

Youthlink Wales, the champion of peer-led approaches to combating substance misuse, is ten year's old. Ymlaen looks at an organisation run by young people for young people.

Young people attending an international youth conference in Cardiff on drugs and alcohol misuse in 1985 felt frustrated at their lack of voice in discussions dominated by older people. They met, and decided to organise their own conference, where they could set the agenda. Youthlink Wales developed from there.

Twenty young people from all over Wales, at two residential weekends, decided to set up not just a conference but an entire organisation. The list of aims

TEN YEARS OF YOUTHLINK WALES

they drafted included providing a voice for young people, giving them an opportunity to explore issues of substance misuse, and to link the youth of Wales and work with other organisations. The name 'Youthlink Wales' was chosen for its broad appeal.

Ten years later, Youthlink is still working with the vision left by its founder members, though adapting it to current circumstances. The organisation has a turnover of £120,000, is core-funded by the Welsh Office, and has three full-time and three part-time staff at offices in Caerphilly, Caernarfon and Carmarthen. It has groups in north and south Wales.

Young people are encouraged to be involved in Youthlink's organisation, to join

its committees, to volunteer. It backs this by providing training,



for example, in workshop skills, committee skills, equal opportunities, bullying, and running residential weekends.

Youthlink develops resources on drugs, alcohol and HIV for young people, for parents, and for youth workers. Its manual, *Participation in Prevention*, is a guide to "training the trainers", outlining how peer-led approaches to substance prevention can be developed by youth workers and others. The manual forms the basis for discussion at annual UK-wide courses, held over three days, that Youthlink has organised for the past six years.

Suzi Williams, Youthlink's current chairperson, is a single mother with a two-year-old child. She says her experience shows that it is possible to combine volunteer work with parenthood.

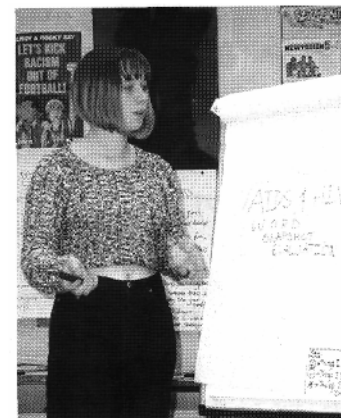
She adds: "I have been heavily involved with Youthlink for three years. During this time I have had training in various skills such as communication, computers, workshops, issues concerning substance misuse,

safer sex, alcohol and HIV. I have undertaken tasks such as setting up and running workshops, residential weekends, conferences and training skills courses

"I am in the process of increasing equal opportunities in Youthlink through training, organising crèche facilities, and

raising money for a drugs awareness residential weekend involving disabled young people. I have also helped to write a leaflet called *Miss Adventure/An Ffawd* for young women.

"I feel proud of being chair of Youthlink because of the young people who elected me. It's a wonderful and exciting experience - even though it does get hectic."



Peer training in action • If you would like more information about Youthlink Wales, please contact Veronica Wilson, 91a Cardiff Road, Caerphilly, Mid Glamorgan CF8 1FQ. Tel 01222885711.

Survey backs sex education

Half of the 15-16-year-old girls and 40 per cent of the boys responding to a recent survey by Health Promotion Wales reported that they had had sexual intercourse. The average age for first intercourse was 14, and almost 10 per cent of those surveyed were sexually active before that age.

The findings of the survey into young people's sexual knowledge, attitudes and behaviour also suggest that they are more aware than any previous generation of the dangers of unprotected sex. The report underlines that sex education has a protective effect, a finding in line with that of much other recent research.

The survey findings are based on confidential questionnaires completed by 1,400 15-16-year-olds.

Among the key findings:

- Young people's knowledge of HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases was generally accurate.
- Three-quarters of boys and two-thirds of girls reported using a condom when they last had sex. The young people surveyed displayed positive attitudes towards condom use.
- Girls were better informed than boys about contraceptive methods and sexually transmitted infection.
- Young people's main source of information about sexual matters were friends, the media, mothers and teachers.

The report says: "Much work still needs to be done to protect young people from pressures towards early sexual intercourse, and to provide information and services to those young people who are continuing to put themselves at risk of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections."