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

Factsheet

Starting the conversation when you are concerned about drug and alcohol use



Evidence ratings:

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

Year:

Targeted Drugs: Alcohol, Cannabis, Drugs (General), Emerging Drugs ("Legal Highs"), "Ice" (Methamphetamine), MDMA/Ecstasy

Tags: effective communication, motivational conversations, getting support

Origin: Australian

Cost:
Free

1. Prepare for the conversation

If you are worried that your child might be using drugs or alcohol, it's important to keep talking to them and being open to communication. This will help to keep them connected to you, even at the most challenging of times. Starting the conversation about a young person's potential drug or alcohol use can be tricky. Having that initial conversation may not resolve everything, but it can be an important first step so your child trusts you and feels able to talk to you.

Here are some tips to getting started:

- **Gather information** to make sure you understand what drug your child may be using and its effects. Relate this information to how your child is acting, and see whether it applies to their situation. Have a clear idea of what it is that concerns you about their drug use.
- **Arrange a suitable time to talk** where you will have some privacy and won't be interrupted. Try to do this in a location that your child feels comfortable in. Talking about this topic can feel confronting, so think about whether you can walk and talk, talk whilst you are driving, or sit side-by-side so there is less pressure on your child.
- **Only start the conversation when the person is not currently under the influence of drugs or alcohol.** If this is difficult, try to pick a time when they seem less **intoxicated** than others (for example, in the morning). Try not to start conversations when they are on their way out of the house.
- It is OK to ask directly about drug use, but **don't make assumptions** that they are using drugs, how often, or why they use it. Try to find out what your child's life is like. Be relaxed and give them a chance to express their views.
- Have some specific examples ready that show the behaviours that you are worried about, in case you get a *"like what?"* in response.

To start the conversation, you might say:

"*I've noticed a few changes in you lately, and I'm a bit worried that you aren't all that happy...what's going on in your life at the moment?*

"*How are your friends going? ...I haven't seen them in a while*"

"*I haven't heard you talking much about school at the moment...how's that going?*"

2. Express concerns but avoid being judgemental or confrontational

- The conversation will be most effective if you **avoid judging or lecturing.** This can be really hard. But you are more likely to get through to the young person if you have a two-way conversation. Don't use negative terms like "addict" as this is only going to make them feel worse and they might close up.**Let them know you care about them.** People are more likely to listen if they feel valued and respected.

- **Try to use statements which include "I"** as this doesn't put the blame on them. Instead of saying "You make me feel worried when you use this drug" say something like "I feel worried about your drug use".

- **Listen** to the young person and express your concerns **in a supportive and non-confrontational manner.** Evidence suggests that "motivational" conversations are most helpful. Talking about what they "like" about using drugs can be a good way to open up the conversation. Remember, as upsetting as drug use can be, the young person has a reason(s) for using (see Why do young people use drugs?).

- Understanding the young person's reasons for using will be important to make sure they get what they need without using the drug. After speaking about what they like about the drug, you can ask "Are there any things you don't like so much about using the drug?". It is useful to open a conversation where the**young person can voice some of the negatives they have noticed related to drug use.** Watch Making the Link to see some examples of motivating conversations with young people.

3. Communicate that change is possible, but can take some time

- **Let them know you are available to talk in the future.** This first conversation might not cover all of your concerns. This first conversation is a first step in an ongoing conversation about drug and alcohol use, and it is important that the person knows they can talk about it again. Ask "permission" to check in with the person again in a week, or a fortnight, etc., to see how they are going.

- Be aware that the young person **may not believe their drug and alcohol use is dangerous.** They may become upset or angered when you talk about it. If this happens, stay on the topic of their drug use and related behaviours, rather than bring up other aspects of their character or any disagreements you may have had in the past. A negative reaction does not mean the conversation was futile – it may take some time for them to process what has been said.

- **Communicate that there is** effective help available to help people reduce or stop their drug or alcohol use. Tell them that you will support them to find the right services when they are ready. If they **do not want to change, encourage them to learn how to reduce their risk of harm** until they're ready to stop using drugs or alcohol.

- **Recovery is often a long and difficult process.** It would be unreasonable to expect changes to the person's behaviour straight away. However, you have taken the important first step by starting a conversation with them.

4. Look after yourself

Supporting a loved one in this process can be extremely challenging, and **it is important to look after yourself too**.

- Remember you can't force them to change. **Only they can take steps to cut down or stop their use**.
- Take time out for your own needs and hobbies.
- Get support by speaking to trusted friends and attending events or support groups in your community.

5. Getting support

It can be hard to seek help, but often the sooner you reach out for support, the better. You may want to talk about your concerns with a friend that you can trust. Your GP or health worker can also be a good starting point – they can discuss your concerns with you in private and help you find other services if you need more support. VisitWhere to get help for a full list of support services.

Evidence Base

This factsheet was developed following expert review 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.

© 2026 Positive Choices | Built by Netfront