

# PARENT INFORMATION SHEET

[www.parentline.org.au](http://www.parentline.org.au)



## Experimenting - Adolescents

In NSW:

- A person under 18 years who buys, possesses or smokes tobacco is not breaking the law
- A person who sells tobacco to a person aged under 18 years or buys it on their behalf is committing an offence
- Police can seize tobacco from someone in a public place if they think that person is under 18.
- Adults and young people can be fined for smoking in certain public places.
- The legal age to buy alcohol is 18 years.
- There is no law that makes it an offence to drink alcohol in a private home, even for under 18s.
- However it is an offence for anyone to buy alcohol and supply it to someone under 18 years of age.

Visit <http://www.lawstuff.org.au/> for more information.

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Experimenting is a natural part of adolescence and is an important part of young people's preparation for adulthood. One of the most distressing forms of experimentation for parents is with alcohol, smoking and other drugs.

The drive for young people to experiment can take the form of curiosity about experiences they haven't had before, changing social relationships and finding new ways of self expression through personal appearance and interests.

Experimenting with substances can be one of the most risky ways that adolescents express this need to learn. It is by no means an inevitable part of adolescence. However, should it be a part of your child's journey through adolescence, there are a number of strategies that you can use to approach this issue.

### Why do adolescents experiment?

Experimentation with alcohol, drugs and smoking can be part of a broader need for learning and establishing independence. At times it can also be a means of escape from the social, educational and emotional challenges that young people may be facing. It may be an attempt to gain acceptance from peers and to fit in with a social group. Some adolescents are also attracted to the 'image' that is associated with smoking and the use of other substances.

Whatever the reason for your adolescent's experimentation with these substances, it can be a great source of stress and anxiety for you as a parent, and at times can impact on your whole family.

It is widely recognised that smoking, consuming alcohol and other drug use can lead to serious health issues. Use of alcohol and drugs can also lead to adolescents placing themselves in unsafe situations and impairing their ability to make appropriate choices.

Your expectations as a parent may vary, and you may have conflicting opinions both within yourself and with other adults. It may be that you expect your adolescent to exercise complete abstinence. Alternatively, you may strive for your adolescent to be well-informed about substance use, and for them to stay in control and make their own choices.

Whatever position you choose to take, how you communicate your expectations to your adolescent is crucial. It is important to maintain an open dialogue with them and to ensure that they have access to reliable, accurate sources of information.

## Encourage Discussion

It is important to try to maintain an open dialogue with your adolescent. Being approachable will help to encourage your adolescent to speak openly with you about what is going on.

If this is not happening, or you do not feel comfortable doing this, you can encourage them to speak to another appropriate person e.g. school counsellor, Kids Helpline or another adult that you trust.

## Be Well-Informed

It can be very helpful for you to have a reasonable level of knowledge about alcohol and drugs, and their potential impact on adolescents.

Try to take some time to do some research on alcohol and drugs, their effects and their use. Organisations such as The Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS) can provide you with factual information on alcohol and drugs. *There are some details of services to contact at the end of this info sheet.*

## Share Information

Ensure that your adolescent has access to information from a reputable source (e.g. a counsellor, Kids Helpline, reliable websites). Accurate information will help to provide them with a more balanced view (in contrast to that provided by their peers) and help them to make informed decisions.

## Support Self Esteem

Encourage the development of a healthy sense of self esteem in your adolescent. This is a vital tool that will help them to have the confidence to make their own decisions around experimentation and not be swayed by peer influence.

Notice and praise their achievements, take an interest in their life and their interests and let them know that they are valued for who they are.

## “Walk The Talk”

Remember that you are a role model to your adolescent. Your actions will speak much louder than words. If they know that you drink, smoke or use drugs, this will influence the approach that they take to substance use.

It's quite common for parents to have different expectations of their children to those they have for themselves around this issue. However this undermines your credibility, and potentially your authority, with adolescents around their behaviour. The most effective approach is to “walk the talk”.

## Establish boundaries

Try to agree on limits with your adolescent when they are spending time with friends. For example, you may allow them to go out on the condition that they agree to be home at a certain time, or that you will pick them up.

You may need to follow up with an appropriate consequence (e.g. cannot go out for a period of time afterwards) if they fail to stick to these limits.

## Encourage Healthy Experimentation

It is important to ensure that your adolescent has the opportunity to experiment, and express themselves, in healthy ways.

Enabling them to pursue sporting or creative interests, and express themselves through their clothes and hairstyles, are good ways to provide an acceptable outlet for their need to experiment.

## Know Where They Are Going

Your adolescent may object to sharing their whereabouts if they are attending a party. However it is quite reasonable to expect to know some details.

With younger adolescents this can include the address, start and finish times and who will be supervising. Older adolescents may give you less information, but you can still emphasise your 'need to know' based on safety.

Many parents also expect to know or speak to the other parents first. If you are able to have a conversation with the parents or the supervising adults, it can be very useful to know what approach they have to substance use for their adolescents and those that will be in attendance.

## Get Support

If navigating this phase of adolescence becomes difficult, try to access some support for yourself and your family.

You may be able to speak to other parents, or a counsellor, which may help you to develop a clearer sense of how to approach these situations.

At Parent Line we can support you to plan the conversations that you need to have with your adolescent, and provide you with advice that is tailored to your situation.

## Intervene If There's a Problem

The more involved your adolescent is in the decisions that affect them, the better. However there may be times when you need and exercise your adult judgement and take charge,

Substance use of any kind can become excessive and significantly impact on people's overall well-being and relationships.

In these cases, you may need to get your adolescent linked in to some professional support. Parent Line can provide you with information on appropriate services in your area. Alternatively you can contact your GP for a referral, or your local drug and alcohol service.

## Getting Help and Information

- Parent Line Call 1300 1300 52 or visit [www.parentline.org.au](http://www.parentline.org.au)
- Family Drug Support  
Call 1300 368 186 or visit [www.fds.org.au](http://www.fds.org.au)
- Quitline  
Call 13QUIT or visit [www.13quit.org.au](http://www.13quit.org.au)
- DrinkWise  
Visit [www.drinkwise.com.au](http://www.drinkwise.com.au)
- Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)  
Call 1800 422 599 (Country NSW) or 02 9361 8000 (Sydney)
- NSW government websites  
[www.alcohol.gov.au](http://www.alcohol.gov.au),  
[www.alcoholinfo.nsw.gov.au](http://www.alcoholinfo.nsw.gov.au),  
[www.druginfo.nsw.gov.au](http://www.druginfo.nsw.gov.au)  
[www.health.nsw.gov.au](http://www.health.nsw.gov.au)
- The Drug Prevention Network  
[www.druginfo.adf.org.au](http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au)
- Network of Alcohol & Drug Agencies  
<http://www.nada.org.au/>