

# Young people, alcohol and drugs



**Parents play an important role in keeping young people safe from the risks of alcohol and drugs. What they see you doing and your attitudes strongly influence their decisions. Their views on alcohol and drugs are formed long before their first experience of them.**

**There are many ways parents can minimise the chances of a young person using, or being harmed by, alcohol or drugs. It can help to talk openly and honestly from a young age and encourage them to learn to problem-solve and make responsible decisions. It's never too soon to start.**

## Making good decisions

It's normal for young people to take risks and push boundaries. It can be an important part of becoming independent and creating their own identity. You can help them learn to make good decisions in any situation, and to understand risk and the potential outcomes of their actions.

You could:

- let them practise making safe choices from an early age, eg choosing their own clothes or hairstyle
- talk about various scenarios and the options people have, eg 'What would you say if someone offered you a beer?' Coming up with solutions helps them learn they have choices
- acknowledge their positive decisions
- help them learn from mistakes by talking about what they could do differently next time. This is often more effective than telling them what to do.

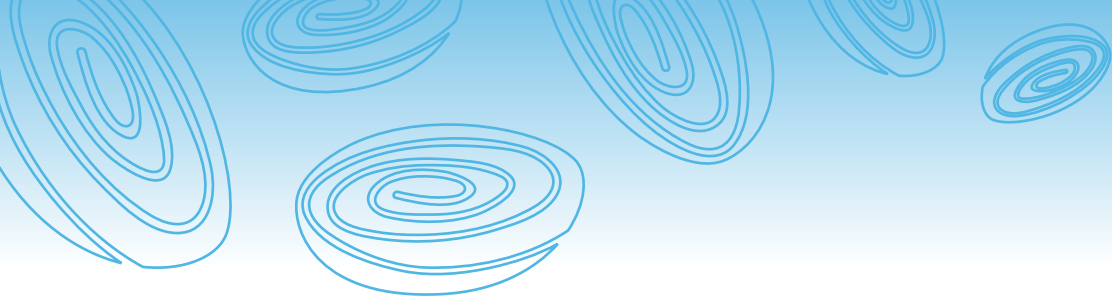
**Supporting young people to make decisions that keep themselves and others safe is an important part of preventing problems with alcohol and drugs.**

## Building your relationship

Although gradually becoming independent is important young people still have a need for your love and guidance, and for connection with you. Building a strong, trusting relationship from an early age can help minimise alcohol and drug use as they get older. Some ways to build your relationship are to:

- show your love - this could be as simple as hugs or saying 'I love you' every day
- acknowledge their strengths and the positive things they do
- regularly spend one-on-one time where you can give them your undivided attention, eg going for a walk or sharing a hobby
- make a habit of enjoying meals together and helping with homework
- get to know their friends and make them welcome in your home
- show you are genuinely interested in what interests them, celebrate their achievements and share their disappointments.

While building trust and open communication is essential, the distinction between parenting and friendship needs to be clear. Many parents fear setting boundaries will create distance. Research shows combining a respectful, loving relationship with sensible boundaries and limits helps encourage young people to make responsible decisions.



## Being well-informed

It is important to know the latest facts about alcohol and drugs and how they affect young people. It is an area where knowledge and understanding can change quickly. Sources of accurate information include those listed at the end of this Guide.

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**When young people see you as well-informed and discussing facts in a calm, balanced way it builds credibility and trust. This makes conversations easier.**  
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## Talking alcohol and drugs

Research shows talking openly and honestly about alcohol and drugs from an early age helps young people learn to problem-solve and make informed decisions. You could:

- talk about familiar medications like paracetamol, look at potential side effects and how someone might manage a headache before using it, eg less screen time, more hydration. Explain why we take medications and the need to follow instructions on how much and when to take them. Starting these conversations early will help your child understand the risks of illicit drugs as they grow up
- find out what they already know, schools start introducing this topic from a young age
- talk when you're both relaxed, eg at the dinner table or in the car
- have frequent chats and listen without interrupting, even if you disagree
- point them to reliable information and take opportunities to provide accurate, balanced facts

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**At times talking with young people can be tough. Some conversations may not go according to plan. Take the opportunity to reconnect when things are calmer. Keeping the connection is key to a strong relationship.**  
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- use TV, movies or people you see affected by alcohol or drugs to have a conversation. Help your young person think about what they might do in that situation
- be approachable and remain calm, even if they tell you something shocking
- try not to react in ways that close down discussion. They might be less likely to talk and share in future
- help them prepare for peer pressure to drink or use drugs, eg they could practise ways to respond
- challenge the idea that drinking is a normal part of growing up. More young people are choosing not to drink than ever before.

## Promoting safe choices

- Help your young person think about:
  - how alcohol or drugs can affect their ability to think clearly and make good judgements
  - risks to their health and wellbeing
  - the impact on their lives if they break the law.
- Know where they are going, what they are doing and who they are with. Get to know their friends and their parents where possible.
- Have an agreed "safety plan" when they go out, eg ensure their phone is fully charged, they have money for a taxi and know they can call you at any time, in any condition, if they or their friends need help.
- Encourage them to participate in activities, sports and hobbies with a range of peers.
- Recognise and acknowledge responsible choices, eg they may be allowed to stay out later or enjoy an extra night out.
- Involve them in developing a safety and wellbeing family agreement. Make it clear this isn't about spoiling their fun. It might include:
  - clearly explaining your expectations, eg whether or not they are allowed to drink alcohol and why
  - how they could avoid situations where there is alcohol or drugs
  - calling or texting you to help them leave events where there is alcohol or drugs or they feel uncomfortable or unsafe. You can agree on a code if they want to leave but can't tell their friends



- what to do if they or a friend are affected by alcohol or drugs
- what will happen if the family agreement is broken. They are more likely to respect this if they've had a say.

You can review the agreement as they develop skills and maturity over time.

**Studies show most parents are not giving alcohol to under 18 year olds and more and more young people are choosing not to drink.**

## Being a role model

Parents play a crucial role in shaping their young person's attitude towards alcohol and drugs. They learn from what they see you doing.

If you drink alcohol:

- let them see not all your activities include drinking
- be careful with language, eg saying 'I need a drink' can imply alcohol is a solution to stress
- role model healthy coping strategies and ways to have fun without alcohol or drugs
- avoid contradictions between what you say and do.

## Peer groups

Peer groups are very important to young people. They help them:

- develop a sense of belonging
- feel understood by others going through similar experiences
- test out their ideas and values
- work out what they like by trying different things, eg dress styles, music choices, activities, interests
- become more experienced at making choices and trusting their own judgement
- practise being independent.

Young people may choose a peer group because of things like dress style, musical tastes, interests or whether or not they drink or take drugs. Most decide to drink or take drugs without peer pressure. Nonetheless it's important to acknowledge the influence peer groups can have on your young person. Encouraging their involvement in a range of activities, sports and hobbies will help them have several friendship groups. They will have a bigger network to connect with if one group starts drinking or using drugs.

## Alcohol

Many people believe alcohol is less risky than drugs because it is legal. However legal substances such as alcohol, tobacco and some medicines are responsible for most harm to young people.

### The impact of alcohol

People under 18 years of age are more likely to suffer harm from alcohol.

- Their brains are still developing and therefore more vulnerable to damage from alcohol. There can be ongoing emotional, learning and memory problems.
- Drinking alcohol can increase risk-taking and lead to unsafe sex, car accidents and injuries. It can also increase the risk of self-harm and even suicide.
- Drinking at an early age increases the risk of developing problems with alcohol as an adult.

**The National Health and Medical Research Council recommends children and young people under 18 years of age should not drink alcohol. This reduces the risk of injury and other health problems.**

### Drinking at home

Research shows the earlier young people start to drink the greater the risk of developing problems with alcohol later on. Some people believe allowing them to drink at home, supervised by parents, does no harm and will help them learn to drink sensibly. This is not true. It's best to delay drinking for as long as possible.



Young people who drink alcohol at home, even just sips and tastes, are more likely to:

- start drinking at a younger age
- binge drink (considered high-risk)
- experience damage from alcohol
- get more alcohol from elsewhere, eg friends.

### Alcohol at underage parties

If you are hosting a party at home for your young person it is illegal to give alcohol to anyone under 18 years without permission from their parent/carer.

This permission requires you to:

- personally supervise the young person
- not allow them to become intoxicated
- not be intoxicated yourself.

If you use a catering company at home or hire a venue alcohol cannot be served to minors under any circumstances.

### When young people drink

Talk to them about drinking safely. Encourage:

- eating before they drink to slow down alcohol absorption
- starting with water to prevent dehydration and not drinking alcohol quickly. It helps to have a glass of water between each alcoholic drink
- being aware of how much they are drinking and the alcohol content of different drinks
- avoiding drinking games and shots
- helping friends who seem to be drinking too much. Suggest a walk, try distracting them or involve others to prevent a possible emergency. Don't let them drive.

**It's vital your young person feels safe to reach out in an emergency. Let them know they can contact you at any time, in any condition, for help or call 000 without fear of getting into trouble. Paramedics do not have to involve the police.**

## Drugs

Many parents worry whether their young person is using drugs and what they should do about it.

### How will I know?

There is no simple way to tell if someone is using drugs. Parents may notice changes and wonder if it is a sign of drug use. It's important not to jump to conclusions. There could be other causes, eg illness, problems at school or with friends or things happening in the family.

Changes may include:

- unusual or out-of-character behaviour
- mood swings that are more than the usual ups and downs of adolescence
- being withdrawn or avoiding time with family
- a drop in schoolwork or attendance
- dropping out of activities or sports they usually enjoy
- an unexplained or sudden new group of friends
- big changes in physical appearance
- eating or sleeping problems
- valuable items or money missing at home.

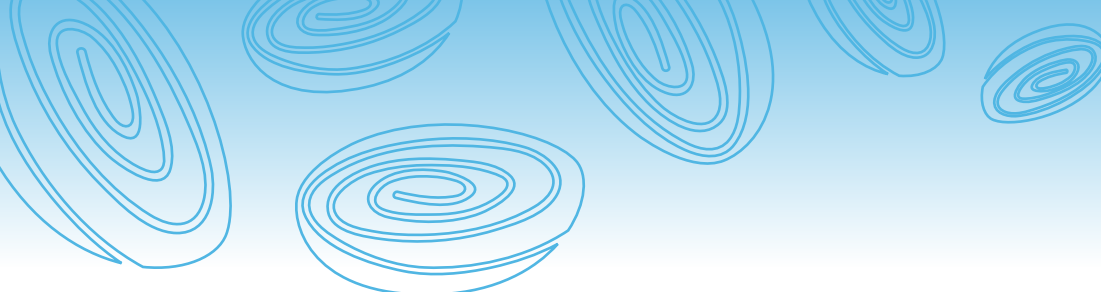
If any of these are happening and affecting their daily life something may be going on for them. They may need extra help and support.

**Some young people use alcohol or drugs to help cope with worries or mental health problems. If you think this may be the case it is important to get help. Services at the end of this Guide are a good place to start.**

### Raising your concerns

If you are worried your young person might be using drugs it is important to talk with them. How you handle these conversations will make a difference to how they respond.





Most young people will let you know what's happening if:

- you stay calm and don't accuse or blame
- they see you as caring and supportive
- you ask at the right time
- they're not afraid of being punished.

It can help to:

- talk when you are alone together and both relaxed
- approach the topic calmly, eg 'I've noticed you haven't been yourself lately. Are things OK?'
- choose words wisely to avoid hurt. Listen and try to understand their feelings. If conflicts persist involve another adult
- avoid lecturing. Instead of saying 'You need to...' try statements like 'If I was in your position I would...'
- pause and cool down if things get heated. Suggest taking a break and return when calm. Address the issue together taking a "you and me versus the problem approach".

**Before responding to challenging statements from your young person pause and take a deep breath. This will help you engage more calmly and show them what to do when their emotions are intense.**

## What if they are using drugs?

If you find your young person has used or is using drugs:

- give yourself time to calm down and think through what's happening before you react
- try to avoid strong reactions and arguments that could harm your relationship
- avoid blame. Let them know you're concerned about their wellbeing and want to help
- give them a chance to tell you what's happening without interrupting or lecturing. Find out what drugs they're using, how often and where
- talk openly and honestly rather than going behind their back and searching for drugs. The loss of trust will be greater than the benefit of anything you may find

- ask if they want to stop using drugs. Are they able to stop by themselves or do they need help?

**Make sure young people have reliable, accurate information about drugs and services that can help if they want to stop using them.**

If your older teenager chooses not to stop using drugs recognise they're making their own life decisions. For your family's wellbeing set boundaries, eg not giving them money or supporting them in ways they should be capable of without drugs. You have the right to say using drugs or being under their influence is not OK in your home. Sticking to these boundaries helps you offer love and support without enabling their drug use.

In extreme situations some parents may ask their child to choose between drugs or living at home. If you consider this be sure it is what you really want. While they should be responsible for their choices ensure they have a safe alternative. Let them know you love them and they are welcome to return but make sure your expectations are clear.

If their drug use leads to legal troubles offer emotional support but consider allowing them to face the outcome of choices they have made.

## Getting help

Parents can feel out of their depth if they find their young person is using drugs. Remember you don't have to deal with this alone. Your own health and wellbeing are important too.

- Reach out for support, eg family, friends, other parents, GP, a counsellor or other health professional.
- Specialist services listed in this Guide can provide reliable information and support.
- Be compassionate to yourself if you feel overwhelmed at times. Acknowledge the ways you are trying to help your young person.

**Note:** The term 'Parents' in this Guide refers to anyone caring for and/or raising children and young people, eg parents, caregivers, step-parents, grandparents, guardians, foster or kinship carers.





## Want more information?

### Emergencies

Phone 000 for emergency assistance

### Alcohol and Drug Information Service

Phone 1300 131 340, 8.30am-10pm, 7 days

A confidential telephone counselling, information and referral service

<https://knowyouroptions.sa.gov.au/>

### National Alcohol & Other Drug Hotline

Phone 1800 250 015, 24/7

Free confidential counselling, advice, support and referrals

<https://toolkit.lifeline.org.au/articles/support/national-alcohol-other-drug-hotline>

### Alcohol and Drug Foundation

Information on alcohol, drugs and support services

[www.adf.org.au/help-support/path2help](http://www.adf.org.au/help-support/path2help)

### 0439 TELL ME

Text a drug name to 0439 835 563 and receive a text with information about the effects of the drug and links to further information <https://adf.org.au/resources/text-the-effects/>

### Legal Services Commission SA

Young people, Alcohol and the Law Factsheet

<http://www.lsc.sa.gov.au/resources/AlcoholandTheLawYoungPeopleFactsheet.pdf>

### Support for young people

#### Drug and Alcohol Youth Outreach Service - Mission Australia

Phone 8417 8100, 9am-5pm, Mon-Fri

Support for anyone aged 10-25 and family/friends in greater Adelaide region [www.missionaustralia.com.au/](http://www.missionaustralia.com.au/)

### Kids Helpline

Phone 1800 551 800 or chat online, 24 hours

Support and information, including on alcohol and drugs for children and young people aged 5-25 and their

parents [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)

### Headspace

Phone 1800 650 890 or chat online at [www.eHeadSpace.org.au](http://www.eHeadSpace.org.au), 9am-12.30am

To talk face to face find your local centre at <https://headspace.org.au/headspace-centres/>

Information and free, confidential support for anyone aged 12-25

### ReachOut

Free, anonymous and 24/7

Alcohol and drugs information for young people [www.reachout.com](http://www.reachout.com)

### Support for parents

#### Family Drug Support

Phone 1300 368 186, 24/7

Support and information for families affected by alcohol and other drugs [www.fds.org.au/](http://www.fds.org.au/)

### The Other Talk

Tips for starting conversations about alcohol and drugs

<https://cdn.adf.org.au/media/documents/GettingStarted.pdf>

### Parenting Strategies

Information and guidelines on preventing alcohol misuse in young people [www.parentingstrategies.net](http://www.parentingstrategies.net)

### Raising Children Network

Parenting information, including on alcohol and drugs [www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)

### Parenting SA

For other Parent Easy Guides including 'Young people and parties', 'Young people, emotions and wellbeing', 'Young people, body image and food', 'Young people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual' and 'Living with young people' [www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)



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### Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Women's and Children's Health Network

**[www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)**

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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Revised: 03/2024.