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

Recommended program

The Illicit Project



Evidence ratings:

This resource is supported by one published study. See our Help/Q&A section for more details.

Year: Year 9–10, Year 11–12

Targeted Drugs: Alcohol, Cannabis, Drugs (General), MDMA/Ecstasy

Tags: The Illicit Project, harm reduction, older adolescents, neuroscience

Time Allocated: 1-6 lessons

Links to National Curriculum:
ACPPS089 (Yr 9–10), ACPPS090 (Yr 9–10), ACPPS092 (Yr 9–10), ACPPS093 (Yr 9–10), ACPPS095 (Yr 9–10), AC9HP10P01 (Yr 9-10), AC9HP10P02 (Yr 9-10), AC9HP10P08 (Yr 9-10), AC9HP10P04 (Yr 9-10), AC9HP10P09 (Yr 9-10)

Origin: Australian

Cost:
Costs Involved

Available

The Illicit Project is managed by the Matilda Centre, University of Sydney.

Click below to be directed to The Illicit Project website for information on accessing the program.

Access The Illicit Project

Developers

The Illicit Project was developed by researchers based at the Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use, the University of Sydney. The program development and trial were supported by *Positive Choices* to address the lack of evidence-based drug prevention programs for older adolescents.

Format

This internet-delivered program comprises of **three 35-minute online modules** that focus on:

1. Alcohol and the developing brain.
2. MDMA, cannabis and harm reduction.
3. Mental health and wellbeing.

The workshops include:

- Cinematic, animated explainer videos.
- Interviews with neuroscientists and drug experts.
- Interviews with young people.
- Interactive activities to apply learnings.

Each module is summarised in a one-page handout that students can take home and keep for future reference. The program requires minimal teacher involvement, except for a short group debrief at the completion of each module.

Summary

The Illicit Project is a neuroscience-based alcohol and drug harm reduction program targeted at adolescents in Years 10 to 12. The program upskills young people in strategies to reduce the harms of alcohol and drug use and leverages positive psychology and neuroscience to engage adolescents in health promotion. Specifically, the program aims to:

- Upskill young people in strategies to reduce the short- and long-term harms of alcohol and drugs.
- Build understanding about stages of brain development during adolescence and young adulthood.
- Empower young people to protect and respect their brains during key developmental stages.
- Engage young people through peer role modelling so they can better navigate complex social situations.

The program was co-designed with young people, and a team of neuroscientists, mental health and substance use and public health experts at the Matilda Centre.

Training and Costs

The Illicit Project is available in Australian secondary schools for $10 per student.

Expected Benefits

A study that tested this resource (see sources below) found evidence for the following benefits:

- Delayed onset of cannabis use (at 6 months follow up)
- Reduced MDMA/ecstasy use (at 6 months follow up)
- Improved knowledge, attitudes, and skills to reduce drug harms (at 6 and 12 months follow up)
- Reduced prescription drug misuse (at 12 months follow up)

Evidence Base

Benefits of The Illicit Project have been demonstrated in Australia in one randomised controlled trial, discussed in the below research papers:

Sources

Debenham, J., Birrell, L., Champion, K., & Newton, N. (2023). An on-line school-based substance use harm reduction programme: The Illicit Project randomized controlled trial results. Addiction, 119(4), 741-752. https://doi.org/10.1111/add.16403

Debenham, J., Champion, K., Birrell, L., & Newton, N. (2022). Effectiveness of a neuroscience-based, harm reduction program for older adolescents: A cluster randomised controlled trial of the Illicit Project. Preventive medicine reports, 26, 101706. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2022.101706

A pilot trial to evaluate the effectiveness of a face-to-face version of the program has also been published:

Debenham, J., Birrell, L., Champion, K., Askovic, M., & Newton, N. (2020). A pilot study of a neuroscience-based, harm minimisation programme in schools and youth centres in Australia. BMJ open, 10(2).

© 2026 Positive Choices | Built by Netfront