Positive Choices
Drug and Alcohol Information
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Factsheet

Preventing alcohol and other drug harms among rural young people



Evidence ratings:

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

Year:

Targeted Drugs: Alcohol, Drugs (General)

Tags: rural, regional, remote

Origin: Australian

Cost:
Free

Key messages

- Understanding the challenges for young people living in rural areas helps us to support them in the best way
- Friends and family are important influences in whether a young person chooses to use alcohol or other drugs
- Providing fun and accessible social activities as alternatives can help young people stay safe.

Are regional youth at higher risk?

It might surprise you to learn that alcohol, tobacco and illegal drug use are higher among people living in remote areas than those living in the big cities. Almost one third of young Australians live in rural and remote communities, so it is important to understand why they might be more at risk.

Some reasons why young people in these areas could be at higher risk include:

- Boredom or feeling like there is nothing else to do
- Fears about privacy when asking for advice or getting help for drug use in small communities where lots of people know each other
- Limited access to services and resources

Research studies tell us that young people in rural areas may be more likely to experience harm, particularly from alcohol use. These harms include:

- Driving a car while drunk
- Getting into fights or being a victim of alcohol-related violence
- Needing hospital care.

The good news is that there are things we can do to reduce the risk.

In many ways, how we approach these harms among young people living in rural and remote communities is the same as how we do this in metro areas. However, there are some differences.

The better we understand the unique barriers faced by young people living in rural and remote communities, the easier it is to overcome them. Some of the ways we can overcome these barriers are outlined below.

Set a good example

Parents have a lot of influence over whether a young person decides to use alcohol or other drugs. The challenge is that different people can have different ideas about how best to prevent harm, so it can be hard to know the right approach. To make things easier for you, here are 3 things that increase young people's risk, according to research.

1. **Your attitude matters!** Young people whose parents show they approve of underage drinking are more likely to misuse alcohol.

2. Your own use of alcohol (how often, and how much) also matters, as young people often model their parent's behaviour.

3. Making alcohol available to your child or giving your child alcohol at home. It's a common misperception that giving alcohol to young people helps them to develop healthy drinking habits. **The research tells us this is not the case.** In fact, supplying alcohol to young people under the age of 18 can increase their risk of:

- Drinking at a younger age
- Drinking more when they do drink
- Problems with alcohol early on and later in life.

It might not feel like it sometimes, but as a parent, **your behaviour and attitudes do have a big impact on young people's behaviour** and their decision to use alcohol and other drugs.

Work together

Research tells us that having clear rules about alcohol and other drug use is one of the best ways you can guide your child's behaviour. Meeting with the parents of other young people in your community and agreeing upon a clear set of rules around alcohol and other drug use has been found to be effective in preventing underage drinking.

- **Know who your child's friends are** and **take an interest in what they are doing when they are not at home**. Young people are more likely to use alcohol and other drugs if their friends do.
- Get together with other parents in the school community. Set clear expectations and develop rules and be consistent in enforcing them.
- Keep up to date with the research by accessing free webinars.
- Get a group together and form a Local Drug Action Team (LDAT). The LDAT program provides funds to put community-led plans to reduce drug and alcohol harms into action. Sound interesting? Find out more here.

Provide alternatives

When young people feel bored and like there is nothing to do they can be more likely to get into trouble to distract themselves. **Providing your teenager with a choice to participate in other fun, drug and alcohol free activities** can help to combat this. Below are some alternatives that have been shown to be effective in the research:

- Playing sport and being active helps people to stay healthy, both mentally and physically.
- Giving young people a leadership role and involving them in the planning process makes it more likely they will take part.
- A Friday night activity, such as Midnight basketball, is an example of a program that has found to be work well over time even with little funding.
- Some other examples of activities might be arts, bingo nights, cultural activities, cooking classes, free open-air movie nights and music sessions – to name a few.

Programs that give young people a leadership role and those that are done in a safe and fun environment are most successful.

The research says that it doesn't really matter what type of activity you choose so long as young people are doing something they enjoy. To make sure of this, it's really important to involve them when planning the events – ask your teenager what they would like to do and work together to make it happen.

What else?

- Reducing harms from alcohol and other drugs will be most effective if everyone gets involved.
- Community and school-based programs that work in partnership with community services have been shown to be effective in rural areas.
- Parents, schools, health services, media outlets, law enforcement and sporting clubs all have an important role in preventing drug related harms in the Australian community.

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 and the National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre at the University of New South Wales, and the National Drug Research Institute at Curtin University.

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