

# ALCOHOL ABUSE AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Mentor Pops in Kampala Schools

Paper presented at the alcohol epidemiology and policy meeting; the first KBS thematic meeting in Africa 15-18 November 2010, Speke Resort Munyonyo, Kampala Uganda.

*Regina Kacwamu / Uganda Youth Development Link / +256 712 934461 / rkacwamu@yahoo.com*

---

## **Introduction**

Alcohol use/abuse in Uganda is not considered a social problem; it therefore passes unnoticed even among students in urban schools. It becomes a problem when someone misses something. For as long as it does not have a visible effect on someone it is not an issue. One recent study by Uganda Youth Development Link - UYDEL indicate that 60% of students in secondary schools use /abuse alcohol. Although other substances such as khat and marijuana are common, alcohol especially packed in sachets (tot packs) are very popular easily accessible and easy to conceal by young people. Despite the recognition of devastating effects of alcohol on students, many schools have not instituted serious measures to prevent the onset of alcohol consumption in schools and the homes and communities where students come from have not been supportive either. This paper presents experience of UYDEL during the implementation of school sensitization outreach activities in 14 schools in Kampala city using Mentor Pop information packs.

## **Why students drink alcohol**

Students are introduced to alcohol through many ways but the most common is by peer pressure and to experiment. Others start due to the desire to experiment or fit in in peer groups. Other important factors include cheap and accessible alcohol, poor role models from parents, school and community environment. The alcohol industry through aggressive advertising has played a big role to glamorize alcohol use as contributing to success and bright futures. In fact some bill boards in town show pictures of successful people including a graduate as being related to association with certain types of brands. Others show musicians who are role models of young people in the pop culture as being associated to drinking certain alcohol brands. Generally, the landscape of alcohol advertising in Uganda clearly targets young people including those in school. Despite the disclaimer; *Alcohol strictly not for sale to persons under 18 years*, young people can buy and consume alcohol without practical restriction. Although on many school regulation lists, alcohol use and abuse on school campuses is strictly prohibited, it usually goes unnoticed and/or unenforced by the administrators.

## **When do students drink and how do they get the alcohol?**

Students smuggle alcohol in schools at the beginning of the term, by hiding it in the properties where teachers cannot suspect. Some students mix alcohol in drinks and juices. Although some do check for alcohol in students bags, many schools are just interested in checking for extra clothes than alcohol. Schools that have students coming in on a non-resident basis (day scholars), they are not checked daily and in fact in addition to students escaping to access alcohol in neighboring villages, day scholars play a big role in drinking alcohol in school environments. Some students drink when they go out for social events (e.g. dancing, football, study trips, leaver's parties). Some schools take children to beaches for leavers parties and there students and teachers drink. During such gatherings, teachers do not care what students drink because it is supposed to be a big day out. At such events, they fight; for instance when they loose a match or engage in sexual activities. During the holidays, children also access alcohol from home or the environment where they live. Many find their way to beach bashes and day-time discos where they access alcohol. So even when schools care to put regulations and enforce them. The outside environment waters down all their efforts.

## **When students drink**

As the drinking culture gets engrained in schools, the beliefs among the drinkers about the advantages of alcohol get rooted and start to entice other students to follow suit. Some students believe that they cannot concentrate in class or withstand the cold during prep time. The drinkers are given names to signify their power and celebrity status. In fact, if caught drinking, the teachers may not be surprised and they are given lighter punishments for as long as the drinking does not produce serious effects like damage of property or threat to life.

## **Effects of alcohol on students**

In many ways, alcohol use in schools is closely linked to antisocial behavior, poor school attendance and performance and elevated dropout rates. Although alcohol abuse in schools in Uganda has not been well studied and documented. There is clear anecdotal evidence as well as testimonies of young people that have suffered its consequences. There is also high likelihood that a student that uses alcohol goes on to abuse other drugs like marijuana when their bodies get used to alcohol and can no longer produce the desired effect. They may also mix different brands of alcohol of higher alcoholic content. Other issues such as high risk to unsafe sexual practices that lead to HIV/AIDS, early pregnancies and unsafe abortions and accidents are also common among students that use/abuse alcohol in schools.

## **UYDEL's intervention**

UYDEL is a non-government organization that works with young people (children and youth, specifically with issues of drug and substance abuse, sexual abuse and exploitation, reproductive health and HIV/AIDS. Mentor Pop is one of the flagship programmes of Mentor Foundation that

provides information about drug and substance abuse for young people in print, electronic and social networking such as Facebook.

Between 2009 and 2010, UYDEL worked with school clubs comprised of 20-50 members in 14 secondary schools in Kampala City to increase awareness on alcohol and drug abuse among students. Social workers visited the schools at least once a week to conduct peer led activities on alcohol and drug abuse prevention. The activities included: talks on assemblies, quizzes, talk shows, group discussions and debates. We used the Mentor pop information pack alongside other material developed by UYDEL, specifically the peer to peer information guide to stimulate discussions.

During such interactive discussions we asked the teachers to step out so that the students would speak freely. After each discussion, we would privately brief the teachers about the discussions so they could start thinking of interventions to contain the situation or further prevent alcohol use in the school environment. We provided information materials that include booklets, factsheets and brochures to students for further reading and provided library copies as well. We provided personal counseling to students that needed to talk about their alcohol habits/problems and fears. After the discussion, students were encouraged to visit the Mentor pop Website ([www.mentorPOP.com](http://www.mentorPOP.com)) or the Facebook page for more information and interaction with youth from other countries and settings.

The information pack included messages on definitions of drugs and substances, why people use them, the risks involved, how use/abuse affects the user and others, relationships between drug and substances and sports and facts and myths about drugs and substances.

### **Achievements**

We provided important accurate and friendly information to students in an educative yet interesting and entertaining way but also fostered positive peer learning and influence, important to reverse negative peer pressure to start using alcohol. In addition, these engagements provided an opportunity to understand the dynamics of alcohol and drug abuse in schools and helped teachers understand better the situation of alcohol use/abuse in their schools. Teachers realized the importance of talking about alcohol to their students.

### **Important issues we learnt**

- In all the schools, there was no deliberate effort by the school administration to talk to the students about drugs and alcohol despite the knowledge that some students were affected. Students would be dismissed indefinitely if found red-handed with alcohol or drugs only to end up in another school.
- The teachers also fear making public alcohol problems in school for fear of losing students or staining the image of the school.
- Alcohol (tot packs and crude waragi) is the most abused substance in schools because it is accessible, cheap and easy to conceal

- Students conceal alcohol and drugs in drinks, powdered milk. Others forge gate passes and escape to neighboring villages to drink in the evenings.
- Groups of students that drink alcohol are usually popular and have group names that symbolize their celebrity status for instance 'abakabi-the bad ones' or eagles'. They also have special talents such as music, dance or sports, such that despite the school administration knowing their drinking problems, they get excused.
- The students felt that alcohol prevention is not a priority for school administrators. It becomes a concern when it has visible effects such as causing strikes or leading to destruction of school property.
- Parents and teachers show drinking examples to students. In fact when students escape to villages, they meet their teachers in drinking joints. Some teachers come to class drunk and also become friends with such children that it becomes difficult to punish them.
- Social gatherings like sports, beach bashes and study trips provide opportunities for students to access alcohol and engage in sexual activities when drunk (Particularly at the beach). Students revealed that schools with outside football pitches provide opportunity for students to drink when they have football matches. During such times, they fight and destroy people's gardens especially when they loose a match.
- Students who drink almost always use other substances, especially marijuana to prove to their friends that they are stronger.

One of the students shared this story

*I learnt to drink in S.5 three weeks to my end of year exams because a click of 6 boys and 3 girls in S.5 and S.6, who had taken alcohol throughout high school convinced me that I would be stronger to read for longer hours if I drunk. My colleagues made a deal, we stole and sold a school generator and got 860,000 Uganda shillings. We would buy 5 litre jerrican of waragi daily from a local bar during super we would escape and spend the entire prep time 9-10 pm and return just before the roll call. The ring leader was expelled for stealing the generator and never did exams; he now sells second hand clothes in owino market. The rest of us were sent to bring our parents who paid the generator. However, we continued drinking. Three of our teachers who were also drunkards knew but protected us several times the issue came up in staff meetings because we did well in class. One day, we bought ta 20 litre jerrican of crude waragi and deposited it at the borehole. So whenever we would go to wash or fetch water we would drink. Nobody noticed. In my dormitory, we were 120 students out of which, 80 of us used to drink, majority on a daily basis, others when we went out of the school. One day, when I was drunk, my friend annoyed me and I carried him with an intention of throwing him down from the third floor of our school building. Other students helped him I got so scared after I learnt later what could have happened because of me. One classmate gave me the Mentor Pop information pack although I was reluctant, I read the book because it was fun and easy to read. Now I realize that if I had got this information in primary school, I would never have tasted alcohol. I am in the school club where we talk to other students about alcohol and drugs.*

## **Challenges**

- Schools concentrate on school curriculum to get better grades and it was at times difficult to fix appointments to speak to and engage the students. And because of this, sustaining such efforts in some schools would require extended engagement with the schools to appreciate the approach and establish it in the schools work plan.
- Many schools did not have computers and students could not therefore access more information on the MentorPop Website, although students were encouraged to visit the site whenever in holiday or whenever they got chance to.

## **Recommendations**

- Children are living in an environment where alcohol is accepted and widely accepted. The parents, teachers and communities must be living positive examples and also institute deliberate measures to keep children away from alcohol and drugs. Addressing alcohol issues in schools alone without interventions at home and community may not be effective.
- Accurate information should be provided to students in form of edutainment and in easy and appropriate language that can motivate and convince students to keep away from drugs and alcohol at an early age. Schools that have access to internet can also motivate their students to seek out alcohol and drug abuse prevention information on sites such as Mentor POP or the Mentor POP Facebook page.
- Teachers themselves need training to identify, talk about and support alcohol related problems in schools.
- Prevention strategies should aim at empowering children and youth through life skills training and mentoring to build self-esteem and confidence to make informed choices and withstand peer pressure.
- In depth research in this area is urgently needed to provide empirical evidence to guide interventions.
- Shop keepers should also be mandated not to sell alcohol to minors, parents sensitized not to drink alcohol in front of minors and schools can implement breathalyzer test for students on school premises.