



Clearing the Air

Talking with Children and Teenagers about Smoking



Why do children and teenagers try smoking?

There are many reasons why children and teenagers try smoking. Some reasons may include:

- they may copy parents or older brothers or sisters who smoke;
- smoking is seen as an adult behaviour and therefore children and teenagers experiment with smoking to look older;
- they may be curious about smoking;
- they may believe most teenagers smoke;
- they may copy characters in movies or magazines;
- they may feel smoking helps them appear to be part of a group.

Young people need to know that most people, young and old, do not smoke.

Most children and teenagers who try smoking decide not to continue to smoke.

Can adults help children decide to be smoke-free?

While there is no sure way to prevent all children from experimenting with cigarettes, the good news is that parents and other adults play an important role in children and teenagers' decisions about smoking.

Why should adults talk to children about smoking?

In Australia, regular cigarette smoking causes many more deaths every year than alcohol, heroin and all other drugs put together. Most adult smokers begin smoking in their teenage years, and most wish they could quit. Young people often don't realise how quickly a person can become 'hooked' on smoking. Talking with them can help them gain confidence in their ability to make healthy, independent choices.

Do children and teenagers value what adults say?

Although adults often say they feel ignored by teenagers, teenagers report that advice from adults about cigarettes (and information about alcohol and other drugs) is helpful because it prepares them for the realities of life.



What can adults *do* to prevent children and teenagers from smoking cigarettes?

It is important for adults to set standards for children and teenagers about smoking. Adults who smoke cigarettes may feel uncomfortable about this; however, it is important to point out the risks that smoking causes to health. Here are a few tips to help you along:

- **Try to set a healthy example.** Don't smoke or, if you do, make a real attempt to quit or cut down. Explain how difficult it is to quit due to being 'hooked'. Show that you understand the danger that smoking presents to you and your family and avoid smoking in enclosed places and in front of children.
- **Set family rules about smoking** and discuss with children and teenagers what will happen if the rules are broken. Young people who believe that their parents disapprove of their smoking are less likely to take up smoking.
- **Make your home and car smoke-free** and limit smoking to outdoor areas.
- **Help children and teenagers practise refusal skills** so they can put their plans into action. Try asking them questions such as "What could you say if someone offered you a cigarette and you didn't want one?"

What can adults say to prevent children and teenagers from smoking cigarettes?

- **When you see other people smoking, use this as a discussion starter.** For example, talk about how easily people can become 'hooked' on smoking. Most adults started smoking as teenagers and find quitting a lot harder than they imagined. To avoid sounding like a know-it-all, you could begin by saying, "You have to make up your own mind about smoking but I think..."
- **Explain that trying smoking and smoking regularly are not the same.** Of the people who have ever tried a cigarette, most do not continue smoking. This means they have experimented with smoking and then decided to be smoke-free.
- **Discuss the negative effects of smoking.** Immediate effects (such as smelly breath, negative effects on sports performance, financial cost, unattractiveness) are more meaningful to teenagers than long term effects such as death and disease.
- **Focus on the advantages of being smoke-free.** Give children positive messages about the benefits of not smoking. They will have more money to spend on other things, their breath will



be fresher, they will feel healthier and their hair and clothes will smell cleaner for longer.

- **Correct the myth that most teenagers smoke.** Many young people try smoking because they think everyone else is doing it and it is a normal behaviour. Most people (both young and old) do not smoke. It is important to help them understand this. Try saying, "I read that most teenagers in Australia don't smoke regularly. What do you think?"
- **Explain how some tobacco companies pay money to have smoking featured in movies and magazines** to give the impression that smoking is popular and glamorous. Try saying, "What do you think about actors being paid to smoke in movies?"

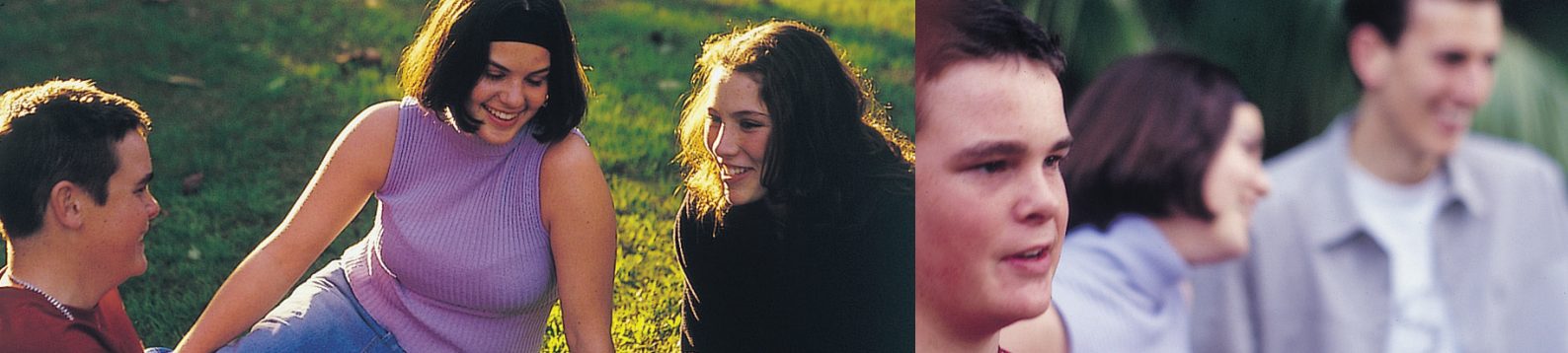


What is the best way for adults to talk with children and teenagers about smoking?

It is important that children and teenagers feel they can talk openly and honestly about smoking.

1. **Talk with them (rather than lecture them) about smoking and other issues.** Get conversations started by bringing up the topic when you are in a relaxed situation (e.g. at home). Or, try talking while you are sitting side by side rather than face to face. Practise these communication skills on less controversial topics.
2. **During conversation, check that they have understood what you have said about smoking, and remember that this works both ways.** After you've talked, say "What do you think I'd say about..." Encourage them to give you their opinion on smoking and make them aware that you are listening and taking their view seriously by summarising what they have said.
3. **Use open-ended questions to help turn a conversation with children or teenagers into a discussion rather than a lecture.** Open-ended questions need more than a 'yes' or 'no' answer. An example of an open-ended question is, "What would you say if one of your friends started smoking?"
4. **Explain what you would rather them do.** Don't assume that children and teenagers know your opinions about cigarette smoking. While it is important to respect their views, your opinion will help them make their decisions.
5. Children and teenagers who **have a positive relationship** with at least one parent are less likely to participate in risky activities. Spend time with them, use positive, friendly and caring language when talking to children and teenagers, and reward them for doing well. This will help make them feel good about themselves and will strengthen your relationship.

Remember that your influence on a child or teenager's choices about smoking is important.



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This brochure was developed by the Smarter than Smoking Project. Material in this brochure has been adapted from Quit Victoria and used with permission. Information was also obtained from projects conducted by the WA Centre for Health Promotion Research at Curtin University of Technology and used with permission. Specific projects include the Providing Drug Education for Parents Project (Doctoral Research undertaken by Shelley Beatty) and the Fathers and Drugs Project.

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