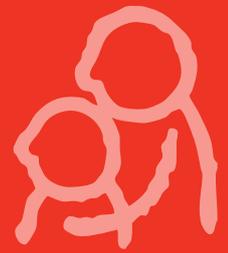


Young people and drugs

Parent easy guide 15



Parenting SA

Many parents worry about whether their son or daughter is taking illegal drugs, how they can tell, and what to do about it. We live in a drug-taking society. While there's a lot of concern about illegal drugs in the media, the most harm and greatest risk to young people comes from using legal drugs such as alcohol, cigarettes and medicines. More young people are involved in violence, are hospitalised or die from alcohol-related causes than from illegal drugs.

Many parents wonder why young people would even think of trying drugs. Part of growing up is to experiment with new things and test limits, so it's not surprising that some young people try illegal drugs as well as legal ones. Many young people however don't experiment with drugs at all. Fortunately, out of those who do try drugs, many won't go on using drugs regularly, and only a few will develop serious problems.

Sometimes we think only troubled young people use drugs. However, of the young people who are having problems in their lives, only a small number turn to drugs. Using drugs, especially alcohol, is a way some young people try to manage problems in their lives.

The longer young people wait before they first try or regularly use drugs, the less likely a problem will develop. While this can offer some comfort to parents, it's important for parents to be well informed and know what to do.

*This PEG uses 'he' and 'she' in turn.
Change to suit your young person's sex.*

Why do young people use drugs?

Understanding some of the reasons young people use drugs may help parents appreciate the many pressures facing young people.

Some of the reasons young people may use drugs are:

- > Ordinary reasons, such as 'having fun' or doing something different
- > Availability - access to drugs is not always difficult. It's usually through other young people, friends or older peers
- > Curiosity and experimentation - 'I wanted to see what it was like'
- > Acceptance by a peer group - 'Most of my friends were doing it'
- > Rebellion - 'Because you don't approve' or said 'No'
- > Depression - 'It made me feel okay'
- > Confidence and self-esteem - 'I wanted to feel better about myself'
- > Relaxation or coping with stress, boredom or pain - 'All my problems disappeared for a while'
- > Experiencing a 'high' - 'I liked the feeling'
- > Example you set - what sort of behaviour do you model? If you use drugs don't be surprised if your child follows
- > Focusing on the 'dangers of drugs' can raise young people's curiosity.

Young people usually rely on friends to tell them what to expect from a drug - the information they get is often not accurate.



Government
of South Australia

SA Health

Helping parents be their best

What you can do to prevent drug use

Good parenting is important to all children and young people to help them be healthy in all parts of their lives. However, good parenting won't always prevent young people from trying drugs. They're at an age when they make their own choices about using drugs, and many other things as well. If you find your son or daughter has used, or is using illegal drugs, blame is not helpful. Preparing them in the best way possible to make healthy and safe decisions is the most important thing you can do.

This can include:

- > Being aware that the way you live your life and the behaviours you model will influence your children. When it comes to parenting and drugs, 'Do as I say, not as I do' has little impact. Think about your use of alcohol, tobacco, medications and other drugs
- > Spend time with your children before they're into their teens. Be involved in their lives, know their friends, teachers' names, what interests them. Show a genuine interest rather than just 'prying'
- > Teach responsible behaviour. Give them practice at making choices. Acknowledge their responsible decisions and help them to learn from their mistakes. Gradually give them more responsibility for making their own decisions
- > Teach the balance of rights and responsibilities so they understand responsibilities also come with rights. For example, ask her to let you know where she's going when she's out but allow her to have some say about when she comes in
- > As your children enter their teen years think about what you can do to help make their lives interesting. If you spend the weekend sitting around watching TV, drinking and smoking, you're modelling that this is the way to spend your spare time! If your weekends offer things to look forward to, they're more likely to think of weekends as a time for enjoyable, healthy and interesting activities
- > Young people who have other interests may be less likely to take up drugs (although some sports encourage it, e.g. drinking after matches). Encourage their involvement in sport, take an interest in their hobbies and help them get to the different activities they're interested in
- > Build their self-esteem. Tell them and show them you care about and value them. Let them see you notice the things they do
- > Keep the communication open and honest - be approachable. Listen to their ideas and opinions, even if you don't agree with them. Try not to interrupt or react in a way that stops discussion. This way they won't be frightened to tell you things you may not want to hear, but need to hear
- > Don't pretend to know everything. If you don't know, say so and that you'll try to find out
- > Make sure you have safe arrangements for young people getting home. Have an emergency plan in case they lose money, drink too much or get into a difficult situation. For example, a pre-paid mobile phone to call you, permission to take a taxi and you'll pay. If it happens often, think about what else might be happening for them

- > Give rewards for responsible behaviour, e.g. allow them to stay out a bit later or have an extra night out
- > As young people get older they'll be making their own choices about friends, groups and activities. Making their friends welcome, being interested in their interests and helping them get to activities will be very important to them
- > If young people aren't going to school, if they're bored, unemployed and without hobbies and interests, they're more vulnerable to drug use
- > Sometimes young people who have a mental illness use drugs to help cope with their distress. If you have other concerns about your child it's important to get help.

Using drugs is not the same as being addicted to drugs. In most cases addiction happens over time and after regular use. Some people may get addicted faster than others. Using any illegal drug is risky and should be avoided. They may contain very dangerous chemicals that can cause damage to the brain or even death. This can happen at first use and before addiction.

Peer groups

- > Peer group pressure is often overstated and most young people make a decision to take drugs without being forced or tricked. However they may choose their peer group because of what the group is doing in a number of areas, including drugs
- > Young people need to have good reasons to change their peer group. Support them to have friendships with different groups and keep in touch with old friends. If young people are involved in more than one group they have a bigger network to connect with if one group starts using drugs. Make their friends welcome.

How will I know if they're taking drugs?

This is the most common question parents ask. There's no easy, sure way to tell. This is because the effect of the drug might have worn off before you see them or because it isn't something that's easy to see.

Even when there's a major change in behaviour, it could be caused by something else, such as illness.

Parents who know their children well won't notice any sudden change in behaviour that might be a sign that something's wrong. Changes may include:

- > Unusual or out-of-character behaviour
- > Silence, sulking, or anger towards others
- > Mood swings
- > More than usual lack of cooperation and rudeness
- > Avoiding being with or talking with the family
- > Drop in school work, or truancy
- > Dropping out of regular activities, e.g. sport
- > Change of friends - unexplained or sudden change to a new group of friends

- > Changes in physical appearance, e.g. reddened eyes
- > Eating problems
- > Lack of energy, tired all the time
- > Valuable items or money missing at home.

Don't jump to conclusions! Think about all the possible reasons for a change in behaviour. Is it due to a sudden growth spurt, or puberty? Are there problems at school or with friends? Are things going on within your family that could be affecting him? Remember, there are many reasons other than drugs that might be causing these changes.

Bringing up the subject

To raise the subject of drugs you need to be able to talk with some confidence. The way you talk will make a difference to how your child responds.

- > **Find out about drugs for yourself first** so you know what you're talking about. What's the most up-to-date information? What are the common drugs and their effects?
- > **Talk about it when you're both in a reasonable mood.** Make some private time. A good time may be when you're driving her somewhere she wants to go, but not when you're in a hurry
- > **Say something that opens up the subject in an easy way,** such as, 'I've noticed you haven't been yourself lately. Are things OK for you?' Most young people will let you know what's happening if you ask at the right time, if they're not afraid of punishment, and if they see you as caring and supportive
- > **Make it easy for them to talk to you.** Try talking about someone else you know so she sees you're open to listen. You might say, for example: 'I was talking to a friend about her daughter smoking pot. She was very worried. What do you think about it?'. Sometimes a young person will test out parents by talking about a friend when they really mean themselves - be careful how you respond!

If you suspect or find out they're taking drugs

- > Don't react immediately. Give yourself time to calm down if you're upset, and think through what's happening. Strong reactions are common but they don't help. Don't nag or lecture. There's a danger that a big argument might back you both into a corner and harm your relationship
- > If he comes home under the influence of drugs, wait until he sleeps it off and talk the next day. Getting angry will close the door on communication
- > Get a picture of what's happening in his life. Give him a chance to tell you what happened, e.g. 'Can you give me an idea what was going on?'
- > Separate the behaviour from the person. You may not approve of what he is doing but you still need to show your love and care

- > Tell him you're concerned about his wellbeing and you think he might be using drugs
- > Remind him of your values and what you'll allow in your house. This can be tricky and will depend on how old he is. With older adolescents you may have to come to terms with the fact that they're making their own life choices. However, if they won't give up the drug you still have the right to say they're not to use it at home. Some parents tell their young person to give it up or they'll have to leave home. If you say this, be sure it's what you really want and that you mean what you say. Don't push him into a more risky living situation
- > Find out what kinds of drugs are being used and how they're being used. The best way to find out is to ask him - e.g. by communication rather than detection. Detection won't give you the answers. Even if you find drugs in his room, they could belong to someone else. Don't become the 'drug squad' and go on searches for drugs - the loss of trust will be greater than the benefit of anything you might find out
- > Discuss what he considers the benefits and consequences of using drugs. Is he aware of what's likely to happen if he uses drugs, such as the effect on his friendships, family relationships, education, and future chances of getting work?
- > In South Australia, if he's involved in minor drug offences, efforts are made to keep him out of the criminal justice system. In the first instance, referrals are made to health services so he has a chance to look at his drug use
- > If this happens, give him moral support but let him know it's his responsibility. Let him deal with the consequences of his behaviour, including making arrangements, keeping appointments etc
- > Discuss the issue of trust. You may feel this has been broken. Ask him what he thinks should happen and how trust can be re-built
- > Punishment hardly ever prevents drug use
- > Remember, drugs aren't the only things that can lead to difficult decisions for parents. There are many times when you'll have to think about your rights and needs and his rights and needs
- > Ask for help. You don't need to handle this alone and it's often useful to talk to someone who's skilled in this area.

Dealing with emergencies

- > If you find or suspect your child or their friend has passed out from drug or alcohol use, phone 000 immediately for an ambulance. Don't hesitate
- > If you want to be prepared to handle a drug overdose contact the Alcohol and Drug Information Service.

Reminders

- > Parents who communicate, listen well, are approachable and who give choices (rather than orders) can support young people to build skills to make good decisions for themselves
- > Choose a good time and make sure you know what you're talking about when you talk about drugs
- > Being angry, judging and criticising doesn't work - it only makes things worse
- > Be willing to talk honestly about the drugs you use (alcohol, nicotine, medicines etc)
- > Don't over-react to situations. You might jump to the wrong conclusion
- > Don't be afraid to ask for help. You don't need to handle concerns on your own.

Contacts

Youth Healthline: Tel 1300 131 719

Monday to Friday 9 am – 5 pm

Youth health and parenting information

Alcohol and Drug Information Service: Tel 1300 131 340

Kids Helpline: Tel 1800 551 800

Poisons Information Centre: Tel 13 11 26

Police Drug Diversion Initiative: Tel (08) 8274 3355

For further information contact the Statewide Co-ordinator.

QuitSA: Tel 13 78 48

Websites

www.cyh.com

For parenting and child health information

www.parenting.sa.gov.au

For other Parent Easy Guides

www.drugs.health.gov.au

National Drugs Campaign

www.kidshelp.com.au

Kids Helpline

www.dassa.sa.gov.au

The Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS) provides information, publications, counselling and professional assistance in dealing with and understanding alcohol and drug problems

www.adf.org.au

The Australian Drug Foundation provides alcohol and other drug information, publications, research and fact sheets for parents, young people, health professionals

For more information

Parent Helpline 1300 364 100

Parenting SA

Children, Youth and Women's Health Service

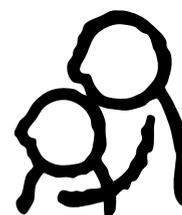
Telephone (08) 8303 1660

Internet: www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Revised 05/10

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia

© Department of Health, Government of South Australia.
All rights reserved. Printed May 2010.



Parenting SA

Helping parents be their best