Four traits that point to binge drinking

**IS YOUR TEENAGER AT RISK?**

Children with higher than average levels of these personality traits have been shown to be 90 per cent more likely to develop alcohol and drug problems. Impulsivity is specifically associated with misuse of stimulants (including cocaine and prescription stimulant medications). Boredom; teenagers may say they drank and took drugs out of it. They didn’t participate.

The Preventure program was designed by Professor Patricia Conrod from the University of Montreal more than 10 years ago to modify a teenager’s behaviour and thinking. It has been tested on thousands of teenagers around the world – including in the Czech Republic, Canada, Britain and Australia – with similar results.

In the first Australian trial, a program targeting 438 year 8 students with one or more of these traits successfully halved the onset of drinking and the incidence of binge drinking for up to three years following the intervention compared with students who didn’t participate.

The Preventure program was introduced into NSW and Victorian schools, students were classified as high risk using the “Substance Use Risk Profile” scale to determine whether they had higher than average levels of the four personality traits. Over three years, the private and public school students were asked every six months how often they drank and the frequency of their binge drinking, reported the new research in the Psychological Medicine journal.

Students weren’t told they were at high risk unless they asked. Teenagers were taught to manage their personality traits and individual tendencies better, and make better decisions.

Australian researcher Nicola Newton said the “beauty of the program” was that it was very short, effective, hardly mentioned alcohol or other drugs, yet it reduced the uptake of both while improving mental health.

Another program called Climate Schools, which used cartoons delivered online, was found to be just as effective as Preventure. It is suitable for all students, not only those at risk, and was developed by Associate Professor Newton with UNSW’s Professor Maree Teesson.

The number of teenagers binge drinking would be reduced by 250,000 a year if either of these programs was introduced into schools, said Professor Newton, who is the director of prevention research at the NHMRC Centre of Research Excellence in Mental Health and Substance Use.

In a study comparing Preventure with Climate Schools, researchers tracked the drinking behaviour of 2190 year 8 students at 26 public and private schools for three years, according to research papers in Psychological Medicine and the Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry.

In the past, most school-based prevention programs had minimal effects on reducing alcohol or other drug use, or improving mental health, they argued. Both the universally available Climate Schools and the targeted Preventure program halved the uptake of drinking and the incidence of binge drinking. Yet delivering the two programs together had no added benefit.

In another trial by Professor Conrod, Preventure decreased illicit drug taking by 80 per cent and improved mental health.

Professor Newton called on Australian schools to incorporate the programs into the curriculum.

“For each year we can delay the onset of drinking, we reduce the chance of developing a full-blown substance abuse disorder by 10 per cent,” she said.

“We know if you are going to develop a substance-use disorder, you pretty much have done it by the end of school.”

Drinking too much caused 11,000 hospitalisations of young people aged 15-24 every year, 2015 research found.

The latest National Drug Strategy Household Survey showed fewer teenagers were drinking, with about one in five compared with nearly one in three in 2013.

Most binge drinking peaks in these years when young people are introduced to alcohol.