

Drug and Alcohol Information for Parents and Carers



The importance of drug education

Whilst drug and alcohol education is an important part of the school curriculum, to be really effective children need to learn at home too. This leaflet provides some key facts on alcohol, cannabis, cocaine and New Psychoactive Substances (the group of drugs formerly known as 'legal highs'), tips on how to talk about this sensitive subject and details of where to go for more information and support.

How should I talk to my child?

You don't need to be a drugs expert to help your child learn the skills to make healthy choices. Worries about getting it wrong, not saying the right thing and not knowing enough can make it easier to say nothing, but it is important to keep talking. Starting early and encouraging conversations makes it more likely that your child will come to you if there is a problem

Do start the conversation early so that children learn to speak openly.

Don't save things up to have one 'big talk'.

Do take the opportunity to have everyday conversations. Use social media, news, TV etc as a prompt.

Don't use threats or scare tactics; the evidence is they don't work.

Don't present your opinions as facts. Only give correct information and if you don't know, say.

Do set clear rules and boundaries. Your child should know your expectations.

Don't be confrontational. Explain your point of view and listen to theirs.

Do take the opportunity to learn together, starting with the websites suggested on this info sheet.

What else can I do?

Young people drink or take drugs for lots of different reasons including curiosity, boredom and wanting to fit in as well as to gain any perceived benefits. Research shows that parents can help reduce the risk by providing a positive role model at home and reinforcing the fact that not all young people try drugs.

Make sure you know the basic facts about drugs and alcohol and where to go for advice and support in Hertfordshire.

- Get to know your child's friendship groups and their parents
- Encourage out of school hobbies, clubs and activities
- Encourage independence and a sense of personal responsibility for choices made
- Place limits, expectations and consequences on behaviour
- Offer praise and reassurance
- Let them know they have your trust and support.

What are the risks?

All drugs carry risks. In young people, who are not yet fully grown, the effects can be especially unpredictable and dangerous. The human brain begins to develop in the womb but is not fully formed until well into adulthood and early drug misuse can impact on growth and development.

As well as risks to physical and mental health, intoxication increases the risk of accidents, arguments and fights. Teenagers are also more likely to engage in unprotected sex, which can lead to early pregnancy and the risk of sexually transmitted infections. Any of these potential risks increase with more frequent drug use, mixing alcohol with drugs and by using a higher strength of a drug.

In addition to this the consequences of being caught and charged with drug offences could be a criminal record or custodial sentence, which can impact negatively on future life choices.

What should I look for?

Potential indicators of substance misuse:

- Loss of interest in sports or favourite activities
- Lack of interest in appearance or personal hygiene
- Dramatic mood swings, excessive tiredness, lethargy, changes in appetite
- Sudden changes in established friendship groups
- Taking time off school
- Dilated pupils, red eyes, bad skin
- Spending, stealing or borrowing money, coupled with a refusal to explain how/why.

What should I do if I think my child is using drugs?

Don't panic. If you think or know that your child has been using drugs, it's natural to feel worried or angry, but losing your temper or making hasty decisions is unlikely to help. Try to remain calm and listen. **Offer support.** Never challenge your child if you think they are drunk or have been using drugs, this is only likely to make things worse. Make sure they are safe of any immediate danger and wait until later to talk things through. **Get help.** If it is a medical emergency call 999 and try to give as much information as possible.

CAUTION: many teenagers experience behavioural changes for reasons that have nothing to do with substance misuse, so do be careful not to jump to conclusions. Be curious, not accusatory.

Where can I get help?

You can talk in confidence to your GP or a professional from A-DASH, which provides services for young people (under 18) in Hertfordshire with drug and alcohol problems.

A-DASH www.hpft.nhs.uk

Type 'A-DASH' into the search engine to find information about available support, call 01992 531971

Al Anon Confidential helpline on 020 7403 088

Talk to Frank www.talktofrank.com

Free confidential drugs information and advice line, call 0300 123 6600

Family Lives Confidential helpline on 0808 800 2222

ALCOHOL FACT FILE

Legal status: Controlled by age (18).

What is it? Alcohol is produced by the fermentation of grains and fruits.

The risks: Alcohol is a highly addictive drug with short and long term health risks. Heavy drinking can result in alcohol poisoning, which can be fatal.

CANNABIS FACT FILE

Legal status: Class B drug.

What is it? There are different types of cannabis, including stronger varieties called 'skunk'. The leaves and flowers of the plant produce varying mind-altering effects when smoked or consumed.

The risks: Cannabis is often rolled and smoked with tobacco, which increases the health risks. It can impair the ability to think and learn; users can become increasingly anxious and paranoid, which contributes to concerns about the impact on mental health.

COCAINE FACT FILE

Legal status: Class A drug.

What is it? Cocaine and crack cocaine is derived from the leaves of the coca plant or prepared synthetically.

The risks: All types of cocaine are addictive. Cocaine raises the body's temperature, makes the heart beat faster, increasing the risk of a heart attack or stroke.

PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES FACT FILE

Legal status: Illegal to produce, sell or supply.

What are they? Psychoactive substances are herbal and chemical compounds created to mimic the effects of other drugs like cocaine, ecstasy and cannabis.

The risks: In addition to the risks associated with the drugs they mimic few, if any, have been tested for toxicity and can have serious adverse effects. The long term effects on physical and mental health are currently unknown.