Positive Choices
Drug and Alcohol Information
Get informed, stay smart, stay safe

Factsheet

Harm minimisation: How to talk to teenagers about staying safe



Evidence ratings:

This resource has undergone expert review. See our Help/Q&A section for more details.

Year:

Targeted Drugs: Alcohol, Cannabis, Drugs (General), MDMA/Ecstasy

Tags: drug use, teenagers, harm reduction, safety

Origin: Australian

Cost:
Free

What is harm minimisation?

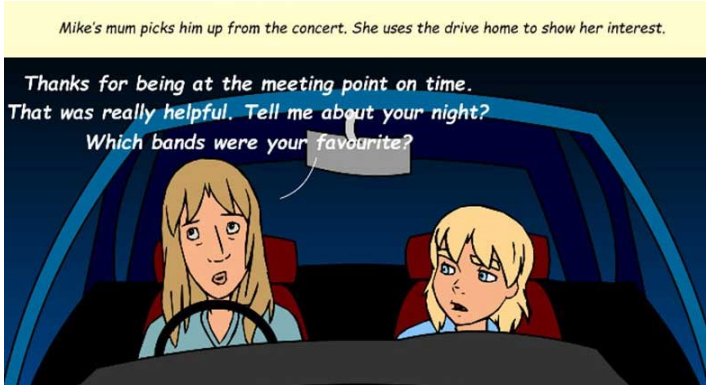
Harm minimisation is an approach which focuses on strategies to reduce harms to the individual and society that are associated with the use of alcohol and other drugs. Harms associated with the use of alcohol and other drugs peaks in adolescence through to early adulthood. In view of this, and the known impacts of alcohol and drug use on the developing brain, it is recommended that young people avoid using alcohol or other drugs for as long as possible.

As part of the National Drug Strategy, the Australian Government adopts a harm minimisation approach to alcohol and other drug use prevention. Its principles guide the health, education, and law enforcement bodies in all states and territories of Australia.

Talking to young people about harm minimisation

Parents play a key role in their teenager's decision to use or not use alcohol and other drugs. Below are tips on how to talk to your teenager about minimising harms associated with alcohol and other drug use:

- When talking about sensitive topics such as alcohol and other drugs, it is important to approach the conversation openly and without judgement.
- Find out what harms your teenager is aware of in relation to alcohol and other drugs.
- Young people often report negative social consequences (e.g., being sick in front of others or saying something foolish) as a primary concern. You may want to focus on those concerns, because they are especially important to young people, so they will be more motivated to try and avoid these types of consequences.
- Ensure you spend time listening and talking about your teenager's concerns before asking if they'd be willing to hear some of your concerns when it comes to alcohol and other drugs.
- Together with your teenager agree on rules for when they go out with friends. E.g., after a night out, how will they get home? What time will they get home? Will they need to message you to check in?



- Get the facts about teenage alcohol and other drug use beforehand so you can communicate effectively and confidently. For example, do you know how many 12-17 year olds are choosing not to drink? Or smoke tobacco? Or smoke cannabis? Based on recent Australia-wide survey data among 12-17 year olds 35% have never drunk alcohol, 87% have never smoked tobacco, and 87% have never smoked cannabis.
- Learning the facts can help you clear up your teenager's misperceptions about alcohol and other drug use, like the idea that 'everyone is doing it'.

For more information on current statistics and trends to support your discussion, visit this page.

For more information on communicating with young people about alcohol and other drugs, read our factsheet here.

Read the tips below on how to reduce harm and keep your teenager safe.

Dos

Know your teenager's whereabouts



- Who will they be with? What time will they be home?
- Make these conversations routine.
- Encourage them to download the Emergency+ App. The app pinpoints their location and can be helpful when calling 000.

Encourage them to call 000 at the first sign of an emergency



- Signs of an emergency include when a person is passed out, breathing shallow, not responding to questions or on being lightly shaken.
- Young people may not want to call an ambulance if they're scared about getting in trouble- so make sure they know the facts.
- Parents/guardians will only be notified by the ambulance if the person is under 18 years and is taken to hospital.
- Police will not be notified unless there is a risk to someone's safety or if someone dies.
- For more information on responding in an emergency click here.

Talk to other parents in your child's year group



- Discuss their rules and expectations.
- Get their contact details and their teenager's contact details.
- Talk about resources and tips for keeping safe that you've found most useful.

Make sure they're aware of how quickly intoxication can happen



- Make sure your teenager understands the alcohol content of different types of drinks.
- While premixed drinks (e.g., sold in cans) have a standard number of drinks, it can be tricky to keep track of the alcoholic content when drinks are mixed manually.
- Make an agreement for your child to always stay with at least one friend throughout an event.
- Get them to test their knowledge of what a standard drink looks like in this game.

Don'ts

Do not allow your teenager to drive or get public transport home late at night



- Instead arrange for you or another parent to pick them up.

Do not supply alcohol to your child if they are under 18 years old



- It is a **myth** that supplying alcohol to your teenager before an event will meant they drink less at the event, in fact they often will drink more.
- Instead, supplying alcohol to your teenager can contribute to 'pre-loading'.
- 'Pre-loading' or 'pre-drinking' involves young people drinking heavily, usually at someone's home before going to the main party or a licensed venue.
- Pre-drinking is associated with harmful consequences such as victimisation, aggression, accidents, and injury.

Do not let them accept drinks from strangers



- Ensure your teenager knows the risks of accepting drinks from a stranger.
- Get more information in our drink spiking factsheet.

Do not mix drugs



- Mixing drugs can include combining alcohol with prescribed medications and/or illegal drugs.
- When attending festivals encourage your teenager to locate the first aid tent and help their friends get there if needed.
- First aid tents at festivals are there to help people who are experiencing a medical emergency and/or a bad reaction to a drug.
- For more information read our factsheet on mixing different drugs.

Evidence Base

This factsheet was developed following expert review by researchers at the Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use at the University of Sydney. A full list of sources which informed this factsheet can be seen below.

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