Positive Choices
Drug and Alcohol Information
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Factsheet

How can school staff support LGBTQIA+ youth and prevent harm from alcohol and drug use?



Evidence ratings:

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

Year:

Targeted Drugs: Alcohol, Drugs (General)

Tags: prevention, support, lgbtqia+

Origin: Australian

Cost:
Free

Introduction

LGBTQIA+ refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex or asexual people, with the '+' representing other identities or labels. You might hear other terms like sexuality and gender diverse people or sexual and gender minorities when talking about the LGBTQIA+ community. Although we refer to LGBTQIA+ youth collectively in this factsheet, experiences vary widely across different identities and communities, and each young person's experience is unique.

Current research suggests that between one in ten (9.5%) to one in six (17.7%) Australians aged 16-24 years identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community.

LGBTQIA+ youth, minority stress, and alcohol and other drug use

Most LGBTQIA+ youth live happy, healthy, and connected lives. But many also face stigma, discrimination, bullying, or even violence. The ongoing pressure that comes from being part of a minority group and dealing with things like exclusion or abuse is called minority stress. This kind of stress is linked to poorer mental health and disproportionate harms from alcohol and drug use.

Research shows that LGBTQIA+ students who experience victimisation and discrimination (e.g. bullying) are more likely to use alcohol and other drugs than those who don't. LGBTQIA+ youth also report higher levels of psychological distress, and are more likely to experience mental health challenges and alcohol or other drug use at the same time. For example, LGBTQIA+ young people with symptoms of depression are more likely to use alcohol and cigarettes, compared to those without these symptoms.

Even so, there is a lot of strength in LGBTQIA+ communities. Emerging research has highlighted resilience, identity affirmation and community connection as key factors that protect against these harms and promote wellbeing among LGBTQIA+ youth. Support from schools, peers, and families is an important part of promoting resilience and connection.

Importance of social network support

LGBTQIA+ youth who have supportive parents and friends, and who feel connected to them, are less likely to use alcohol and other drugs. Supporting young people to feel accepted, affirming their identity, and encouraging open conversations can help reduce stress.

Youth who have friends using alcohol and other drugs are more likely to also use these substances. Read our factsheet to learn more about why alcohol and other drug prevention is important.

Importance of school support

A whole-of-school approach is important for creating a safe and supportive environment that helps promote student resilience and self-esteem. Research shows that LGBTQIA+ students who are more involved in school, and feel like they belong to the school community, are less likely to use alcohol. Young LGBTQIA+ people who feel supported by school staff are also less likely to use alcohol and other drugs.

What can school staff do?

In addition to providing general wellbeing support, school policies that aim to reduce discrimination have been shown to lead to better mental health and educational outcomes among youth in the LGBTQIA+ community.

These policies include:

- Education about discrimination for students and school staff
- Not tolerating discrimination
- Visual signs of support (e.g. rainbow posters)
- Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) – student-led supportive spaces for LGBTQIA+ young people

When LGBTQIA+ youth are aware of these policies, they are also more likely to report better mental health outcomes.

As with alcohol and other drug education generally, LGBTQIA+ youth who are aware of the risks of substance use are less likely to use substances.Read our factsheet to learn more about choosing resources for school-based prevention.

Further resources

There are lots of resources available for supporting LGBTQIA+ youth as well as resources for LGBTQIA+ youth themselves:

- Minus18 provides school workshops and online resources for LGBTQIA+ young people.
- QLife is a national phone and online LGBTIQ+ peer support service, available between 3pm and midnight, 7 days a week. Phone: 1800 184 527
- ReachOut's guide on supporting LGBTQIA+ young people covers key terms and language, and gives practical tips for schools. They also have resources on gender and sexuality for youth and parents.
- Intersex Peer Support Australia & Aotearoa (NZ) is a peer support and information group for people born with variations in sex characteristics and their families.
- Transforming Families have guides for parents and schools to support trans and gender diverse youth.

Evidence Base

This factsheet was developed following expert review by Sylvia Lee, MPH University of Sydney and researchers at the Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use at the University of Sydney. A list of sources that also informed this factsheet is provided below.

Sources

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