

Children urged to pre-plan how they would say no to a cigarette

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RESEARCHERS AT the University of Leeds have completed a major four-year study that aims to stop children from smoking as figures show that almost half of smokers in Britain took up the habit before they turned 16.

The pioneering project, led by the School of Psychology, involved 3,500 children from 20 schools across the city, plus 25 schools from Staffordshire.

Starting when the pupils were aged 11 and 12, the participants were asked to produce a plan of how they would say no to an offer of a cigarette.

It is hoped that if the test is a success, schools across the country will adopt the approach in a bid to prevent youngsters from taking up smoking.

Professor Mark Conner, who led the Reducing Smoking Initiation in Young Adults Project, said: "The idea is if you pre-plan what you are going to say, if someone does offer you a cigarette, you don't think about it. You plan how you are going to say no."

"If you can get people not to start smoking in the first place, it is the most effective strategy as it is easier than getting someone to quit."

"It is hard to get kids to say no. It's true that the overall number of smokers has been falling, but there is still up to 20 per cent of the population actually smoking."

The final data is in the process of being collected, with the results expected in the next few

weeks. It will be compared to a group of pupils who did not come up with a plan to avoid smoking.

Professor Conner said: "Smoking rates are quite low in 11 and 12-year-olds. It's the 15 and 16-year-olds where you will expect to see the difference between the group that is doing the smoking intervention and the group that isn't."

The individual plans saw pupils choose from a list of suggestions put forward by the university on how to turn down a cigarette, as well as come up with their own rebuttals.

Professor Conner said: "As the children got older they became more inventive as to how to say no. 'No cancer sticks for me' is the one that always sticks in my mind."

"It's a technique used for all sorts of other behaviours. There is a previous study showing it does work, but not on such a big scale where more than 6,000 children have taken part."

"The children seem pretty positive about it. They think it's an easy task to do, but the proof is in whether we get a reduction in the rates of smoking in adolescents."

According to figures compiled by Cancer Research UK, around 40 per cent of current or previous regular smokers in Britain began smoking before age 16, while three per cent of the UK's children under 16 currently smoke.

However, the number of new childhood smokers each year is falling, the charity said.

It comes after new figures released last week revealed that the

proportion of smokers in Britain is at its lowest on record.

Dr Penny Woods, chief executive of the British Lung Foundation, said: "The fact that smoking rates are falling overall is good news. Those who quit live longer and feel better, no matter their age. However we must not be complacent. Smoking is still the number one cause of early preventable death in the UK, and rates amongst people aged 16 to 24 continue to remain stubborn, particularly amongst young women."

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Professor Mark Conner, from the University of Leeds School of Psychology