

Young people, alcohol and drugs



Parents can play a role in keeping young people safe from the risks of using alcohol and drugs. What young people see you doing and your attitudes towards alcohol and drugs strongly influence the decisions young people make. Their attitudes towards alcohol and drugs are formed well before their first experience of them.

It can also help to talk openly and honestly with young people from a young age, and help them learn to make good decisions and solve problems on their own. It is never too soon to start.

Learning to make good decisions

It is usual for young people to experiment, take risks and test limits. However, their brain is still developing its decision-making areas, and they often act from emotions and impulses and can make unsafe choices.

Parents can help young people learn to make good decisions in any situation, and to understand risk and the potential outcomes of their actions. This is more effective than telling them to 'Just Say No'.

You could:

- talk about various scenarios and the options people have. Coming up with safe and healthy solutions helps young people learn they have choices
- let children practise making safe choices for themselves from an early age. As they grow up and become better at this, you can extend the areas they can make their own choices

- acknowledge when children and young people make good decisions
- help them learn from mistakes. Learning what happens as a result of their choices is often more effective than telling them what to do.

Building your relationship

Building a strong, trusting relationship with your child can help prevent substance misuse as they get older.

Some ways to build your relationship are to:

- spend time with children, talking, playing, having fun
- tell them you love them
- be involved in their lives
- get to know their friends and make them welcome in your home
- show you are genuinely interested in what interests them
- notice their strengths and the good things they do, and tell them.

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

Being well-informed

It is important to know the latest facts about alcohol and drugs and their impact on young people. It is an area where knowledge and understanding changes rapidly and it is easy to become out of date. Myths are common in our community, particularly about drugs and addiction. When your young person sees you as calm and balanced and a source of reliable information, it can be easier to have important conversations. Some places to find good information are at the end of this Guide.

When young people see you as well-informed, and you talk in a calm and balanced way, it builds credibility and trust and makes conversations easier.

Talking with children

Talking openly and honestly about alcohol and drugs from an early age will help prepare children and young people to deal with things that might arise. Encouraging healthy attitudes, especially before they start high school, can help protect them from any unhealthy attitudes they encounter.

You could:

- start talking with children early, in ways that suit their age and development
- find out what they already know. Schools start introducing this topic in age-appropriate ways from a young age
- take opportunities as they arise to give accurate, balanced information
- use TV, movies or people you see affected by alcohol or drugs to have a conversation. Help children think about what they might do in that situation.

Talking with pre-teens and teens

As children get older:

- be approachable and unshockable. Listen to their ideas even if you don't agree
- try not to interrupt or react in ways that stop discussion. They might worry about telling you things you need to hear
- show them where to get accurate information from reliable sources
- help them think about:
 - their safety. Young people can be vulnerable if they are under the influence of alcohol or drugs, involved in the drug culture or accessing drugs
 - the impact on their lives if they break the law
 - risks to their health and wellbeing
- work out together a family agreement about alcohol and drugs. Make it clear the agreement is about safety and wellbeing, not about spoiling their fun. Agree on the response if agreements are broken. Involving young people in coming up with solutions if agreements are broken is more effective than parents deciding and imposing penalties. Review the agreement together as they get older and develop skills and maturity
- make sure young people can get home safely when they go out. Have an emergency plan, eg a pre-paid mobile phone to call you, or permission to take a taxi and you'll pay. If this happens often, talk with them about what else might be going on
- acknowledge responsible behaviour. Your young person may be able to stay out a bit later or have an extra night out
- encourage their involvement in a range of activities, sports and hobbies.



Peer groups

Peer groups are very important to young people. They want to feel 'normal', to 'fit in' and belong with those of their own age. However, peer group pressure can be overstated. Most young people decide to drink or take drugs without being pressured, forced or tricked. They may choose a peer group because of what the group is doing, eg how they dress, the music they listen to, or whether or not they drink or take drugs.

Support young people to have a number of friendship groups. They will have a bigger network to connect with if one group starts drinking or using drugs.

Alcohol

Many people think that because alcohol is legal it must be less risky, and getting drunk is just part of becoming an adult. However, most harm to young people comes from using legal substances such as alcohol, tobacco and medicines. More are involved in violence, hospitalised or die from alcohol-related causes than from illegal drugs.

The impact of alcohol

Some impacts of alcohol on young people include:

- damage to their adolescent brain, particularly the part dealing with emotions, memory and decision-making. This can affect learning and problem-solving and contribute to developing mental health problems. Those under 15 years are especially at risk
- the harms caused by drinking to excess, binge-drinking, taking risks and doing things they might regret later
- contributing to the three main causes of teenage death – injury, homicide and suicide.

While there is much harm caused by drinking alcohol, studies¹ over a number of years show a shift in drinking culture, with more young people abstaining from alcohol or delaying when they start to drink. This is a positive trend, however there are still a lot of young people drinking before the legal age of 18 years.

Drinking at home

The earlier young people start to drink, the greater the chance they will have problems with alcohol later in life. Some people believe that letting young people drink at home, supervised by parents, does no harm and will help them drink sensibly later. This is not the case. It is best to delay drinking for as long as possible.

Alcohol at underage parties

If you are hosting a party at home for your son or daughter, the law says you must not give alcohol to people under 18 years unless their parent or carer has given you permission.

This permission requires you to:

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

All adults, even an adult sibling, need the parent or carer's permission to supply alcohol to a minor and must provide responsible supervision. See www.cbs.sa.gov.au/liquor-reform for more information.

You are a role model for children and young people. Be prepared to look at your own use of alcohol, tobacco, medications and other drugs.



Drugs

Many parents worry about whether their son or daughter is using illegal drugs and what they should do about it. They worry about the harms of drugs such as cannabis, heroin, ecstasy, ice or speed (methamphetamine).

How will I know if they are using drugs?

There is no easy, sure way to tell if a young person is taking drugs. Parents who know their child well may notice changes and wonder whether it is a sign of drug use. It may be, but it is important not to jump to conclusions. There could be other causes, such as illness, problems at school or with friends, or the impact of things going on in your family.

Changes may include:

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

If any of these are happening, there may something going on for your young person. They may need extra help and support.

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Some young people use alcohol or drugs to help them cope with worries or mental health problems. If you think this may be happening it is important to get help. Doctors, counsellors or services in this Guide are good places to start.
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Raising your concerns

If you are worried that your son or daughter 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:

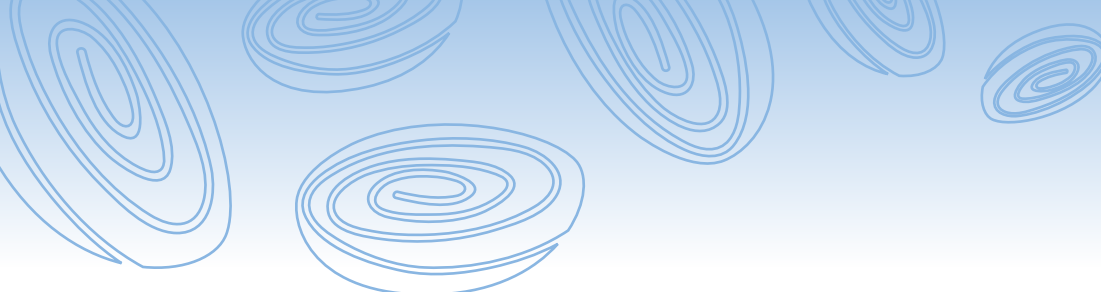
- you stay calm and don't accuse or blame
- they see you as caring and supportive
- you ask at the right time
- they're not afraid they will be punished.

It can help to:

- talk when you are both in a reasonable mood and alone together, eg driving in the car, but not when you're in a hurry
- open up the subject in an easy way, eg 'I've noticed you haven't been yourself lately. Are things OK for you?'
- make it easy for them to talk. Try talking about someone else you know. You might say, 'I was talking to a friend about her daughter using drugs. She was very worried. What do you think she should do?'

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Sometimes a young person will test out parents by talking about a friend when they really mean themselves. Your response will be important to them.
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What if they are using drugs?

If you find your young person has used, or is using drugs remember blame is not helpful.

- Don't react immediately. Give yourself time to calm down and think through what's happening.
- Try to avoid strong reactions and big arguments that could harm your relationship.
- Tell them you're concerned about their wellbeing and you think they might be using drugs. Let them know you want to help.
- Give them a chance to tell you what's happening without interrupting or lecturing. Find out what drugs are being used, how often and where they are being used.
- The best way to find out what's happening is to ask them - that is, by talking rather than by 'detection'. Don't go behind their back and search for drugs. The loss of trust will be greater than the benefit of anything you might find out.
- Ask if they want to stop using drugs. Are they able to stop by themselves or do they need help? How can you support them?
- If they are an older teenager, and don't want to stop using drugs you may have to come to terms with the fact that they're making their own life choices. You still have the right to say they are not to use or be under the influence of drugs in your home. Let them know you love them but make sure expectations are clear.
- Some parents tell their young person to give up drugs or they'll have to leave home. If you say this, be sure it's what you really want. While your young person needs to accept the outcomes of their choices, it is also important they have somewhere safe to go.
- If their drug use brings them into contact with the legal system give them moral support but allow them to face the outcome of their choices. Rescuing them, eg paying their fines, could result in them continuing to use drugs.

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

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Getting help

It's OK to ask for help - you don't need to handle this alone. If your young person is still at school, teachers may be able to provide information about any issues they are having and suggest strategies to support them.

Your doctor, a health professional or the services in this Guide are also good places to find information and support.

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If you think someone has passed out from drug or alcohol use, put them on their side and phone 000 immediately for an ambulance. Don't hesitate. Paramedics do not need to involve the police.

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1 National Drug Strategy Household Survey, 2016





Want more information?

Emergencies

Phone 000 for ambulance, police or fire

Police attendance

Phone 131 444 for non-urgent police attendance

Telephone counselling

Phone 1300 13 1340, 8.30am -10pm, 7 days a week for free, confidential counselling, information and referral from the Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)

Know your options

Information for anyone experiencing problems with alcohol and drugs. You can find a support service in your area or use the free online counselling service 24/7.

Phone 1300 13 1340, 8.30am-10pm, 7 days a week for free, counselling, information and referral www.knowyouroptions.sa.gov.au

SA Health

Information about drug and alcohol services including those of the Drug and Alcohol Services of SA (DASSA) and the Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS) www.sahealth.sa.gov.au

Australian Government, Department of Health

Information about drugs and their effects including what drugs look like. Tips for parents on talking with their teens <https://campaigns.health.gov.au/drughelp>

Alcohol and Drug Foundation

Phone 1300 85 85 84 for information about alcohol, drugs and support services <https://adf.org.au>

Drug Info

Facts and resources about alcohol and drugs www.druginfo.adf.org.au

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

The Other Talk

Talking with your children about alcohol and other drugs, safe partying and relevant laws www.theothertalk.org.au

Parenting Strategies

Information and guidelines on preventing adolescent alcohol misuse, including free online course for parents www.parentingstrategies.net

Youth Mental Health Service

Phone 13 14 65, 24 hours. Supporting young people 16 to 24 years to manage their mental health www.sahealth.sa.gov.au

Headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation

Phone 1800 650 890, 9am-1am. Help for parents and young people 12-25 years www.headspace.org.au

Kids Helpline

Information for children and young people on a range of topics, including alcohol and drugs www.kidshelp.com.au

ReachOut

Online mental health support for young people www.au.reachout.com

Quit SA

Phone 13 78 48
Phone information and support to stop smoking www.cancersa.org.au/quitline

Raising Children Network

For parenting information www.raisingchildren.net.au

Child and Youth Health

For parenting and child health information www.cyh.com

Parenting SA

For other Parent Easy Guides including 'Young people and parties', 'Living with young people', 'Talking sex with young people', 'Young people, feelings and depression', 'Young people and food' and 'Young people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual' www.parenting.sa.gov.au



**Government of
South Australia**

Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department for Education and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

**Ph: 08 8303 1660
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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