

Unplugged

A substance use-prevention programme for schools, implemented in 17 European countries

Aims and Objectives

Unplugged is a school-based curriculum for adolescents. It aims to prevent substance use (alcohol, tobacco and drugs) by improving knowledge, shaping healthier attitudes toward substances, and building the life skills needed to resist peer pressure and make healthy decisions.

Implementation highlights

- **Curriculum structure:** 12 one- hour lessons delivered over the school year by class teachers. Topics cover: 1) Knowledge and attitudes about substances; 2) Interpersonal and intrapersonal skills; 3) Correction of social norms.
- **Theory and Methodology:** Lessons use a comprehensive social influence approach combining life skills education with active learning techniques — role-play, group discussion, and brainstorming — to promote critical thinking and life skills (1,2).
- **Teacher Training:** Mandatory training for class teachers delivered by certified trainers (~3 days). Teaching techniques include: role-playing, group discussions, and brainstorming to promote active learning.

At a glance



Univ.
Prevention



Target audience

- Students aged 12-14



Costs

- Teacher training: ~€3,500
- Implementation support: ~€1,400



Delivery settings

School



Professionals involved

- Implementation: Teachers;
- Training: psychologists, social workers, prevention workers



Objectives

- Prevent substance use;
- Strengthen skills to manage social influences;
- Improve knowledge and attitudes about substances and their health consequences.



Leading organization:

EUDAP - European Drug Abuse Prevention Faculty



Countries

Implemented in 28 countries worldwide (17 countries in Europe)

How can this practice be implemented?

EU-Dap faculty provides a structured protocol for cultural adaptation to support implementation in new contexts (more information [here](#))

Country-specific implementation experiences — including obstacles, lessons learned, and recommendations — are documented and publicly available [here](#)

Get started

Access free materials in multiple languages at eudap.eu/unplugged

Explore country-specific implementation experiences at eudap.eu/countries

Contact the EU-Dap team at info@eudap.eu



Key takeaways



- ▶ 20-30% lower probability of cigarette smoking, alcohol intoxication and cannabis use
- ▶ Education materials available for free
- ▶ Reduction of positive attitudes towards tobacco, alcohol and substance use
- ▶ Correction of normative beliefs

Supporting policies



- In **Italy**, Unplugged is embedded in the National Prevention Plan 2020-2025 (PNP) and its regional counterparts, where it serves as a strategic tool for promoting psychosocial health among adolescents. The PNP emphasises early school-based intervention through a health promotion approach — centred on the "Health-Promoting School" model — prioritising life skills and peer education over information-only drug prevention.
- Santé Publique **France** has listed Unplugged among its recommended effective programmes. At policy level, Unplugged is enabled by a 2022 interministerial instruction which mandated the nationwide development of psychosocial skills in schools and by the Interministerial Strategy for Mobilisation against Addictive Behaviours 2023-2027, which targets both illicit drugs and licit substances.

What makes this a good practice?

key features

- ▶ Originally tested on 7,079 pupils of 7 European countries
- ▶ Reduction in smoking,

- drunkenness, alcohol-related problems, and cannabis use
- ▶ €6 return for every €1 invested

Impact: does it work?

Effectiveness

Unplugged reduces cigarette smoking, intoxication drinking, alcohol-related problems and cannabis use (3-6) by decreasing positive attitudes towards drugs, correcting normative beliefs and increasing refusal skills (7). Beneficial effects persisted at 15-month follow-up and were stronger among males (8) and adolescents of low socioeconomic level schools (9).

Efficiency

A cost-benefit analyses by Santé publique France (10) indicates that for every €1 invested, society saves €6 in healthcare costs; when including the value of life years saved, the return can be as high as €150 per euro invested (11).

Evidence base

Unplugged has been evaluated in four cluster RCTs across Europe (4,10,12,13). Today, the EU-Dap project continues evaluation by studying new aspects of effectiveness, supporting replication trials, studying risk factors for use and mediators of program effects, and participating to the dissemination and the adoption of effective prevention interventions.

Reach: who can benefit?

Equity and access

Unplugged is delivered to all students within a class regardless of risk or background; its school-based format ensures reach to diverse populations, including those less likely to access health or social services, and involves no out-of-pocket costs for students.

Transferability and scalability

Unplugged was designed from the outset for transferability and has already been implemented in 28 countries worldwide. Programme materials are freely available online in more than 10 languages, and HOGENT University has been entrusted by the EU-Dap study group with overseeing cultural adaptation, ensuring quality and consistency across contexts.

Integration: keeping it going and working across sectors

Sustainability

Unplugged is supported by a structured delivery model relying on trained trainers and class teachers rather than external specialists, minimising ongoing staffing costs. EU-Dap provides continuous organisational support, capacity-building, and free access to materials, reducing financial barriers to long-term implementation.

Intersectorality

Unplugged has been designed by public health researchers, but delivery is within the education sector.

Engagement and innovation: listening to young people and adapting over time

Youth participation

During its development and updates by the EU-Dap project, youth and stakeholders were involved through pilot testing and feedback loops to ensure the structure and content were relatable and age-appropriate.

Intergenerational / life-course approach

Unplugged includes dedicated parent workshops and a specific manual for parents, which provide caregivers with the tools to improve family communication and support their children's informed decision-making.

References and additional tools to favour translation

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