

## BRIEFING

# Children and young people engaging in harmful activities

## Introduction

As part of our work on understanding the drivers of challenging pupil behaviour, NASUWT – The Teachers' Union – wanted to explore the types of harm experienced by pupils. Our research on vaping over the past three years has already shown this to be a health risk to children and young people, with 55% of teachers reporting that vaping is a concern in their schools. Additionally, 52% of teachers have observed an increase in vaping among pupils over the past year.

In our 2025 Behaviour in Schools Survey, we asked teachers and school leaders whether they are concerned about the pupils they teach misusing substances and engaging in harmful activities. A total of 4,000 NASUWT members answered this part of the survey, from the near 6,000 who participated in the research. As would be expected, most of those who skipped the question were those working in the primary sector.

This means the significant majority of those providing responses work in secondary, post-16 or further education.

To understand the levels of misuse on a more granular level, teachers and leaders were asked to state whether the issue was occurring in school or out of school.

## The scale of the issue

Looking at the data, instances of misusing certain substances or engaging in harmful activities are more likely to happen outside of school. However, the issue is also clearly manifesting within the school as well; with some misuse more common than others.

Excessive consumption of energy drinks was the top concern for teachers and leaders, with 71% identifying use in school and 70% concerned about use outside of school.

More than half (57%) are worried about pupils using cannabis outside of school, which is similar to concern over alcohol – with 55% of respondents identifying this as a risk outside of school.

Adding to the complexity over misuse of tobacco and nicotine, a third of teachers are concerned about pupils using nicotine pouches or snus outside of school. More than one in ten (13%) raise this as an issue within school.

Many teachers have shared concerns with NASUWT over pupils' unhealthy relationship with social media. In this particular exploration of harms, a quarter of teachers (24%) cite concern over pupils misusing gambling websites or apps outside of school. Inside of school, 6% cite it as an issue.

The full findings are:

	Inside of school	Outside of school
Alcohol	7%	55%
Nicotine pouches/snus	13%	30%
Energy drinks	71%	70%
Gambling websites or apps	6%	24%
Cannabis	19%	57%
Spice	9%	24%
Nitrous oxide	4%	25%
Other drugs	5%	16%

Where teachers and leaders identified the use of other drugs, ketamine and cocaine were listed as the most commonly used substances.

## Links to behavioural challenges

To understand the impact that the use of these harmful substances and activities is having on pupil behaviour, teachers were asked for comments on their experiences.

Common themes included tiredness and lack of focus, as well as irritability, mood swings and erratic behaviour. Teachers report more aggression by pupils who are clearly affected by these substances.

There is also a link between these harmful activities and loss of interest in school and learning.

Specific comments include:

- “They are not focusing in class; they are usually very tired and will often sleep in the lesson if not noticed.”
- “They become volatile and disconnected and are hard to engage or refuse to take ownership of their studies.”
- “Lethargy; lack of ambition; they are being introduced to the idea that drug-taking is cool and harmless.”
- “The gambling issue seems to fly under the radar a lot but it’s a very real concern, especially for the post-16 students. Some are not sleeping and instead gambling all night and come into school half asleep.”
- “They tend to present as disengaged from school once they become habitual or heavy users of cannabis or alcohol.”
- “Energy drinks are a problem with younger students in particular, because they make them very hyper.”
- “Going AWOL and not showing up for classes.”

## Policy asks

Addressing the issues of children and young people misusing alcohol, legal and illegal substances and other harms cannot be tackled by the education system alone. We are calling for partnership approaches to be established, involving schools, health, police, youth justice services and other stakeholders, in order to share expertise and resources effectively.

Given the links between substance misuse and mental health issues – both as a cause of engaging with harmful behaviours and a result of these risky activities – NASUWT is continuing with its call for the Government to commit to ensure every school across England has access to a school-based counsellor.

NASUWT would also urge the Government to implement its plans to ban drinks containing more than 150mg of caffeine per litre to under-16s, both in retail outlets and online. However, in recognition that children can still obtain these drinks from their parents or other adults, we continue to call for better public health campaigns to make adults more aware of the harms energy drinks may cause.

We would also welcome further research into how children are being introduced and attracted to online gambling, especially as they are not old enough to legally engage with this type of activity.

For further information, please contact:

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## About Us

NASUWT is The Teachers' Union and is the voice of the teaching profession.

Our aim is to improve and protect the status, morale and working conditions of the teaching profession so that teachers and headteachers can provide the best education and support to children and young people.

We are committed to ensuring that teachers and headteachers are recognised and rewarded as highly skilled professionals, with working conditions that enable them to focus on their core role of leading teaching and learning.

NASUWT is proud to be led by teachers for teachers. Our democratic structures ensure that we are the voice of the profession and our decisions are rooted in the concerns of our members.

Our members are teachers and headteachers working in schools, early years settings and post-16 colleges.