

Why Do Some Young People Take Drugs?

According to a Eurobarometer report published in 2014, drug use among young people in Ireland is higher than the EU average. I want to look at the why this is and why young people choose to use drugs.

A drug is any chemical that affects how your body works, your behaviour and/or how you feel.

Contrary to popular belief substances such as alcohol, over the counter medication and caffeine, can also be considered drugs even though they may not be illegal to consume.

How can drug use affect a young person?

Drugs can seriously affect physical and mental well being but the effects really depend on the drug, the amount taken and the person taking it.

Drugs work by changing the chemicals within the brain. They prevent neurotransmitters (which carry messages around the brain) from functioning properly. Using drugs can affect mental health causing anxiety, psychosis and depression. Drug use during teenage years can affect brain development as it progresses into adulthood.

Different drugs can affect the body in different ways. These effects can be temporary but others can last a lifetime. For instance, hallucinogens such as ketamine can cause muscle spasms and numbness whereas when injecting drugs, sharing dirty needles can leave you at risk to HIV.

Using drugs can also lead to dependency. This can put physical, mental and financial strain not only on the individual, but on their friends and relatives too.

So, Why Do Young People Take Drugs?

There are various reasons as to why young people engage in drug use, it would be impossible to list them all. Experimenting with alcohol and drugs as a young person isn't at all uncommon. Other reasons like peer pressure, college culture, an escape from stress or to get that buzz on a night out are also factors.

Social factors can also play a part in drug use, meaning, depending on a young person's background, they can be more/less likely to engage in drug use. For example, a young person from a socially disadvantaged area is more likely to use drugs than a person from a more affluent background. A young person from a marginalised community is also more likely to engage in drug use, such as in the LGBT+ community where members are twice as likely to engage in drug use.

A Young Person's Point-of-View

I took to social media to find out from other young people their relationship with and opinions on drug use.

After surveying a small group of 15 - 25 year olds I found that:

- When asked if having ever engaged in drug use, half of respondents said they had
- A majority of those that had engaged in drug use had done so within the last month
- Drug use most commonly occurred at parties, on holiday or with friends
- Reasons behind drug use included curiosity, drunkenness, to relax, to get a buzz or pressure from friends
- When asked about their opinion on drug use over 50% of respondents believed it was up to the individual what they chose to do
- Those who have experience of addiction within their family or close friends tended to disagree with drug use

What I noticed most from asking other young people about their views and experiences was, generally, the consideration behind the decision to use drugs. With many respondents remarking that in their past experiences they knew what they were taking and the risks associated in doing so. This is in contrast to the picture painted by society of young people acting irresponsibly, not to be trusted. I think this is a credit to campaigns in recent years which have created a dialogue around responsible drug use. One being the “What’s in the Pill” campaign, which raised awareness around the contents of ecstasy pills to college students. A welcome alternative to previous methods of scaremongering or just plain silence on the issue of drug use.

From speaking to other young people I’ve found a majority of the time drug use usually happens when with others, like with a group of friends or at a party, which can have the potential to fuel peer pressure and excessive drug use. Being in an exceptional situation, like at a party or on holiday, allows people to let their hair down, and do things they wouldn’t normally do, and that tends to be where drug use comes into play.

The general attitude among the young people surveyed was that personal drug use among friends recreationally was viewed as acceptable, as long as nobody else came to harm. Drug dealers were viewed more negatively, seen as providers of gateway drugs that could lead individuals into dependency.

One question that arose in the survey was as to why more “socially accepted” drugs, such as nicotine and alcohol, weren’t taken as seriously as substances like ecstasy or cocaine, even though they have the potential to cause physical and mental harm.

The question “why do young people use drugs?” is a difficult and complex question to try and answer. The reality is, that at some point young people will come into contact with drugs.

Over recent years attitudes towards drug use among young people has changed. Young people seem much more informed about drug use which, I believe, is a positive thing. As mentioned, experimentation is an important part of a young person's journey and at some point they are going to come into contact with drugs and when they do, scaremongering, silence and misinformation isn't what's going to enable them to make an informed decision, if anything it'll do more harm than good.

What I do know is if our society can get over their reluctance to address drug use in young people and instead supported them in giving them the correct information, creating an open dialogue around drug use and access to support services without judgement, I think we'd be in a much better position to deal with drug use in young people than we are right now.

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