

Paul has worked in drug projects for young people over the last ten years. He has become something of an expert, despite the fact that he didn't choose this path. A placement at Community Links opened doors to a local drug agency and, as he says, "the rest is history." At Spark, Paul gives information sessions at schools and one-to-one support to young people who are involved with drugs and alcohol. These young people are either referred by a GP or their school, or they contact Spark directly.

He also works with parents and carers. He explains: "I make home visits to parents and carers, or we meet

somewhere neutral. We'll talk about whether there's drug use or not and how to handle it. I tell them how to recognise drugs and the signs that someone they know is using. Everything is confidential."

After these visits, Paul may or may not go on to work with that young person. He describes himself as "the tip of the iceberg" at Spark; after making contact, he will assess the young person and pass them on to a worker within the charity, or to a relevant agency. Spark's 'iceberg' is a resource of very skilled, experienced drug workers. If this sounds a little like a factory line, it's far from it. Paul explains: "Young people are constantly on a

rollercoaster, so I'll usually see someone three or four times before they realise they can't carry on with the drugs. They'll remember what we've talked about and come back to me; it's like gardening sometimes, you just plant the seeds and wait for them to grow.

"For example, I recently held workshops in a local support school. About a week after they were finished the teachers contacted me and said a young person had decided to stop using and wanted help. So it obviously took an extra week or so for the information to sink in, but it did."

Being a Plaistow resident, Paul has a

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vested interest in his success. He says: "I'm passionate about what I do because I live in this borough, so the young people that walk by my house, that go to school with my nieces and nephews, some of them are the ones I'm helping. It sounds a bit corny but I want the best world for our young people. And if I can make a change to one or two people, they might

influence others."

This influence is the positive side of peer pressure, but Paul often contends with its more negative side. He continues: "Taking drugs is often a social thing. Young people think that if they stop using drugs, they'll lose their group of friends. If people aren't ready to give up, I can't force them, but I can give advice about how to stay as safe as possible. For example, I'll say: if you are using, try to use when your mood is good. I'll also try to inform them about the dangers of the drug they're using. It's difficult, but if the person has the enthusiasm and willpower to give up, they can."

"I support them, but ultimately they have to do the work themselves. It's about showing them that they have the power to change their own situations."

See the Newham Spark team in action and get advice at two events to mark National Tackling Drugs Week.

Stratford Shopping Centre
Tuesday 9 June, 1-4pm

ASDA Beckton
Friday 12 June, 1-4pm

Call Newham Spark on +++++

Matters of substance

Talking to young people about drug use is not an easy job. Most parents would rather avoid it and schools often feel ill-equipped to tackle it. But Paul Hira, parents, carers and vulnerable people worker at Newham drug charity Spark, takes it in his stride.

