people:

### Messages that address young people's 'risk beliefs' about vaping

Young people in the UK have a variety of views on the risks of vaping. This is unsurprising given there is major uncertainty about their long-term effects.

Some believe they are relatively harmless and others feel they are more risky than cigarettes.

There is an overt need for more education. So campaign messages should clearly communicate the risks of vapes in a measured way.

Being factual and up front works but using 'fear tactics' with exaggerated health claims and visuals doesn't.

#### Example key message:

*Young people can be more sensitive to the effects of nicotine. And this could lead to addiction. ✓*

### Messages about the cost of vapes to current / future well-being

Messages which communicate the possible **cost** of vapes to young people's well-being now and in the future, are proven to be effective. For example:

- stressing short term health problems as well as the possibility of future issues.
- the potential to get addicted.
- the possibility of a gateway effect – i.e. vapes leading to the use of more toxic / harmful substances.

However messages that emphasise monetary **gains** of quitting vapes can also cut through too.

#### Example key messages:

*The short-term effects of vaping on young people can include headaches, dizziness, concentration problems and sore throats. ✓*

*The long-term effects of vaping are unknown. ✓*

### Messages that increase young people's confidence to quit or resist vaping and also provide support

Messages should help promote a young person's confidence that they can resist or quit vaping. Using case-studies of peers who've stood up to peer pressure or kicked the habit can work really well.

Communicating any support and help that's available to quit is key. Providing confidence and support to change or adopt a certain behaviour, are key parts of Social Cognitive Theory (**SCT**).

#### Example key messages:

*You got this. You can quit vaping. Text QUITVAPE to 88709 for help and support. ✓*

#### Example key message:

*Vaping to be different? So is everyone else. You be you – not someone else. ✓*



## STUDY OF THE USA FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION'S (FDA) VAPE 'WARNING' MESSAGES

In a study conducted in the USA, young people viewed adverts containing different warning messages about vapes.

The FDA's warning about potential addiction - **WARNING: This product contains nicotine. Nicotine is an addictive chemical** - was compared with a warning on possible health effects - **WARNING: This product is especially harmful to youth and young adults. It may cause mood disorders and damage to parts of the brain that control attention and learning.**

The study also included a 'control' health condition that didn't contain a warning.

The results showed that both vape warning messages decreased positive perceptions of the habit whilst increasing negative associations with vaping behaviour. The warning about potential health harms for young people was the most effective.

## MESSAGE PRESENTATION

- Messages should be clear and straightforward – avoiding puns and metaphors.
- Messages should be supportive, helpful and 'on the side' of young people – never finger waggy or fear mongering.
- Bright colours are often preferred by young people in materials (neon colours can be popular) Warning messages can be highlighted in boxes with safety/warning colours and design (often yellow and black).

## WHAT SPECIFIC FORMATS AND CHANNELS ARE EFFECTIVE?

Ultimately in any vaping education campaign it's vital that young people are asked about what the most effective communications formats and channels are. As well as the people they trust to convey messages about vaping.

Evidence suggests that the following routes can be effective:

- **the school environment** can play a crucial role in campaigns. As part of a wider initiative the provision of campaign posters in school toilets can be effective - as vaping can be rife in this location. Studies have shown that schools initiatives are more effective if they are delivered in different ways across the school (in lessons/assemblies, online, via posters etc) and continuously throughout the year rather than being 'one offs.'
- **however, not all school programmes have proven to be effective** in preventing vaping initiation. Researchers acknowledge the need for evidence-based, evaluated programmes to effectively tackle vaping.

- **smartphones** allow for a range of effective communications formats – text messages, which have been shown to be a very effective interactive tool for both raising awareness and promoting resilience to peer pressure, as well as videos, animations and interactive online quizzes.
- **video games** are a fun and interactive way to promote knowledge about vapes and support skills development to resist the habit. More details on *smokeSCREEN*, a US vaping education videogame initiative, can be found later.
- **social media** can provide a conducive digital environment for young people's opinions and perceptions about vaping.
- **the role of older peers as well as parents, teachers, youth / social workers and other trusted adults** can be key in communicating messages. Although the extent of their role will depend on local research among young people on exactly who their trusted communicators are.

MESSAGES SHOULD BE CLEAR AND STRAIGHTFORWARD – AVOIDING PUNS AND METAPHORS.

VIDEO GAMES ARE A FUN AND INTERACTIVE WAY TO PROMOTE KNOWLEDGE AND RESILIENCE.

TEXT MESSAGES WITH LINKS TO SUPPORT HAVE BEEN SHOWN TO BE A VERY EFFECTIVE INTERACTIVE TOOL FOR BOTH RAISING AWARENESS AND PROMOTING RESILIENCE TO PEER PRESSURE.

## GOOD PRACTICE CASE STUDIES

The following case studies are exemplary programmes. They were chosen for their strong evidence, innovation and quality of methodology, delivery and results. They are both grounded in behavioural theory.

### THIS IS QUITTING

**Description:** An interactive, automated text message support programme, helping 13–24-year-olds to quit vaping, primarily delivered in the US.

The programme has been operated by the Truth Initiative since January 2019.

<https://truthinitiative.org/this-is-quitting-resources>

**How it works:** To start receiving messages and support from the programme to help kick the habit, young people simply text the campaign – the support is then tailored to their first inputs, e.g. their age, enrolment or quit date, and the vape brand they use. If no quit date is set, then messages to build skills and confidence are sent. Those who have set a quit date receive messages informing them about the risks of vaping, the benefits of quitting and supporting activities to build coping skills and self-confidence. Messages are often written by former vape-users to give authenticity and enhance a feeling of peer support. All users are offered mental health support, breathing techniques and information about the Crisis Text Line.

**Evaluation and effectiveness:** Between January 2019 and May 2024, nearly 750,000 young people had enrolled in the United States.

An observation evaluation and a two-arm Randomised Control Trial, which included a control group, showed promising results in terms of the programme's effectiveness.

The studies revealed that:

- more than 6 in 10 (61%) of the enrolled young adults indicated having reduced or stopped their use of vapes.
- those assigned to the *This is Quitting* programme were a third more likely to quit vaping in a 7-month time period compared to those in the control group for both age groups: 13-17 years and 18-24 years.



**Figure 1.** Flyer from This Is Quitting, derived from: <https://truthinitiative.org/this-is-quitting-resources>



## SMOKESCREEN

**Description:** smokeScreen is a web-based video game intervention, targeted at young people (10 to 16 years) with the aim of promoting greater knowledge of vapes and tobacco products and encouraging resilience to peer pressure.

It was developed by the Yale Centre for Health and Learning Games of Yale University and is delivered in the US. It's grounded in Social Cognitive Theory and the Theory of Planned Behaviour.

<https://playbl.com/our-games/smokescreen/>

**How it works:** The video game attempts to enhance young people's knowledge about tobacco products and vapes as well as fostering skills to resist peer influence through two mini-games ("Know Sense" and "Refusal Power"). SmokeSCREEN includes 10 game levels and can be completed within 1-2 hours in multiple sessions.

**Evaluation and effectiveness:** Hieftje et al. (2021) evaluated the effectiveness of smokeSCREEN.

Their results highlight how the use of gamification (providing information in a fun, interactive way through games & video games) can be a strategy to help influence the beliefs and knowledge of young people.

After playing the game, nearly in 1 in 10 (8.4%) of the participants changed their views to seeing vapes as being potentially harmful to health. The intervention also measurably increased knowledge of the potentially addictive nature of vaping. Researchers suggest that shifting beliefs and knowledge can be a pre-requisite to behaviour change.

The intervention was found to have had a more significant impact on older adolescents than younger ones. Researchers believe older participants may have more relevant knowledge of the issues and can possibly relate to the content more.



Figure 2. Sample frames of smokeSCREEN video game derived from: <https://playbl.com/our-games/smokescreen/>



## CONCLUSIONS

So what conclusions can we draw from this research review?

In general terms, the most effective campaigns in this area exhibited some (or all) of the following elements:

- they were co-developed with young people.
- they were based on appropriate behavioural theory.
- they addressed young people's 'risk beliefs' about vapes and educated them on the health and wider risks of vaping in a no-nonsense, factual way.
- they avoided finger-wagging, sensationalism and fearmongering.
- they were supportive and gave young people both agency and confidence to resist peer pressure and/or quit vaping.
- they provided tailored online / offline help and support to quit.
- they were run over relatively long periods of time - rather than being 'one offs'.
- they were communicated via trusted people and marketing channels across a number of settings - both in school and the community.
- they used attractive colours and visuals.
- they used fun, interactive elements to engage and educate (including text messaging and video games).

## FUTURE RESEARCH

The research review identified critical gaps in the existing evidence-base that need to be rectified, including the need for:

- more research among young people under the age of 18 on 'what works' communications-wise in helping them to resist or quit vaping.
- specific studies that focus on younger age groups (e.g. 10-13 year olds) to identify whether there could be message or channel differences compared to older age groups. Vaping is often initiated in this age bracket - so these studies are important.
- pivotal long-term longitudinal studies.
- more research analysing the role of socio-cultural and socio-demographic variables (e.g. gender, or different 'social groupings' etc).
- more rigorous studies conducted of UK campaigns / communications initiatives in this area.



## FURTHER RESOURCES

If you're looking to run your own vaping education campaign with young people please have a look at the following sites and links which can provide helpful resources:

- [A short animated film](#) to start discussions on vaping: ASH/Smokefree Sheffield.
- [Vaping The Facts: Classroom Presentation](#) for use by teachers alongside the animated film: ASH/Smokefree Sheffield.
- [Vapes | FRANK](#) a wide range of useful information on vapes: Talk to Frank.
- <https://youtu.be/i4G3GP3vPW0?si=3NAwcdqDEY9Hh7Vf> FYI Investigates – Kids who vape: BAFTA-award winning TV news show, led by young people, analyses the issue: SKY News.

NB: these resources were not included in the evidence review - but have been popular with organisations across the UK.

If you would like expert help in co-developing and delivering a youth vaping education campaign please get in touch:

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We are an award-winning behaviour change communications consultancy – running campaigns that change people’s lives. We’re public health experts and have strong experience in running effective tobacco control and youth vaping cessation campaigns.

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