



## PEN PICTURE: Alcohol Focus Scotland

Addressing Scotland's relationship with alcohol and understanding and reducing alcohol harm is central to the purpose of Scotland's national alcohol charity. Alcohol Focus Scotland (AFS) has developed innovative learning resources to help practitioners support children, young people and families affected by alcohol, this includes Oh Lila! for early years learning, and Rory the story of a little dog which is a learning resource aimed at primary school children and addresses the issue of parental alcohol problems.

When it comes to young people's learning about alcohol and other drugs too many educational programmes to date can be seen as didactic, overly focused on information-giving and presenting alcohol as something to be feared. Research tells us that interactive educational programmes based on a social influences approach, which attempt to give young people the confidence and skills to resist social pressure to consume alcohol, might be more effective. With this in mind AFS sought to develop a programme for 14 to 16 year olds that would address risk and resilience and focus on critical thinking. The final piece of the approach has come with the recognition that much of the pressure to normalise and consume alcohol is being played out in the world of social media where young people are digital natives and adults can be easily excluded from the places and spaces young people (and the alcohol marketers) inhabit.

To develop the Alcohol Truth Project AFS looked to learning from the edgy Tobacco Truth programme in Florida, USA. That approach identified a set of ugly truths which no corporation selling a harmful product wants their new potential consumer base to know.

To develop and pilot the Alcohol Truth Project young people worked with AFS facilitators to first explore their digital lives and understand how social media marketing works. Alongside this emerging critical media literacy young people began to look at the place of alcohol in their community and the idea of alcohol harm. Young people soon discovered that they are targeted by sophisticated marketing techniques which are used to build brand awareness and the acceptability of alcohol. As a response young people made their own social media messages on those ugly truths that mattered most to them, view these at [www.alcoholtruthproject.wordpress.com](http://www.alcoholtruthproject.wordpress.com)

Implementing preventative intervention during adolescence is crucial to prevent the onset of problematic drug use. However the methods used to engage young people in considering how they can counteract the social and cultural practices which promote excessive alcohol consumption are rarely considered. Learning from the Alcohol Truth Project has confirmed that young people need to be seen as producers of knowledge, not mere consumers; preventing alcohol harm needs to involve engaging young people's critical social perspective and mobilising their support to promote positive social and cultural change.

*"I thought it was going to be about alcohol but its more about social media and its effects on alcohol advertising – how they market to young people...Raising awareness about advertising on social media, if we raise awareness now when you're older you'll remember the facts about alcohol and make safer more informed choices...Made me aware of how the alcohol industry targets people." Craig*