

Abstract

Is it all smoke without fire? Welsh primary school children's perceptions of electronic cigarettes

Lorna Porcellato, Kim Ross-Houle, Zara Quigg, Jane Harris, Charlotte Bigland, Rebecca Bates, Hannah Timpson, Ivan Gee, Julie Bishop, Ashley Gould and Alisha Davies

Liverpool John Moores University and Public Health Wales

The increasing popularity and rapid growth of electronic cigarettes has raised considerable concern about their impact on children and young people. Concerns relate to electronic cigarettes acting as a potential gateway to tobacco smoking for young never-smokers, increased experimentation leading to a renormalisation of smoking behaviour and potential health harms of vaping. Current research is largely focused on adolescents and young adults. In view of the recognised influence of the early years on attitude and habit formation, better understanding of what young children think about electronic cigarettes is needed.

The study aimed to provide insight into children's awareness of electronic cigarettes relative to tobacco smoking, their beliefs about vaping and smoking and understanding of the risks and benefits. Data was collected in 8 primary schools across Wales using a mix of methods. Four hundred and ninety-eight children (ages 7-11) completed a class-administered booklet encompassing a draw and write exercise and questionnaire. Ninety-six children also participated in 24 peer discussion groups.

Findings illustrated that almost all children across the 3 year groups had an awareness of electronic cigarettes and were able to differentiate between electronic and tobacco cigarettes. The primary reason for using electronic cigarettes was to stop smoking; the main reason for smoking tobacco cigarettes was to look cool or because it was fun and enjoyable. Generally the children had little understanding of any health harms of electronic cigarettes; there were many misperceptions and considerable uncertainty. Children had few intentions to use electronic cigarettes or smoke tobacco cigarettes when older. Almost all the children were of the opinion that using electronic cigarettes (98.8%) and smoking tobacco cigarettes (99.2%) was inappropriate for children their age but almost half thought it was okay for adults to use electronic cigarettes (50%) or tobacco cigarettes (46.2%). Findings suggest that children's perceptions of vaping and smoking were influenced by exposure through family and friends.

Results highlight the need for comprehensive evidence based electronic cigarette education in Welsh primary schools and suggests that health messaging efforts should reinforce children's views of electronic cigarettes as smoking cessation devices within a harm reduction narrative. Further research is needed to explore whether children's perceptions influence their future use of tobacco or electronic cigarettes.