Positive Choices
Drug and Alcohol Information
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Factsheet

Talking to a young person about alcohol and other drugs



Evidence ratings:

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

Year:

Targeted Drugs: Alcohol, Drugs (General)

Tags:

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Cost:
Free

Talking to a young person about alcohol and other drugs

Sometimes students feel more comfortable talking about their personal issues with a trusted teacher than with a family member. Teachers trained in dealing with drug problems can assist students with accessing appropriate resources and support. When suspecting drug use, duty of care procedures must be followed. Only the appropriate school committee should be notified, and as different schools will have different reporting and referral procedures it is important to be aware of these and respond accordingly.

Drugs (including alcohol) are associated with many short and long-term harms. These relate not just to how much someone is using, but also how much their use affects their life and the lives of those around them. If you think a student or someone else is affected by drug use, here are some tips to allow you to support them and communicate effectively with them about their drug use:

- **Gather information** to make sure you have an understanding of the drug/s you think they may be taking. Reflect on their situation so you can organise your thoughts and 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;
- Ask about their drug use; **don't make assumptions** that they are using drugs;
- Behavioural changes are a **good starting point for discussion**, for example, "I noticed you haven't been yourself lately…";
- **Be prepared for a negative reaction**. One reason for this may be they do not view their drug use as a problem. Be sure to stay calm and reasonable. Don't let it turn into an argument;
- The conversation will be most effective if you **avoid judging or lecturing.** This can be extremely difficult! But you are more likely to get through to the young person if you have a two-way conversation rather than lecture them;
- **Listen** to the young person and express your concerns **in a supportive and non-confrontational manner.** Evidence suggests that "motivational" rather than confrontational conversations are most helpful. Watch Making the Link for video demonstrations of how to have motivating conversations with young people;
- **Use statements including "I" as this doesn't put the blame on them**. Instead of saying, "You make me feel worried when you use drugs" say something like "I feel worried about your drug use";
- **Remind them of their good qualities.** Young people will be more likely to listen and take advice on board if they feel valued and respected;
- **Be trustworthy and supportive** so they know that they can rely on you in a time of need and that what they tell you is kept confidential (unless concerns for safety override);
- Remind them that we are all human and that we all have problems so that they are not too hard on themselves.**Let them know that help is available;**
- If they do not want to change, encourage them to learn how to reduce their risk of harm until they're ready to quit.**Let them know you are available to talk in the future.**

Seeking professional help may be the next step. You can consult the school counsellor who will be able to support you in your efforts to communicate with a student. See Where to get help for a list of places available to help people of all ages with any drug or alcohol issues.

School-based drug prevention programs

There are a number of drug prevention programs that have been developed for implementation within schools within the context of the Australian curriculum. Developed in consultation and collaboration with teachers, these programs are designed to increase awareness and reduce alcohol/drug use and related harms. BrowseSchool-based Drug Prevention Programs that have been evaluated and shown to have positive outcomes in Australia.

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.

See Teacher booklet for more information.

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