

# Talk about it

**A guide to having open conversations**  
about alcohol and other drugs with young people



ADF

Alcohol  
and Drug  
Foundation

**This guide has been developed to help parents and carers talk to their children about alcohol and other drugs.**

**It explores how to have these conversations with young children through to teens, why young people might use alcohol and other drugs, and how to recognise when a young person may need help.**



## When it comes to preparing your young person for situations when they may be around alcohol and other drugs talking about it – often – is key.

We know talking to children and teenagers about alcohol and other drugs (AOD) can reduce the chances they'll drink or take other drugs or experience AOD harms later in life.<sup>1</sup>

You can start these conversations from an early age, to support your young person before they go to high school.

In fact, raising this topic early means you can establish that there's no silly questions and no off-limit topics.

### This guide is designed to help you:

- have appropriate conversations about alcohol and other drugs with children and teenagers
- understand some of the common issues young people face in relation to drugs and alcohol
- support your child or teenager when it comes to alcohol and other drugs.



### Getting started - some tips

4

### A word about stigma

5

### Young children and pre-teens

7

- Talking to young children and pre-teens
- Topics to discuss
- Role modelling makes a difference

### Teenagers, alcohol and other drug use

10

- Why do young people use alcohol or other drugs?
- When might use start?
- Alcohol and the teenage brain
- What about vaping?
- Talking to teenagers
- Social media
- Safer partying
- Schoolies

### Young people and the law

18

- Giving alcohol to young people
- Underage drinking
- Drink spiking
- Other drugs

### Worried about a young person's drug use?

20

### What if I don't feel comfortable talking about alcohol or other drugs?

22

### Young people, mental health and alcohol and other drugs

23

### Help and support

25

### How you tackle this topic is important because:

- Research shows parents' attitudes and actions have a huge impact on a young person's drinking behaviour.<sup>2-5</sup>
- Your rules around alcohol use can decrease the likelihood of your young person engaging in risky drinking.<sup>6</sup>
- Your decision not to allow your young person to drink is backed by the **Australian alcohol guidelines**.



# Getting started

## - some tips

### Get the facts

Information about alcohol and other drugs can change over time and we now know a lot more about the long-term harmful effects. The more you know, the better equipped you'll be to understand your young person's challenges, what they may encounter and the potential harms to their health.

To get the facts you need, use reliable sources about alcohol and other drugs, like this guide, the ADF's [Drug Facts page](#), and the [Positive Choices' Parent Booklet](#). This way you can provide your young person with the most accurate and up-to-date information to cut through the many myths and misconceptions.

### Be clear about your own beliefs

Get clear about your views on the use of alcohol and other drugs. For example, it's up to you whether your under 18-year-old is allowed to drink or not. To help you make this decision, check out the [Australian alcohol guidelines](#). They state the safest option for people under 18 is not to drink.<sup>7</sup>

### Keep things relaxed

When you're having conversations about alcohol and other drugs keep things casual and relaxed. You could use media stories, social media posts, song lyrics, or themes from movies or TV shows as conversation prompts. Using these prompts can make your conversations natural and part of your everyday. Remember, there's no limit to the number of conversations you can have.

### Be curious

Find out what your young person thinks about alcohol and other drugs. Ask what they'd do in different situations and listen to their opinions. By remaining open and keeping your body language and tone respectful you can encourage an open conversation. Most importantly, listen to their opinions and ensure your young person knows they can talk to you about any concerns they have – at any time.<sup>8</sup>

### Focus on their health

Focus on how you care about them and want them to be healthy. Try not to use exaggerated statements about the dangers as it will make you appear less knowledgeable. Talk about why people may want to drink and use other drugs, as well as discussing the harms.

### Set rules and consequences

Explain your views on alcohol and other drugs and use the facts to back them up. Establish clear rules and consequences for breaking them.

### Help them to navigate tricky situations

Give your young person some strategies to help them get out of situations where they may feel pressured to use alcohol or other drugs. You could also let them know that you are always available to pick them up if they are feeling uncomfortable. See here for [more information on peer pressure and how to say no](#).



# A word about stigma

When you're talking with young people about alcohol, other drugs or mental ill health be mindful of stigma. Stigma is when someone is discriminated against or shamed for actual or perceived characteristics, behaviours or parts of their identity. It is a mark of disgrace and difference, and generally occurs when society disapproves or holds a negative attitude towards something.

An alcohol and other drug **dependence** is when someone is unable to control or stop using a substance, even though it's causing harm. Dependence is also referred to as addiction, and can involve medications as well as alcohol or illegal drugs.<sup>9</sup> A dependence is a diagnosable health condition – nobody chooses to become addicted to alcohol or other drugs.

**Mental health** is our state of mental and emotional wellbeing. It enables us to achieve our potential, cope with normal life stresses, and contribute positively to our communities.<sup>10</sup>

Someone with **mental health needs** may experience disturbances to their thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and behaviours.<sup>11</sup> This includes those who have been diagnosed with a mental health condition, as well as those who are experiencing mental ill health symptoms. Mental ill health can impact school, work, and personal relationships.<sup>12</sup>

Mental health needs, or mental ill health, are used to describe when someone is experiencing these symptoms instead of mental health 'condition, 'problem' or 'issue' as these terms can be stigmatising because they can portray the person negatively.

People who use illegal drugs, have an alcohol or drug dependence or are experiencing mental ill health are often highly stigmatised.

This can involve them being:

- generalised and stereotyped
- socially excluded
- treated unequally
- blamed for societal problems.<sup>13, 14</sup>

Someone who experiences stigma is less likely to seek help for dependence and will tend to have poorer health and social wellbeing.

## **Whether you're talking to your young person about alcohol or other drugs, or talking about other people who use alcohol and other drugs remember, words hold a lot of power - choosing the right ones can have a big impact.**

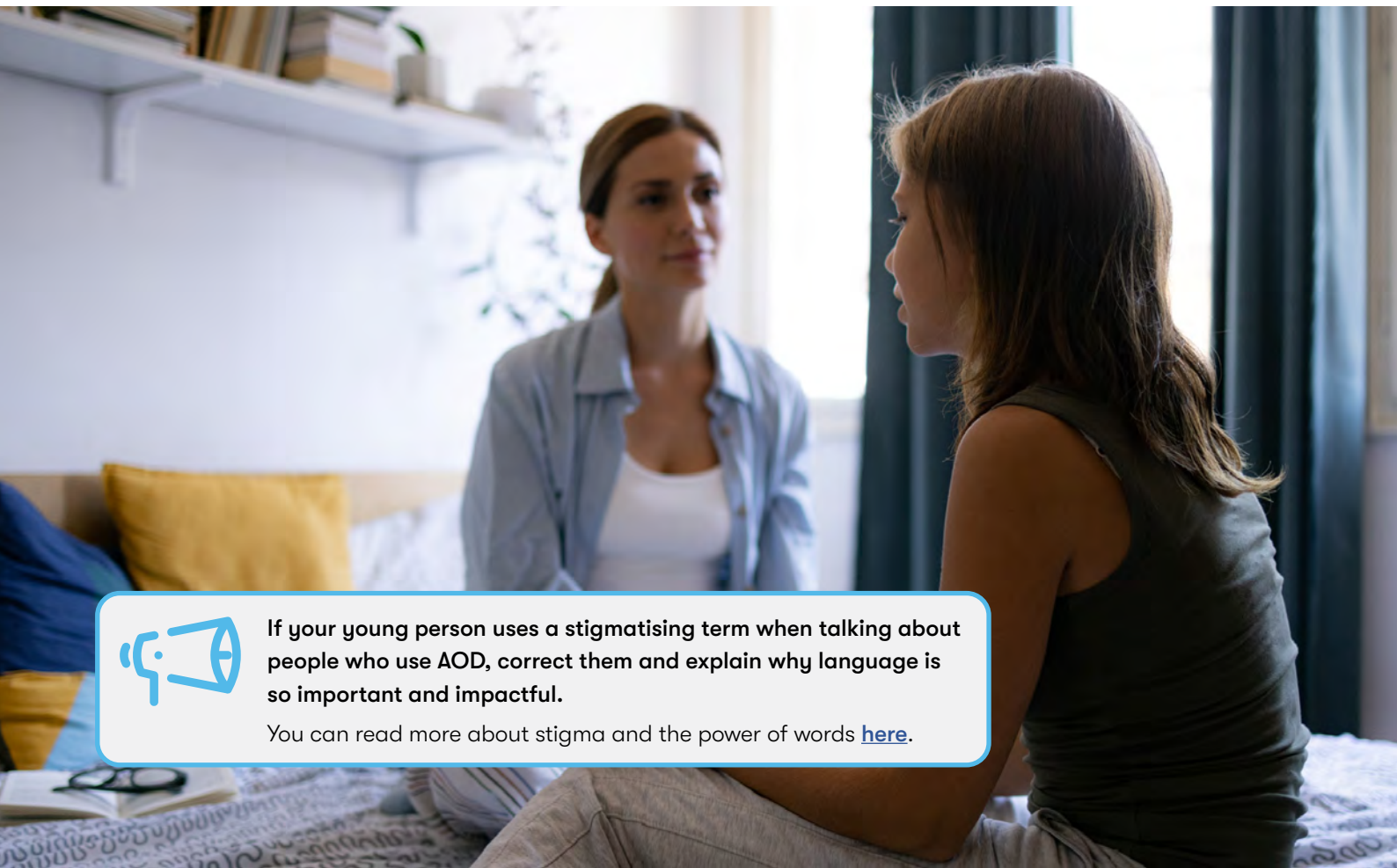
When talking about people who use drugs or alcohol, or are experiencing mental ill health, try to be person-centred. This involves not defining someone or a group solely by their alcohol and other drugs use or mental health needs, for example:

Swap this	For this
Junkie, addict, drug user/abuse	Person who uses alcohol/other drugs, person who is dependent on alcohol/other drugs



If your young person uses a stigmatising term when talking about people who use AOD, correct them and explain why language is so important and impactful.

You can read more about stigma and the power of words [here](#).



# Young children and pre-teens

## Talking to young children and pre-teens

You can start talking about alcohol and other drugs from an early age.

By using age-appropriate language and starting the conversation early, before kids reach high school, you can keep the door open for them to continue to ask questions as they enter adolescence.<sup>15</sup>

Some ways to start having this conversation with younger and pre-teen children can include:

- using popular culture or the news as a conversation starter
- when using a medicine (like paracetamol or antibiotics), explain to your child what the medicine is, why you're using it, and why it's important to follow the instructions and not take too much
- asking in an open, curious and non-judgemental way, what they know or have heard about drugs or alcohol.



**If you feel uncertain about where and when to have these conversations keep things casual and relaxed.** It can help to have these talks while you're doing something together, like watching TV, driving or walking the dog.

## Topics to discuss

It can be helpful to explain to your child what a drug is and the reasons why people use them. Here's some starting points:




- A drug is something that affects how our brains and bodies work.
- Drugs can cause changes in our mood, thoughts, feelings or behaviour. They can also impact our bodies by making things less painful or helping to treat an illness.

There are different types of drugs, including:

- medicines, that help treat people when they're sick
- other drugs (legal, illegal, decriminalised) that are used for many different reasons, like alcohol, cigarettes, or cannabis. These reasons might include:
  - to relax
  - for enjoyment
  - to be part of a group
  - to avoid or cope with physical and/or psychological pain
  - to treat an illness
  - for curiosity
  - to cope with problems
  - to relieve stress.

**Try not to exaggerate the dangers of alcohol and other drugs**, but instead be clear about the effects and the risks. Focus on how you care about your child and how you want them to be healthy.

Some examples of the risks include:

-  they can impact our physical and mental health
-  they make some activities more dangerous, like driving, swimming or operating machines
-  they can make you less worried about danger.

There's no limit to how many of these conversations you can have.

By regularly talking with your child about alcohol or other drugs, they will be better informed by the time they become teenagers.

If they ask a question and you're not sure how to answer, there's lots of information and resources available to help you get the facts. It's also important to correct any misguided ideas they might have.

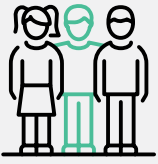
You can find information on the ADF's [Drug Facts](#) page, and via Positive Choice's [Drug Education Pamphlet](#).

## Role modelling makes a difference

It's not just what you say that makes a big difference, it is also what you - and others - do that shapes a young person's attitudes and behaviours.







## The influence of others

Before your young person is faced with deciding whether or not to have their first alcoholic drink, they'll have formed attitudes and expectations about alcohol and other drugs from parents, carers, family, friends, the media and the internet.

How much they are influenced by others is important when weighing up the risk of alcohol and other drugs. Be aware of how susceptible your young person is to the influence of peers and the attitudes and behaviours of their friends.

## What you can do

Your behaviour can significantly influence your child's attitudes and approach to alcohol and other drugs.<sup>1</sup> Parental drinking, supply of alcohol and favourable attitudes towards alcohol are all risk factors in teenage drinking.<sup>4</sup>

But, if you choose to drink, leading by example and role modelling lower risk drinking can help delay your child's drinking, and also positively influence their approach to drinking when they become adults.<sup>2</sup>

You can have a powerful influence on your young person's drinking behaviour by:

- avoiding saying you 'need' or 'deserve' a drink
- not giving children 'celebratory drinks' in wine, champagne or cocktail glasses
- drinking at the [recommended levels to reduce alcohol-related risks](#) (no more than 4 standard drinks in one day, and no more than 10 in a week). The same guidelines recommend people under 18 should not drink alcohol at all<sup>7</sup>
- including alcohol-free days in your week
- practicing healthy ways to manage stress like exercise, listening to music or meditation
- showing that you don't need to drink to have fun, deal with stress or wind down
- demonstrating that you can say 'no' to a drink at a party or event
- keeping track of how many standard drinks you've had, even when you're not driving.



Parents and carers often ask whether they should tell their young person about their past experiences with alcohol and/or drugs (good or bad). If you do decide to share your past, consider how much detail you want to give; whether your story will be beneficial; and, how you will respond to questions.

# Teenagers, alcohol and other drug use

## Why do teenagers use alcohol or other drugs?

Risk-taking is a key part of adolescent development. It helps teenagers develop their identity, build experience and gain peer approval.<sup>16</sup>

For some teenagers, risk-taking will mean experimentation with alcohol and other drugs.

But most teens who drink or use other drugs don't become addicted.

There are some common reasons why teenagers might use alcohol and other drugs, including to:

- experiment – adolescence is a time of curiosity, experimentation and risk-taking
- fit in – some teens use drugs to overcome insecurities and low self-esteem, or to feel like they belong or fit in to friendship groups and social circles
- feel good – many teenagers take drugs to get high, to experience feelings of pleasure and euphoria, and to relax
- stay awake
- fall asleep
- increase confidence
- lose weight
- deal with emotional pain or trauma
- feel better – some teens take drugs as a form of self-medication, to relieve stress, forget or replace negative feelings, depression or social anxiety.<sup>17,18</sup>



**There are different ways teenagers use alcohol or other drugs. But there's no typical use or progression, and most drug use doesn't lead to problematic use or dependence.**

You can find out more about understanding teenager alcohol and drug use [here](#).



## When might use start?

The use of alcohol and other drugs by Australian teenagers is actually declining. But, they are likely to encounter alcohol and other drugs as they become more independent.<sup>19</sup>

The age at which teenagers first try alcohol or other drugs has been steadily increasing.

- In 2019, the average age people first smoked a cigarette was 16.6 years, compared to 14.3 years in 2001.
- This is similar for alcohol – increasing from 14.7 years in 2001, to 16.2 years in 2019.
- The average age someone first tries an illegal drug rose from 16.7 years in 2016 to 17.3 years in 2019.<sup>20</sup>



### Teenagers drinking patterns are also changing.

More teenagers are choosing not to drink alcohol.

- In 2007, 39% of 14-17 years olds didn't drink, but by 2019 this rose to 73%.<sup>20</sup>
- Of those who did drink in 2017, 43% got alcohol from their parents.<sup>21</sup>

Cannabis is the third most used drug after alcohol and nicotine, but less teenagers seem to be interested than previously.

- In 2019, 8.2% of those aged 14-17 had recently used cannabis, a decrease from 21% in 2001.<sup>20</sup>

Research shows the vast majority of people who use cannabis don't go on to use other illicit drugs. And, there is no evidence suggesting people who use cannabis will 'graduate' over time to other drugs.<sup>22</sup>

Some teenagers will try cannabis a few times and stop, others will continue to use it occasionally without any significant issues.<sup>20</sup> Read more about cannabis and teenagers [here](#).

Some teenagers might also use inhalants, you can read more about inhalants [here](#).

For information about any other drug check out our Drug Facts page [here](#).



### Alcohol and the developing brain

Drinking can be harmful to teenagers' physical development, particularly their brain development. During adolescence the brain undergoes a lot of changes. As it is developing, it's more sensitive to alcohol.

- Young people are at greater risk of alcohol-related harm than adults.<sup>7</sup>
- Drinking alcohol can impact brain development up until the age of 25, resulting in affected attention, memory, and decision-making abilities.<sup>23, 24</sup>
- The earlier a young person is introduced to alcohol and the more frequently they drink, can increase the likelihood of them becoming dependant on alcohol later in life.<sup>4</sup>
- Delaying drinking alcohol as long as possible can help reduce harms. The Australian alcohol [guidelines](#) recommend delaying the first drink until at least 18 years.<sup>7</sup>
- While young people are less likely to drink alcohol than past generations, when they do, they are likely to drink to intoxication, resulting in injuries, alcohol poisoning and sometimes death.<sup>7</sup>
- There is strong and consistent evidence that alcohol causes cancer, increasing the risk for mouth, throat, breast, bowel, liver and pancreatic cancer.<sup>25</sup>



## What about vaping?

There's been a lot of concern around teenagers and vaping in recent years.

Some vapes contain nicotine and others don't. Nicotine free vapes are legal in Australia, and those with nicotine can be obtained if someone has a prescription – but neither are legal for those under 18.

- In 2021, 7.6% of teenagers aged 15-17 had used a vape at least once, however it's likely this figure is higher due to under-reporting.<sup>26</sup>
- A recent survey of NSW teens aged 14-17 found 32% had tried vaping at least once.<sup>27</sup>

Nicotine exposure during the teenage years can harm brain development and impact learning, memory, and attention.<sup>27</sup>

Nicotine is also highly addictive, for more info visit our [page about vaping](#).

## Talking to teenagers

We recommend having ongoing conversations with teenagers about alcohol and drugs – talking about what drugs are and why people use them, discussing your expectations and informing them of the risks before they're exposed to alcohol and other drugs.

When having these conversations a great resource to explore together is [Alcohol, Drugs and the Impact](#).

Even if it doesn't always feel like it, you can have a big impact on your teenager's behaviour around alcohol and other drugs.

Each parent or carer has their own unique parenting style – and we know as parents and carers you are the experts in your young person's life. But when it comes to alcohol and other drugs, we know some approaches can work better than others.

Parenting that is responsive and positive, as opposed to negative, is associated with better health and behavioural outcomes in teenagers.<sup>28</sup>

Some positive parenting actions include:

- maintaining rules and boundaries, and sticking to them
- setting realistic expectations
- knowing your teenager's whereabouts and being involved in their lives<sup>29, 30</sup>
- providing emotional support and warmth
- building trust and connectedness
- discussing issues openly.<sup>31</sup>



## Social media

With social media a big part of many young people’s lives, it can expose them to additional alcohol advertising and drug-related content.<sup>4</sup>

Talk to your young person about what they see on social media and encourage them to think critically about it. You might ask them questions like:

- Do you think social media is an accurate representation of people’s lives, including alcohol or drugs?
- Do you think information on social media is reliable? Why/why not?

Let them know that social media can be inaccurate and misleading, especially when it comes to alcohol and other drugs.

Take the opportunity to ask them what they know about alcohol and other drugs and correct any false impressions. You can also show them where they can fact check drug-related info via our [Drug Facts page](#)

### Alcohol advertising

Alcohol ads have been linked to young people starting to drink earlier, and heavy (binge) drinking.<sup>32-35</sup>

Alcohol ads or promotional content cannot target minors or young people under 25 years of age.<sup>36</sup> But, alcohol advertising is poorly regulated, so your young person may be seeing ads they’re not supposed to.

There are some practical things you can do to reduce this:

Channel	Changing their settings	Reporting content
<b>Instagram</b> 	settings > ads > ad topics > search for ‘alcohol’ > click ‘see less’	report > sale of illegal or regulated goods > drugs, alcohol or tobacco
<b>Tik Tok</b> 	profile > settings and privacy > ads> how your ads are personalised > food & beverage > turn off	hold down on video > report > illegal activity and regulated goods > drugs and controlled substances > submit
<b>Snapchat</b> 	profile > settings > additional services (manage) > lifestyle & interests > scroll to bottom, turn off ‘alcohol’ under Ad Topics	hold down on snap and press Report > sale or use of drugs
<b>Facebook</b> 	Settings > Ads preferences > Ad Topics > See less – Alcohol	Report > something else > promoting drug use > submit

#### Making an official complaint:

If you see an alcohol ad which you believe violates the advertising code, make an official complaint to the ABAC (Responsible Alcohol Marketing Code) and the Alcohol Advertising Review Board (AARB).

- [Ad Standards Community Panel online complaint form](#)
- [AARB online complaint form](#)

For more info you can visit our [alcohol advertising, social media and young people page](#).

### Other drug content

While content related to illegal drugs is widely banned on social media platforms, this can be poorly enforced, and many social media users use slang or code words to get around platform rules or guidelines.

Social media content about drugs can be inaccurate, and sometimes glamourises drug use. A 2022 review found that 76% of substance-related content showed substance use positively.<sup>37</sup>

Although exposure to this content alone is unlikely to lead to drug use, it can impact young people’s understanding of drugs and their associated risks.



## Safer partying

Parties can be an opportunity for your teenager to socialise and explore their independence. But, you may have questions about who is attending, who is supervising and if alcohol will be provided.

If you have concerns it can be helpful to:



### Contact the host to find out what sort of party it's going to be

Some good questions to ask the host parent/guardian are:

- How old are the people attending?
- Will there be supervision and how many adults will be supervising?
- Will there be alcohol? Food?
- Is there a plan to prevent gate crashers?
- When will the party start and end?



### Take the opportunity to talk to your teenager about your expectations:

- whether they are allowed to drink or not
- what time they need to be home by
- how they're getting home.



### Support your young person with safer partying tips

- If your teenager is attending a party, this is an ideal time to support them with information to reduce potential harm

## Make a plan

It's important to have a plan for the night and agree how they're getting home.

Make sure they know to never drive or swim if they've been drinking, and to not get a lift from someone who has been drinking or using drugs.

Let them know you're always available to pick them up – any time – if they feel unsafe, or something hasn't gone to plan.

You could also come up with a 'code' message for your teenager to use in case they want to come home, but feel embarrassed about calling you or feel pressured to stay. This could be something like checking in on an unwell relative or pet.<sup>38</sup>

## Stick together

Talk about why it's important to stick with their friends, and to let their friends know where they are going, what they are doing and who they are with, if they do leave them.

Discuss how they can look after their friends. You could talk about how a fight could be defused and what to do if someone becomes intoxicated or unwell.

If they notice someone is intoxicated, unwell or being taken advantage of they should:

- tell the host, or alert someone not affected by alcohol/drugs
- call for help - a parent, or triple zero (000) in an emergency
- intervene, if safe to do so.

## Consent

Let them know that alcohol and other drugs affect someone's ability to give consent. If they, or someone else, is drunk or high, they can't give consent.<sup>39</sup>

Engaging in sexual activities with anyone who can't give informed consent is sexual assault.<sup>39</sup>

For information on consent check out our page [alcohol and consent](#), Reach Out's [guide on consent](#), and Raising Children's [page on getting and giving sexual consent](#).



## Provide harm reduction tips

If your teenager plans to drink (or you think they might), give them some tips to reduce the harms.

And let them know it's ok to say no to a drink. In an ideal world, a simple 'no thanks' would be accepted by their peers. But sometimes teenagers can feel pressured to drink. Brainstorm an excuse they could use if they do feel pressured, like: 'I'm playing in a big game tomorrow' or 'I'm on antibiotics'. Work together to come up with plausible excuses that aren't embarrassing, while still reinforcing the message that it's ok to say no.

Explain to your teenager that it's always safer to not drink or use other drugs. But, if they or a friend do so, it's important they know how to reduce the risks.

These include:

### Alcohol:



**Eat** before and during drinking



**Start slow** and stay hydrated



**Watch** your drink & get your own (never take drinks from others)



**Finish your drink** before a new one



**Use small glasses**



**Sip** not scull



**Water** drink lots of it



**Stick to one type of drink**

### Make your own limits:

- Drink slowly at your pace, not someone else's.
- Say no thanks to top ups.
- No pressure. It's OK to say no.

### Some other stuff



**Think twice** before posting on socials.



**Keep busy.** Dance, socialise – you'll drink less.



**Stay connected** – never leave a friend and don't head off with someone you don't know.



**If it's hot** and you're outside – slip, slop, slap, seek and slide.



Alcohol (and other drugs) can make you less worried about danger. **Watch out for risks.**

### Drugs:

- Without testing you can never be entirely sure what's in a drug or what it's mixed with, this can make effects unpredictable.
- Avoid mixing drugs, including alcohol and any medications.
- Tell friends what you've taken in case of a bad reaction.
- Never drink or take drugs and drive, or travel with a mate that's been drinking or taking drugs.
- Check in with your mind and your body throughout the night – if you start to feel unwell or unsafe, let a friend know.
- Pace yourself – start with a smaller dose and see how you feel before using any more.
- Be prepared – eat before using any drugs and keep hydrated during use.
- Do your research before taking a drug. To know more about a specific drug, check out our [Drug Facts](#) pages or our [Text the Effects](#) service on 0439 TELL ME (0439 835 563).

## If things go wrong

Prep your teenager on what to do if things go wrong.

Let them know it's always ok to call you if they are scared or affected by alcohol or other drugs.

You can also give your contact details to one of your teenager's friends, just in case something happens to them or their phone.<sup>38</sup>

Encourage them to never leave a friend who is drunk or affected by drugs.

This includes staying with them, putting them on their side (recovery position) in case they vomit, and calling triple zero (000) if they pass out or are in trouble.

Let them know an ambulance will not call the police (unless they feel threatened).

## Planning a safe teen party

So, the party is going to be at your house...

There are some steps you can take to make it safer for everyone.

Be clear with your teenager whether drinking will be allowed or not. Whatever you decide, make sure to tell parents/guardians ahead of time.

### Safer party checklist:



- Will alcohol be served? If yes:**
  - inform parents/guardians
  - check your state or territory's [secondary supply laws](#) for anyone attending under 18.
- Will smoking/vaping be allowed?**
- Illegal drugs:** plan your response if someone brings other drugs to the party. Planning ahead will make things less stressful if this situation arises.
- Guests:** confirm number and names of guests invited.
- Inform others:** including neighbours, parents, and police (if you choose to register your party with the local police)
- Food and, non-alcoholic drinks and water:** make sure enough snacks and water are provided, this can help prevent attendees getting too drunk or becoming unwell if they consume alcohol.
- Security:** is the home/venue secure to prevent gate crashers?
- Transport:** if guests have been drinking, make sure they don't drive. Encourage guests who are drinking to use ride share services, taxis or have parents/guardians pick them up. Plan some space for guests to sleep over if they can't get home safely.
- Adult supervisors:** will other parents/adults be supervising?
- Accidents and emergencies:** have a plan for what to do if someone injures themselves, becomes unwell, or behaves inappropriately. This includes:
  - having a first aid kit on hand
  - designating a room for rest and recovery, if someone needs some space/privacy, or rest
  - having parent/guardian phone numbers saved
  - in an emergency, call triple zero (000) – leave space in the driveway or nearby the house/venue for emergency services to access if needed.



Find out more about [hosting a teenage party](#) on our website.





## **Schoolies**

Schoolies, or leavers, can be a rite of passage for many teenagers after completing their final year of high school.

It can be an opportunity for teenagers to socialise and celebrate all the hard work put into their education. It can also be a time that they drink and are exposed to, or use, other drugs.

If your teenager is going on schoolies, it's important they know how to be safe around alcohol and other drugs while they're away.

Before they head on the trip, have a conversation with them about safer partying – including the harm reduction tips listed above.

Visit our pages for more info and tips:

- [Alcohol, drugs, and partying – know more, be safer](#)
- [Staying safe on schoolies](#)

# Young people and the law

## Giving alcohol to young people

The Australian drinking guidelines recommend not supplying or introducing any alcohol until after 18 years of age.<sup>7</sup> This is because it can increase the likelihood of a young person:

- drinking earlier
- drinking more frequently
- drinking larger quantities.<sup>4</sup>

While it's not recommended, in most states and territories it is legal to supply people under 18 with alcohol if you're their legal guardian. But the law varies by state and territory – check out this [page](#) about secondary supply laws for more information.



## Underage drinking

It's illegal for staff of licensed premises to serve alcohol to minors in Australia.

In most states and territories, it's also illegal to give alcohol to anyone under the age of 18 on private property, even in homes, without permission from the young person's parent or legal guardian.

Anyone who supplies alcohol (both adults and minors), to someone who is under 18 years of age can be charged and fined. Find out about the laws that apply in your [state or territory](#).





## Drink spiking

Drink spiking is illegal in Australia and there are serious penalties, including fines and imprisonment.




Drink spiking is often associated with a drug being added to someone's drink. However, it's more common for a friend or acquaintance to add alcohol – or more alcohol than expected – to someone's drink.

There can be serious physical and mental consequences of causing someone to drink more alcohol than they're aware of.

### Talk to your young person about drink spiking and arm them with some sensible safety tips:

-  always keep their drink with them
-  buy or pour their own drinks
-  throw out the drink if it tastes strange or different
-  don't share drinks with others.

### If they are ever in a situation where they think their drink has been spiked, they should:

-  ask someone they trust to help get them to a safe place
-  inform an adult at the party or management at a venue, so they can assist in finding the person responsible for drink spiking
-  if they feel unwell or have been sexually assaulted, go to the nearest hospital, call triple zero (000) or go the nearest police station.

## Other drugs

Other drugs sometimes used by young people, like cannabis, are illegal in most states and territories.

If your young person is caught by police with illicit drugs, they might receive a caution, be questioned, or possibly arrested. Drug laws vary between states and territories. Young people under 18 can be punished as an adult for some drug offences.<sup>40</sup>

From late October 2023, the possession of small amounts of certain illicit drugs will be decriminalised in the ACT. This means if a young person has small amounts of drugs on them, they won't receive a criminal charge. Instead they might receive a caution, fine or be referred to a [diversion program](#).<sup>41</sup> This only applies to the ACT, not other states and territories.

To find out more about laws for your state or territory, visit [Youth Law Australia's page](#) and select your location from the drop-down menu.

# Worried about a young person's drug use?

You may be concerned that your young person is using alcohol or other drugs.

Unless you, or someone else you trust, witness your young person drinking or using drugs, it's very difficult to know they are.

But if they are experiencing alcohol or other drug use issues, there can be some signs to look out for, these can include:

- changes in mood, behaviour, sleeping habits or hygiene
- being more secretive about their things or what they're doing
- losing interest in activities they used to enjoy
- isolating themselves/changing their social habits
- getting in trouble at school or skipping school
- not meeting family or study responsibilities.<sup>42</sup>

If they are using a drug frequently you may notice some of these changes, however these can be difficult to separate from common teenage behaviours.

Although it might be tempting, we recommend not searching their room if you have suspicions, as this can break trust between parent and child.

If you're worried about your young person and substance use, it's important to check in with them to get a better understanding of what's going on. If they are using alcohol or other drugs they may be doing so out of curiosity, or to fit in, but they also might be using substances to cope with some part of their life.

Even if drugs are not involved, they still might need some support.



### Try having an open, non-judgemental and calm conversation with your young person.

It's best not to accuse them of drinking or using drugs, but instead ask them questions like:

- How have you been feeling lately? I've noticed you're not doing some of the things you love.
- Is there something stressful happening for you at the moment?
- How are you getting along with your friends?
- How are you feeling about school? Is there something that is worrying you?

If you think they might be drinking or using drugs, there's ways to bring it up without lecturing them. You can relate what you're noticing about their behaviour or how they might be feeling to alcohol or other drug use, like:

- Sometimes when people feel like this they might be drinking or using drugs, it's OK for you to tell me if you are – I just want to make sure you're safe.
- When we get stressed or sad it's normal to try and find something to make us feel better. Some people try drinking or using drugs, you can tell me if this is happening, I just want to make sure you're alright.

### Some good ways to prepare for the conversation are:



**Plan ahead:** get some information on alcohol and other drugs so you feel informed and prepared. If you have a particular drug concern, visit the ADF's [Drug Facts page](#) or call our Drug Info advice line on 1300 85 85 84.



**Be open, curious and empathetic:** ask them how things are going, mention any concerning behaviour and communicate that you want to ensure they're safe, happy and healthy.



**Stay positive:** even though it might be difficult, try not to accuse, blame or criticise them. By staying calm, warm and positive your child is more likely to be open and honest.



**Focus on behaviour:** mention any worries you have about their changes in behaviour, rather than focusing on alcohol or other drugs. This shows you are primarily concerned about their wellbeing.



These conversations can be difficult, especially when emotions are heightened or if you're feeling anxious or stressed.

If the conversation becomes heated or turns into an argument, take a step back and re-assess. You might need to end the conversation and come back to it another time – this isn't a failure. By doing so, your young person knows you want to talk and you care, but that heated arguments aren't productive.

Go easy on yourself and don't expect perfection. If you overreact, get angry or upset, just apologise and start the conversation again when you're both feeling calmer.<sup>43</sup>

If they don't want to talk, or they react negatively, by asking these questions your young person will still know you care and are there to talk to if something changes.

Let them know that if anything's troubling them, you are always there to talk to.

If having the conversation feels too hard, it can be useful to ask a trusted adult in your young person's life to check in with them – like an uncle or aunt, a coach or adult family friend.



If your young person is showing worrying behaviours and alcohol or other drugs aren't involved, they might still need some support.

Seeking advice from a youth support service like [headspace](#) can be a good first step.



If alcohol or other drugs are impacting on their health and wellbeing, you can reach out to a youth alcohol and other drug service for advice and support:

- Victoria: [Youth Drugs and Alcohol Advice \(YoDAA\)](#)
- National: [DrugInfo phone and email support](#)

# What if I don't feel comfortable talking about alcohol or other drugs?

Talking about alcohol and other drugs isn't commonplace across all cultures.

If you don't feel comfortable talking about alcohol and other drugs with your children, there are other ways you can still positively influence their behaviour.

This includes role modelling responsible drinking, being consistent with rules and boundaries, and showing warmth, support and empathy.

And if you're worried about a teenager's alcohol and other drugs use but can't talk about it with them, you might consider reaching out to their school to speak with their teachers or school welfare workers about your concerns.

There are also some great online resources that might be useful for those from multicultural backgrounds:

- Drug and Alcohol Multicultural Education Centre (DAMEC): a [list of translated health information, easy English resources and other support resources](#).
- Alcohol and Drug Foundation: translated resources available on our [website](#).
- Positive Choices: [parenting resources](#) related to alcohol and other drugs available in Arabic, Hindi, Simplified Chinese and Simplified English.



# Young people, mental health and alcohol and other drugs

If your young person is experiencing mental health needs, such as anxiety or depression, they may be more likely to use alcohol or other drugs to cope.<sup>19</sup>

Some common mental health symptoms experienced by young people are:

- hopelessness
- anxiety
- low mood
- irritability
- lack of quality sleep
- negative or racing thoughts.<sup>44</sup>

While some young people might use alcohol and other drugs to cope, others may find alcohol and using other drugs triggers their first symptoms of mental ill health.<sup>45</sup>

The relationship between alcohol and other drugs and mental health can be complex, and one doesn't always lead to the other. But they can often impact each other.





Young people with mental health needs are more likely to use alcohol and other drugs more frequently, and use multiple substances at the same time.<sup>46,47</sup>

- In 2017, high school students with mental health needs were more likely to use tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drugs than those without mental health needs.<sup>48</sup>
- In 2014, 45% of young people with major depressive disorder had used cannabis or other drugs.<sup>46</sup>

If you think your young person might be experiencing poor mental health, and/or using alcohol and other drugs to cope, it's important to check in with them and get access to help.

## Co-occurring AOD use and mental health needs

Some young people experience an AOD dependence and mental health needs at the same time.

This is referred to as co-occurring, or sometimes also called 'dual diagnosis', 'coexisting' or 'comorbidity'.<sup>49</sup>

Co-occurring mental health needs and alcohol and other drugs use or dependence can affect each young person differently.

Alcohol and other drug use in young people can escalate when their mental health needs are present or untreated, and vice versa. This can worsen the symptoms of AOD use and mental ill health.

If your young person is experiencing mental ill health, they may use alcohol and other drugs to reduce their symptoms and experience temporary relief. But, once the effects of the drug subside, mental health symptoms can be intensified. This can lead to a cycle of using more and building a tolerance to alcohol and other drugs.<sup>50</sup>

If you think your young person is experiencing co-occurring mental health needs and alcohol and other drug use, it's important you get access to support and guidance from health professionals.

See our list of health and support options below or book an appointment with your GP.

You can read more about alcohol, other drugs and mental health in young people [here](#).

### The takeaways

- Parenting and caring for young people is undeniably hard work.
- Preparing them for the world and making sure they are safe, happy and healthy can be both incredibly rewarding and challenging.
- When it comes to alcohol and other drugs the best approach is to be informed, non-judgemental, open and consistent.
- Having informed, curious, two-way conversations early – and often – is key.
- If you or your young person need more information, guidance or support, there are a lot of different services out there to help.

# Help and Support

- [Youth Drugs and Alcohol Advice \(YoDAA\)](#): Information and support for young people, carers and parents. Available 9-8pm Monday – Friday: 1800 458 685.
- [headspace](#): provides expert support for mental ill health and physical health for young people and their families across Australia. Click on the [link](#) to find the nearest headspace centre to you. headspace also provides online and phone support.
- National Alcohol and Other Drug hotline: 1800 250 015
- [State-based parent helplines](#)
- [Positive Choices](#): a range of online resources to support parents and carers to talk to their children about drugs and alcohol.



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