



# Islandic prevention model: a dream come true?

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## Introduction

**In my search for youth work in Europe, I spoke to various people in Belgium, Italy, Greece, Bosnia Herzegovina, Sweden, Norway and recently Iceland**

Iceland is known in the Netherlands for its Icelandic Prevention Model (IPM) > <https://planetyouth.org>. In the Netherlands, this has been translated by the Trimbos Institute into the Growing up in a Promising Environment (OKO) program and is used in around 35 municipalities in a Dutch version > <https://www.trimbos.nl/aanbod/programmas/opgroeien-in-een-kansrijke-omgeving>.

I was curious how it is now implemented and experienced in Iceland itself. I spoke to Nicolas Barreiro and Thorfinnur Skulason from the Planet Youth institute, Karen Rut Konradsdottir, a mother from North Iceland and Jon, a sporty 16-year-old boy from Reykjavík.

## What is the Icelandic prevention model (IPM) that we hear so much about at conferences and in the media?

“The Icelandic Prevention Model (IPM) is an approach based on scientific insights to prevent substance use (alcohol, tobacco and drugs) by young people. The model focuses on implementing local interventions that reduce known risk factors for substance use and strengthen protective factors in parents, schools and communities. Since the introduction of this method twenty years ago, substance use among Icelandic youth has fallen sharply to the lowest use in Europe” (Trimbos). In practice, this means that all children in Iceland between the ages of 6 and 18 have the opportunity to do many activities after and outside school in the areas of culture, sports and well-being. Parents are also expected to be actively involved in the upbringing of their child(ren) and also to ensure less use of alcohol, smoking and drugs. Every year,



schools conduct a survey among young people to determine what is important to them, what they need and where the risks are. On this basis, the local community offers an activity program and encourages parents and children to participate. My question was of course: does this also work in practice in Iceland?

## And how does it work in practice in Iceland? Are people also so enthusiastic about that? and are parents also involved?

Planet Youth is an Icelandic research institute that maintains, stimulates and facilitates IPM worldwide. This program is now being applied in various countries in different ways. including Scotland, Spain, United States, Mexico, Ireland and Slovakia. Thorfinnur Skulason and Nicolas Barreiro, both working at Planet Youth, are enthusiastic and very involved in IPM. By investing in this program for years and maintaining it properly, the results are clearly visible. See the schedule!

Young people use less alcohol, drugs and smoke less and are more sporty and perform better. Jon, a 16 year old boy from

Development of substance use 10th grade in Iceland, years 1998-2022





Reykjavik, puts it simply; “You are much less bored because you are busy every day. I like sports more than school and I play sports with friends about 5 times a week.” According to Thorfinnur and Nicolas, the most important thing about IPM is that it mainly addresses the environment of the young people and not the individual. They see well-being actually improved among young people. “We do see a positive effect through participation in group activities and a lot of attention to a healthier lifestyle that has a positive effect. “We have data from Iceland that shows this positive connection between IPM en youth crime from the statistical bureau of the Icelandic Police. Our US partners have on the other hand made great success in increasing participation in leisure”

See: <https://planetyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Meyers-et-al.-2023.-YES-Card.-HER.pdf>.

Thorfinnur and Nicolas see the annual monitoring at school as an important instrument to keep everyone enthusiastic about the model. “We do not use the monitor publicly to compare schools and local youth, but mainly to see what risks threaten to arise and what is needed to protect youth from them, for example by offering more evening entertainment for the older youth in the village. According to them, parents can also see the results of the monitor.

Nicolas and Thorfinnur are proud that Iceland has a national prevention day every year in which the president of Iceland Guðni Th. Jóhannesson always participates. The success of the IPM is mainly supported by the local communities of the 64 municipalities in Iceland. Local politicians, together with the local community, decide which activities and measures they will

take to get young people active. However, it is not clear to everyone that this is mainly about prevention and that is why Planet Youth must continue to emphasize this, for example through national campaigns. The sense of community is very strong in Iceland, especially among young parents. Parents meet each other, help each other and often continue to see each other as the children grow up, "If you, as a young insecure parent, are helped by another parent, then you will also help someone else later," says Nicolas. Karen Rut Konradsdottir, mother of three daughters and living in Þórshöfn. A village with 400 inhabitants in the north of Iceland reports that parents in her village celebrate their children's birthdays together in the village hall. Almost every Sunday there is a party and parents and children meet each other.

## **Who pays for the activities for young people and how much is their use?**



All children between the ages of 6 and 18 receive a "voucher" of around 500 euros. The budget is used as soon as the children start doing activities and do not receive the money themselves. If you don't use it, it expires. You can use it via a digital platform. Just over 85% of all children use it, up to 90% of older children. Jon knows that the voucher is there, but is not really concerned with it. "I think my parents are watching that." There are differences in the costs of activities. "The music school is more expensive than sports, for example, also because you use instruments more, says Thorfinnur. The municipalities pay for the (sports) accommodations. Parents also pay a small contribution. Karen believes that she pays about 200 euros per year and that means her youngest daughter can do

all the activities she wants after school. But Karen says, the children in the village also did a large fundraising campaign and with that they were able to build a cinder track in the village themselves.

## What risks do Planet Youth itself see in implementing IPM?

Thorfinnur and Nicolas see that children of migrant parents pose a new challenge for the reach of IPM. They participate less in sports and culture. Due to their background, these parents do not feel it is self-evident to let their children participate. People also make less use of it due to a lack of correct information, language problems and cultural differences. “We really need to provide more information to these parent groups. They do not see that children of divorced parents make less use of IPM. These parents are also supported. The community then participates and also supports those parents, because of the children. This happens in a positive atmosphere for children, regardless of the



background of the parents and the family situation. Parents are not held accountable for this, it is about the children, says Nicolas. The use of good role models also helps single-parent families. Youth and sports coaches play an important role in this. Especially because they see the children often and regularly.

Planet Youth therefore has no direct contact with youth. This runs through the local communities. They do organize national campaigns to ban alcohol at parties, no more parties without the presence of parents between 15 and 18 years old. Thorfinnur and Nicolas also see that many children are on social media and then only play games at home. “We would like children to spend less time alone on social media and more time to play and exercise together. If they want to play games, that’s fine, but do it together,”

says Nicolas. Planet Youth has seen alcohol and drug use decrease over the years, but risks continue to appear on the horizon. E-smoking is suddenly increasing among young people and so is SNUS (nicotine bags).

Karen sees in her village that e-smoking is not seen by young people as a replacement for cigarettes, but as a new stimulant. According to Thorfinnur and Nicolas, the IPM has also become so self-evident that people no longer always see its added value. Especially with new parents, you have to work again to convince them of the importance of actively participating and everything that goes with it. Iceland is not a cheap country to live in. Housing is also expensive for young people and they more often stay at home when they study. Young people also quickly start doing side jobs to earn money and they also want to go abroad to study or party. Due to the pressure of studies, especially from the age of 16, young people also participate less in local sports and cultural and welfare activities.



## What do parents think of all those rules and agreements that are made about youth?

Nicolas and Thorfinnur see for themselves that when they were young, parents were much less involved in what the youth did (and what they were not allowed to do). Parents now do much more together and also do more for and with their children. Both at home and after and outside school. And parents speak to each other about this in a positive way.



Karen is an energetic mother and entrepreneur in Þórshöfn i. With her husband they have three guesthouses in the village, a gas station, the school canteen, and a sheep farm and three daughters aged 23, 20 and 11. “It was different when I was young. there was much less to do. As a young person you hung around on the street and visited each other on a sports field. There was no community center or anything like that. Þórshöfn is only small, but now has all the facilities for the residents. A play school for up to 6 years and a school for up to 16 years, with about 50 students. An indoor swimming pool (hot water is free in Iceland ed.), a community center, a youth center, a playground with a large air cushion and sports fields. The distance between the villages and the big city is long, and especially in winter you have to rely on each other. Children who live on a farm come to school by school bus. And they are also brought home again after school. If your child wants to continue playing or exercising in the village after school, the parent must pick up the child themselves.”





Karen sees a big difference between city and countryside. Here you have a lot of freedom and it is safe during the day and in the evening. And besides, no one goes out here late at night when it's pitch dark. According to her, there is a government rule that children are not allowed to go outside unaccompanied after 10 p.m., but you don't have to make that mandatory here because no one does that. Their youngest daughter is still at school in the village, which starts at 8:30 in the morning and ends at 2 o'clock in the afternoon. She plays a lot of sports after school, preferably running on the new cinder track. "That took some getting used to for her, because previously she ran through the fields and hills around the farm." The parents in the village have founded a sports union themselves and hire the youth/sports coach for the children of the village. The youth coach is there during the day and twice a week in the evening in the village youth center. Karen pays around 200 euros per school season for the activities and through the IPM voucher her daughter can participate in everything she wants. The municipality also contributes to the facilities. As a parent, Karen does not see

the fact that a survey is held among young people (twice) annually at school to determine what is desirable for young people. She knows that the youth and parents are being listened to. She has never heard of the Island prevention model and Planet Youth, but she has heard that the government is strongly committed to the prevention of alcohol, drugs and smoking.

## **What do the children and young people themselves think of the rules and activities?**

Jon has never heard of the Islandic Prevention Model, but he thinks it is good that so much attention is paid to it by parents and the government. Not that they never smoke anything anymore or anything, but having fun with each other is much more important than sitting alone smoking or drinking. There are also festivals during the summer holidays and you can meet each other. Jon believes that the government should be stricter when it comes to new drugs such as SNUS.



## What can we learn from the Icelandic experiences?

You cannot directly compare Iceland with the Netherlands. The differences are too great for that. Iceland is as large as the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg together, has 387,000 inhabitants and 64 communities, of which Reykjavik and surrounding areas are the largest with 244,000 inhabitants. But if you look at the local level to see what facilities there are for youth, you can say that Iceland takes much better care of its youth than the Netherlands. And for all children and young people. Especially in a positive way. You should not so much want to change the child itself, but adapt the environment so that the child becomes active with pleasure and can develop. The parents are also more involved and together they feel more responsible for the growing up of the youth. And yes, that is what you get if you support this as a national and local government for twenty years, facilitate it and have its effects scientifically investigated. Perhaps more important than the model is that you give young

people the opportunity to do fun and good things and that you provide a broad and structural offer for this. And we simply call that a broad pedagogical basis. And recently, on the national day of children- and youth work, we once again advocated that all children and young people should participate. And use good volunteers and professionals for this.

### Curious about this?

<https://www.sociaalwerk nederland.nl/actueel/nieuws/12597-lancering-manifest-jongerenwerk-laat-alle-jongeren-meedoen>

- Ernst Radius, 2023

