

June 2013 For parents

Alcohol and other drug prevention in the family

Introduction

Harmful alcohol and other drug use by young people is a concern for most families and communities. While most young people make a relatively smooth transition from childhood and adolescence to adulthood, some young people may engage in one or more high-risk behaviours such as:

- › unsafe sexual activity
- › violence
- › self-harm
- › harmful drug use, including excessive use of alcohol.

Concern and action by parents, families, schools, communities and governments have led to extensive research being conducted to find out how we can prevent or minimise the harms caused by these high-risk behaviours. This fact sheet provides a general overview on some drug prevention strategies that have developed from the research.

How common is harmful drug use among young people?

Although many young people will experiment with alcohol and other drugs (legal or illegal) at some stage, most will not go on to experience problems. According to the 2010 National Drug Strategy Household Survey report:

- › A total of 59.3 per cent of 12–17 year olds have never had one full serve of alcohol
- › A total of 81.3 per cent of 14–17 year olds have never used an illegal drug
- › Only 3.8 per cent of 12–17 year olds smoked tobacco and 2.5 per cent smoked daily.

The most commonly used illegal drug is cannabis. In 2011, it was the most commonly used illicit substance, with 15% of all secondary school students aged between 12 and 17 years reporting the use of cannabis at some time in their life.

The average age for first time use of tobacco is 16 years; alcohol 17 years; and cannabis 18.5 years.

Risk and protective factors

In recent years there has been a lot of research done by health professionals that has found some key influences that can affect whether a young person is more or less likely to use alcohol or other drugs. These are called “risk and protective factors”.

There are many risk factors that can increase the chances of a young person misusing alcohol and other drugs. The more risk factors there are over time, the greater the risk. There is a strong relationship between early indicators (risk factors) and subsequent problems.

Risk factors

Some of the risk factors associated with harmful drug use in young people include:

- › Family factors
 - family conflict such as arguments or members of the family often insulting or yelling at each other
 - family management problems, such as not having clear standards or rules for behaviour or severe or inconsistent punishment
 - family living in poverty
 - family history of drug misuse
 - parents misusing alcohol or other drugs and/or having positive attitudes toward drug use.
- › School influences
 - reduced academic achievement and lack of attachment or commitment to school
 - early and persistent problem behaviours, such as misbehaving in school or fighting with other children.
- › Community influences
 - laws and regulations regarding drugs
 - community attitudes toward drug use
 - poor, deteriorating or crime-ridden neighbourhoods
 - availability of drugs in the community— for example, if it’s easy to get cigarettes, alcohol, cannabis.

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- › Personality and peer influences
 - aggressive or problem behaviours
 - rebelliousness and not feeling like they are a part of their community or society
 - involvement with friends who are using alcohol or other drugs (peer acceptance).

Although no single risk factor can be said to cause harmful alcohol or other drug use, the more risk factors a young person is exposed to—the greater the chance of them trying or using one or more drugs. Research in Australia indicates that the same risk factors that influence harmful drug use among young people can influence other problems such as criminal behaviour, homelessness, mental health problems and sexual risk taking.

What can be done to protect young people from these risks?

Research has also shown that it is possible to reduce the risks of harmful alcohol and other drug use by strengthening certain protective factors in young people. Some of these protective factors include:

- › having a sense of belonging and fitting in at school
- › positive experiences and achievements at school
- › having someone outside the family who believes in and supports them
- › having opportunities to contribute in their school and community
- › feeling supported and respected
- › religious or spiritual links.

Together, families, schools and communities can reduce the risks and increase these protective factors in young people.

Drug prevention strategies

The most effective drug prevention strategies are those that target more than one risk factor, are integrated across the community and are coordinated through childhood and adolescence. These strategies include family intervention, parent education, school drug education, school organisation and behaviour management, restrictions on the sale of alcohol and tobacco, and initiatives undertaken by the community.

Drug prevention in schools

Drug prevention initiatives in schools include drug education and other programs to improve or enhance students' experiences at school. Examples of such programs include mentoring and anti-bullying, breakfast clubs to ensure students start the day with a nutritious meal and homework clubs to help students experiencing difficulties in completing homework.

Drug prevention in the community

Communities support individuals, parents and families through programs that build confidence and good communication. Community drug prevention projects may include programs for young people and parents; publications (booklets, posters, advertisements) that provide information; and health promotion campaigns, including sport, arts and recreation activities.

Drug prevention in the family

Families play a vital role in drug prevention. In partnership with schools and the community, families can prevent, delay or reduce the risks of harmful drug use in their young people. Some strategies for building on the protective factors within the family include:

- › establishing clear standards and rules for behaviour
- › providing opportunities to spend time with the family
- › creating a sense of belonging and opportunities to make a meaningful contribution to the family
- › reducing family conflict
- › enhancing communication and relationships within and outside the family
- › providing positive rewards and recognition.

Help for parents

It is not easy to raise a family in today's society. Some people feel they do not have the knowledge, skills or support they need. Programs that help parents develop family management skills and provide support at home are becoming increasingly important. These programs can help parents develop their children's ability to deal with the challenges of growing up, including developing responsible attitudes and behaviours toward alcohol and other drugs.

Family support programs are offered through schools, community health centres and other organisations. They may also be of benefit to grandparents, foster parents and other carers. Family support programs can:

- › support children and parents to identify goals and respond to their unique challenges
- › promote healthy family relationships
- › provide parenting education and resources
- › provide services in your home and in your local community
- › work in collaboration with other services to provide the best possible support.

Some parenting programs offer skills training applicable to a specific situation or group, for example families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

It's important for families to talk openly about alcohol and other drugs. For advice on how to start the conversation, visit **The Other Talk** website.

Drug prevention benefits everyone

Harmful alcohol and other drug use by young people is a concern for everyone. Family support programs aim to promote healthy and happy relationships within families and can be an effective drug prevention strategy. Their effectiveness can be strengthened when supported by drug prevention initiatives in schools and across the community.

Parents, families, schools, communities and governments can all work together to prevent harmful alcohol and other drug use and to improve the wellbeing of all members of the community.

More information

NHMRC guidelines
Alcohol.gov.au

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

Get the effects of any drug by text
0439 TELL ME (0439 835 563)

Blog about preventing alcohol-related harm in families and communities
GrogWatch.adf.org.au

DrugInfo is a service of

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For more information

Visit druginfo.adf.org.au

Call Drug Information Line 1300 85 85 84

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