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** faced by young people living in rural areas helps us to develop better prevention approaches.
- It's important to **respect privacy and confidentiality** concerns when speaking with young people about drug use.
- Creating a **safe and positive school climate** and providing alternative activities for young people can help protect against drug use and harms.

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 preventing these harms among young people living in rural and remote areas 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.

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.

One way to make this happen is to get a group together and form a Local Drug Action Team (LDAT). The LDAT program provides small amounts of funding for grassroots drug prevention initiatives that are created for communities, by communities. If this sounds like something your local area could benefit from, find out more here.

Social networks

Friends and family have a lot of influence over whether a young person decides to use drugs. Young people who have friends using alcohol and other drugs are more likely to also use these substances. One simple way to help young people stay safe is to **know who their friends are** and **be interested in what their lives are like outside of school**.

- Young people in smaller communities may be unwilling to open up about drug use due to worries about getting in trouble or privacy concerns.
- It is important to keep communication open, listen and let the young person know that you will keep the discussion private unless there is a clear danger to them or someone else.
- If a young person is still worried about privacy or confidentiality, you could suggest that they call a national helpline. You can find a list of support services here.

School belongingness

The climate of a school is made up of the beliefs and values that are encouraged and shared between its staff and students. Particularly in more remote areas, schools can be the only stable service provider in that community so they play an important role in bringing members of the wider community together. Research shows that schools help keep young people safe in 3 important ways:

1. **A positive and enjoyable school environment protects young people** against drug use and other similar behaviours. Young people who are more involved in school and feel like they belong to their school community are less likely to have problems with drug use.

2. **School is a great place for conversations about drug use** because you can provide information and help young people develop age appropriate skills.

3. **Young people often confide in a trusted adult**, such as a teacher, in preference to their parents. **A respected teacher can have a powerful impact on a young person and their pathway.**

A barrier for school staff in more remote areas can be getting access to training to deliver effective prevention programs. However, there are a number of programs available via the Positive Choices database of evidence-based drug prevention resources. These programs are:

- Evidence-based
- Engaging
- Cost effective
- Easy to implement, and
- Require no training!

Positive Choices also provides a range of training webinars which can be watched anytime on demand at no cost.

The best programs are those that are **interactive** and involve **skill training** rather than just delivering information about drug harms.

Each school has its own policy on how to prevent and address alcohol and other drug use among its students. It's a good idea to check whether your school is running a program that is evidence-based and proven to have benefits among young people. If we can intervene early on using these programs we can prevent harm from drug and alcohol use and have a real world impact.

What else?

- Reducing harms from alcohol and other drugs in rural communities works best if everyone gets involved.
- Community run prevention programs and school-based programs that work with the community 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, 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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