

Early Conversations That Can Change Lives

Written by Kelsey Thompson, intern at Choose Life.

Last week, the Choose Life team visited a Pupil Referral Unit in Burnley to deliver a series of interactive sessions with young people aged between 11 and 15. Working in small groups allowed us to create an open, supportive environment where every young person had the opportunity to ask questions, share their thoughts and reflect on the choices that shape their futures. To encourage honest conversation, each group was led by a facilitator. Choose Life Project Manager Steve Duffy led one group, while our intern, Kelsey Thompson, facilitated another alongside one of our lived experience volunteers. This smaller group approach gave every young person the opportunity to engage in meaningful discussion rather than simply listening to a presentation.

Throughout the day, our lived experience volunteers shared their own personal journeys. One volunteer spoke openly about being exposed to drugs from a young age, becoming involved in criminal activity as a teenager, and spending many years trapped in addiction and the prison system. Rather than placing blame on others, he spoke honestly about personal responsibility, the consequences of the choices he made, and the turning point that eventually led him into recovery. Following his story, the young people were encouraged to reflect on what they had heard. Together, we explored the factors that can influence a person's life, including peer pressure, family circumstances, trauma and the impact of negative role models. The discussions encouraged the young people to think critically about how different choices can lead to very different outcomes.

One particularly important conversation highlighted the value of creating safe spaces for young people to talk. During a discussion, one student disclosed that drugs were a regular part of their home environment and that life at home was difficult. Following our safeguarding responsibilities, this information was shared with school staff so that appropriate support and monitoring could be put in place. It served as a reminder that conversations like these can do far more than educate, they can help identify young people who may need additional support.

Alongside the discussions, the sessions included Choose Life's interactive drug dealer role play, which explores how organised criminals identify and manipulate vulnerable young people. Through this exercise, students learned about the tactics used to groom children into criminal exploitation, including offering money, friendship, belonging and protection before gradually drawing them into criminal activity. By understanding these methods, young people are better equipped to recognise warning signs and protect themselves and their peers. What stood out most throughout the day was the willingness of the young people to engage. They asked thoughtful questions, reflected honestly on the influences around them and demonstrated that, when given the opportunity, young people are more than capable of having mature conversations about difficult subjects. At Choose Life, we believe that prevention starts with honest conversations. By combining lived experience with education, discussion and practical activities, we aim to give young people the knowledge, confidence and critical thinking skills to recognise exploitation, make informed decisions and understand that support is always available.

Every conversation matter, and sometimes one conversation can change the direction of a life.