

South Australian  
Commissioner  
for Children and  
Young People  
2022

ccyp.com.au

# Vaping Survey: Key Findings

What do young people in South Australia  
think about current responses to vaping  
and how to better respond?

PROJECT REPORT NO. 33 | JULY 2022



# Contents

Introduction.....	4
Key Findings.....	6
Part 1: Are young people concerned about vaping? .....	8
Part 2: What young people want adults to understand about vaping .....	11
Part 3: Vaping and schools .....	14
Part 4: Vaping in the community .....	19
Conclusion .....	23

# Introduction

Amid growing public concern about the prevalence and impacts of vaping among teenagers in South Australia, I asked young people to share their thoughts on vaping.

I was particularly interested in finding out from young people how common vaping is, whether they have any concerns about vaping, what they want adults to know about vaping, and how adults can best support young people in relation to vaping.

In addition, it was important to understand whether students are learning about the health and financial impacts of vaping at school, how schools are currently responding to vaping, and how schools could better respond to the issues associated or connected to vaping, which include young people's need to manage stress and anxiety.

The voices, thoughts and experiences of teenagers have been largely missing in adult conversations and media reports about vaping. As a result, many young people are feeling misunderstood, judged, shamed, blamed, and punished for vaping. They say they lack information, education and support from the adults and institutions around them.

It is hoped that decision makers in schools and across the community will be better informed as a result of this survey report and that they

will consider young people's insights and experiences when determining what responses to make to address issues related to vaping occurring in schools and the broader community.

Young people want adults to engage and check in with them and to understand their diverse perceptions, experiences, motivations and concerns without judgment.

## Who participated in the survey?

A total of 950 young people aged 13 to 19 years participated in the Commissioner's Vaping Survey undertaken in June 2022.

Age group	Number of respondents	% of total respondents
13–14 years	168	17.7%
15 years	213	22.4%
16 years	263	27.7%
17 years	249	26.2%
18–19 years	54	5.7%

**Age**

Young people aged 15 to 17 years were the highest represented age group making up three quarters or 76.2% of all respondents. Those aged 13 to 14 years represented 17.7% of respondents, while the remainder of respondents were aged 18 to 19 years.

**Gender**

A higher proportion of young females (64.5%) compared to young males (35.5%) took part in the survey, making up 64.5% of respondents. Such a gender split is consistent with young people's participation in previous surveys. A small number of young people identified as non-binary, making up 2.9% of all respondents.

**School sector**

Most young people who participated in the survey reported attending government schools (59.7%). The remaining respondents were split relatively evenly between Independent schools (20.7%) and Catholic schools (19.7%).

**Region**

There was a relatively even split between young people who reported living in metropolitan South Australia (44.3%) and those in regional South Australia (48.4%). A smaller group of respondents reported living in remote South Australia (7.3%).

## Key Findings

**950**



children and young people aged 13–19 years participated in the Commissioner's Vaping Survey.

**1 in 3**



young people said they had never tried vaping.

**2 in 3** respondents had tried vaping.

Many young people are unsure or unaware that in Australia it is illegal to buy or sell e-cigarettes and accessories to or on behalf of a person under 18 years of age.



Existing laws aren't effectively restricting access to vapes.



Young females were more likely than young males to have tried vaping and to describe themselves as both regular or social vapers.



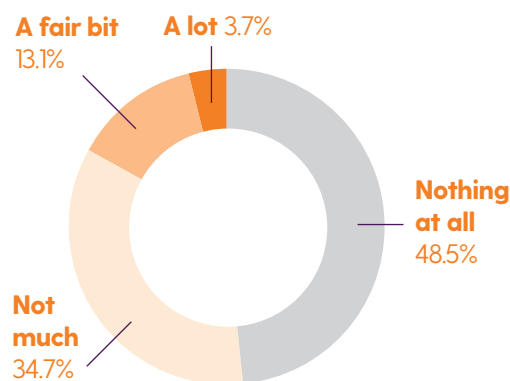
### Of those who had tried vaping:

**almost 1 in 4** respondents described themselves as a regular vaper (vaping most days).

**1 in 5** respondents described themselves as a social vaper (vaping every now and then).

**1 in 7** respondents said they had 'tried vaping but aren't that into it'.

### What did young people learn about vaping at school?



- Almost half (48.5%) of the survey respondents reported learning 'nothing at all' about vaping at school and a further third of respondents (34.7%) reported learning 'not much'.
- 1 in 8 (13.1%) reported learning a 'fair bit' with 1 in 4 (3.7%) reported learning 'a lot'.
- Just over one third of students across each school sector reported learning 'not much' about vaping at school.
- Students in Government and Catholic schools were significantly more likely to report learning 'nothing at all' about vaping at school (52.9% and 47.3% respectively) compared to students in Independent schools (35.8%).

**30%**

of respondents across Government, Independent and Catholic schools reported that they had never tried vaping. A further 14% said they had tried vaping but aren't that into it.

Young people in Government schools were more likely to describe themselves as regular rather than social vapers.



Vaping use increases as young people get older

 **30%**  
of 13 year olds

 **80%**  
of 18 year olds

**60.6%**

of young people thought that schools should teach young people about vaping, although 1 in 4 (25.4%) were unsure.



## Respondents identified a range of ways in which responses to vaping could better support young people.

### Effective responses must acknowledge:

- vaping products are easy to get, despite existing laws and regulation
- vaping is popular and common
- vaping is addictive and hard to quit; and that
- young people vape for a range of different reasons – for fun, to fit in, to substitute meals, to relieve stress, to cope with mental health issues or as a way to address other addictions they may have such as smoking.

### Young people **want schools to teach** young people about:

- the short and long-term physical health effects
- the addictive nature of vaping
- how easy it is to buy vapes, and whether it is illegal
- how cheap it is to initially get a vape but how expensive it can be if it becomes a habit
- how vapes are made and what's in them
- how vaping compares to smoking cigarettes or other drugs; and
- what to do if you want to quit or feel like you're becoming addicted.

### Young people **want adults to:**

- educate young people, about the health risks of vaping
- educate children how to navigate social pressures
- promote support options for young people and their friends
- provide practical support to young people who are concerned about addiction
- stop excluding or punishing those who vape; and
- focus on the adults selling vapes to children.

## PART 1

# Are young people concerned about vaping?

Drawing on their personal experiences and/or observations of vaping at parties, school, work and in the community, most young people identified a range of concerns they have about the immediate and longer term impacts of vaping on themselves or others. The overwhelming majority of respondents (95%) think that vaping is part of their lives, either as vapers themselves or as a behaviour amongst their peers that is worthy of investigation.

They described how ‘most people’, ‘everyone’ or ‘half my year level’ is either vaping or owns a vape and that a smaller number of people they know are selling vapes. Whilst a smaller but still significant proportion of respondents were not personally concerned about vaping because they don’t vape, there were many who still expressed concern for those who do vape, particularly those who they see are vaping a lot or in some cases have become addicted to vaping.

Some young people reported having quit vaping after being social or regular vapers in the past. Others reported ‘not getting anything out of it’ or enjoying it but not doing it because they saw it as a ‘waste of money’. Others said that they had never tried it and ‘never wanted to try it’.

“ most young australians now have them and buy them daily.” – 16 year old, female, Remote SA, Catholic school

“ About 75% of my friends have owned a vape in the past week. However, there are still a lot of people who choose to steer away from it.” – 17 year old, male, Metropolitan SA, Catholic school

Many young people described that vaping has become a normal part of having a ‘good time with their friends’ and that it’s ‘weird if you don’t at this point’. They said vaping is ‘cool’ and ‘popular’, including among younger year levels and ‘kids as young as 10’, that vaping is more popular among girls and that ‘most girls at school do it’.

“ I see it everywhere. But I see it as people see smoking now I guess. It’s like a normal thing.” – 17 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Independent school

Some young people described how vaping is more common, acceptable, and normalised than smoking cigarettes. They reported that vapes are ‘easier for young people to buy’, don’t leave the same smell as cigarettes and are seen as ‘not as bad due to being able to vape without nicotine’. Others described how it ‘was huge’ when it first emerged but now it’s ‘just a general part of life’ and ‘people have gotten so used to it that it’s become normal’.



- “ There are young people who do it, there is mixed opinions in different age groups over whether it is “cool” or purely bad for young peoples health.” – 15 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Catholic school
- “ because me and the people around me do not do it so it does not effect me.” – 14 year old, female, Regional SA, Government school

- “ the long term affects of vaping that are masked with the good flavour of the vapes.” – 17 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Government school
- “ when I was vaping often I was constantly tired, my body aches and my lungs hurt. I don’t know why I kept on vaping for so long.” – 19 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Independent school

## Impacts on health

**Most young people knew that vaping had negative impacts on health and wellbeing and was addictive.** They were particularly concerned about the impact of vaping on the lungs with fears ranging from difficulty with breathing to developing ‘popcorn’ lung through to the risk of ‘dying younger’ than those who don’t vape.

Some teenagers described feeling side effects such as ‘head spins’ or shortness of breath, especially when playing sport. They raised concerns for those living with chronic illnesses, such as asthma, who might be effected by others vaping around them. Others focused on the long-term effects vaping may be having on the body and mind that are ‘not yet known’, including potential impacts on mental health, dental hygiene and fertility.

- “ i’m asthmatic so even being near someone vaping can but dangerous for me. i worry about the long term effects considering that it is still relatively ‘new’, and i worry that people still think it’s completely safe.” – 16 year old, female, Regional SA, Government school

## Lack of information

**A lack of information about the ingredients of a vape, side effects and how vaping relates to smoking – led many young people to raise key concerns about ‘what we don’t know’ about vaping as well as ‘the amount of misinformation’ there is.** Young people are worried that vaping ‘hasn’t been researched enough yet’, with some framing their concerns as a question:

- ‘Why is it taking so long to bring out the truth about them?’
- ‘How significant is the damage really?’
- ‘How harmful is one or two vapes every couple months?’
- ‘Is it better or worse than smoking?’

- “ there’s not any serious campaigning about its long term affects apart from people i’ve seen on tiktok talking about how they ended up in hospital for vaping.” – 17 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Independent School
- “ I am confused about whether it’s illegal or not for minors.” – 14 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Independent school
- “ If I could, I would stop.” – 15 year old, female, Regional SA, Government school

## A gateway to smoking

Young people shared significant concerns that vaping is addictive, with some worried that they or their friends are already addicted and ‘can’t quit’. Others felt concerned about the possibility of ‘never being able to quit’, with some young people focusing on vaping as a ‘coping mechanism’ that helps them to ‘treat anxiety and depression’. Some young people distinguished between nicotine and non-nicotine vapes, and shared particular concern that nicotine ‘is a drug’ even if vaping is not widely viewed as drug-taking.

- “ *Its like some people do it because they use it as a coping mechanism for mental health. others just bc their friends. this is simply bc teenagers are influenced heavily by their peers.*” – 17 year old, male, Metropolitan SA, Government school

Many young people were concerned about the relationship between vaping and other drugs, particularly cigarettes. There were mixed responses and perceptions about whether vaping is better or worse than smoking cigarettes and whether vaping can be ‘a gateway to smoking’ or a ‘way to quit smoking’. There was also uncertainty and fear about the health effects of inhaling ‘second-hand vape smoke’.

- “ *yes of course it’s a huge risk but i would rather that than the smell of ciggys.*” – 17 year old, female, Regional SA, Government school
- “ *I know its not good for me. I dont want to do it but with how reliant i am on nicotine its either that or smoking.*” – 18 year old, male, Regional SA, Independent School

## Cost

Beyond the health impacts, young people shared concerns about the financial impacts of vaping. Although respondents described vapes as relatively cheap when bought occasionally, they noted that costs can accumulate and become significant, especially if vaping becomes a habit. Another money-related concern raised was the prospect of ‘being scammed when buying one’.

- “ *Yes, it worries me that so many young, healthy people are indulging in an unhealthy habit without being educated.*” – 16 year old, female, Regional SA, Catholic school
- “ *The younger population of teenagers seem to vape more often than the older kids at this stage (I’m talking 13–15). And it is especially females. Something the teachers haven’t recognised is that it is far more amongst the female population.*” – 16 year old, male, Metropolitan SA, Catholic School

## PART 2

# What young people want adults to understand about vaping

Young people identified a range of things they felt adults needed to know to ensure responses to vaping resonate with young people and would ensure responses address ‘the real issues’ and ‘root causes of the problem’. Essentially, young people want adults to avoid ‘jumping to conclusions’ and instead consider the range of reasons that influence why young people might start and continue vaping. This understanding was seen as key to adults providing the right support at the right time.

Many young people are aware that vaping is ‘not good’ and they want adults to do more to prevent it, especially ‘younger kids’. Some respondents expressed a view that vaping ‘should be illegal’, and that they aren’t aware of existing laws around vaping. Others know that vaping is ‘meant to be illegal’ but that this doesn’t appear to be the case in reality. They highlighted how easy it is for teenagers to obtain vapes, how popular it is, and how good vaping tastes as ‘a sweet version of a cigarette’.

## It’s easy to get addicted

**One of the top things they want adults to understand is how addictive vaping is and that it is ‘harder to quit than they think’.**

Some respondents wanted to challenge the adult assumption that young people ‘can just stop vaping’. They reported feeling disappointed when adults blame, punish, or judge kids when often their vaping is ‘out of their control’. They said that some teenagers ‘start off doing it to be cool but then do actually become addicted, sometimes without realising ‘until it’s too late’. Some young people highlighted that not all regular vapers ‘want to be doing it’ or that they ‘want to quit’ but ‘find it easier to keep going’ when they’re without support or understanding.

“ How incredibly bad it is for you, yes on the contrary I do do it but it's because I've tried to quit and I couldn't think straight I had the worst ever headaches of my life and I found it to be much too difficult to quit.”  
– 17 year old, male, Metropolitan SA, Independent school

“ It can be a coping mechanism and most people don't want to be addicted but they are. So stop treating kids with nicotine problems like they are stupid and can stop anytime, treat them like an adult with a drug problem or alcohol addiction because it's the same thing.” – 15 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Catholic school

Many young people want support made available for those who are struggling to quit. Other young people emphasised that ‘not everyone does it’ in the first place and that ‘not everyone is addicted’. These respondents explained that vaping is often just ‘for fun’ and to ‘be social’ and ‘cool’ and so it is important to ‘not just assume that if someone did it once that they're “addicted”.’

## Stress relief

**The most common reason young people gave as to why they vape is that it helps them to relieve stress, calm anxiety and depression, and to concentrate, escape or relax.**

While many respondents noted that this ‘is not ideal’ and ‘we know it's bad’, they wanted adults to understand that they do not vape just to ‘be cool or rebellious’ but ‘because it provides temporary relief from reality’, ‘distracts us from pain’ and ‘is very useful for anxiety as the nicotine calms you’. They wanted schools and adults to provide better mental health

and practical support for students to ‘handle stress’ and thereby prevent them from turning to vaping as ‘a stress coping mechanism’.

“ Spending crazy amounts of money because we are addicted and meeting shifty dealers because we cant buy them legitimately isnt fun.” – 18 year old, male, Regional SA, Independent school

“ some of [us] arent doing it to look cool, some of us are genuinely struggling with addictions or are using them as coping mechanisms like a stress reliever.” – 17 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Government school

“ being a teenager is difficult because everyone expects them to act responsible and mature but still treats them like kids. too young for some things but too old for others and its confusing. some kids need a refuge from it all and vaping is one of them, in many cases it's not a huge problem and they quit after a while and it could be worse like there are some kids that take refuge in ending it all.” – 14 year old, female, Regional SA, Government school

## It's part of being a young person

**Some young people explained that they and their peers vape ‘to have fun’, ‘fit in’ or just to try it, either ‘out of curiosity’ or as a ‘normal part of growing up’.** Many respondents described vaping as being no different to smoking ‘for previous generations’. Some highlighted that it was a ‘trend’ and ‘not a forever thing’. That ‘they'll stop when it's not cool anymore’ and eventually ‘the next thing will come up’. However, others warned against treating it ‘like a trend’ because vapes are ‘easier to get’ and ‘very addictive’.

“ Many adults have grown up from smoking and I believe that this has influence my generation to start vaping early on. They vape instead of smoking because it's cheaper and more portable.”  
– 15 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Government school

“ Every teenager tries something to feel rebellious or cool, this is no different from sneaking a pack of smokes from ur parents because you want to try it. It's our bodies, yeah it might ruin it but I mean come on, you live and learn right.” – 16 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Government school

Some young people thought adults should understand and respect that teenagers are 'going to try things' despite the risks, and that they did not see 'the occasional vape' being an issue. Nevertheless, many young people noted that 'there is a point to step in' and support young people, particularly if it becomes 'an everyday thing', and they 'become addicted' or start 'selling them'.

## Parents need to be better informed

**Respondents noted that parents don't know much about vaping.** Most young people emphasised that 'just telling kids not to vape' isn't effective because teenagers will 'find a way to do it no matter what', particularly 'if an adult says not to'. Adults need the same awareness and information that children and young people need, including what health risks vaping poses, what the relevant laws are, and what kind of support is available for young people who want to stop vaping.

“ I wish adults understood that young people aren't educated enough on vaping. They don't know or understand any facts in the harm of vaping and what it could do. I wish there was support and alternatives to support young people like myself in 'not vaping', to stop the damages and harm.”  
– 17 year old, female, Regional SA, Government school

Most of these respondents felt that parents should know more about vaping and be equipped to talk about it openly and without judgement. Others said that some parents are vaping themselves or are supplying vapes to their kids, 'which is part of the problem'. They felt that adults who smoke or who have previously smoked cigarettes should have more understanding around the stress relief vaping offers and why it therefore becomes addictive. They felt it was 'hypocritical for them to be getting mad over this'.

“ They smoke for the nicotine we vape for the nicotine. They say it relives stress and so we do it for the same reason. Weed isnt legalised so nicotine it is.” – 16 year old, female, Remote SA, Government school

“ If the person vaping is educated on the topic and are vaping in a “safe way”, eg. using free base vape liquid. There should not be an issue.” – 18 year old, male, Regional SA, Catholic school

“ I don't do it for the social aspect it's more for the satisfaction, plus if I'm driving and it's only Nic in my system not anything hard like meth”  
– 17 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Government school

## PART 3

# Vaping and schools

Most young people who participated in the survey (60.6%) thought that schools should teach students of all ages about vaping.

Young people said education should not only help them to understand ‘the risks and harms’ associated with vaping, but also equip them with practical resources and support to stop vaping with an emphasis on understanding the ‘benefits of not vaping’. Such a holistic approach will have the best chance of preventing or delaying uptake in the first instance and ultimately help to minimise harm.

Young people identified the following topics for inclusion in information about vaping they would like to see made available to students.

- Why vaping can be harmful and the ‘benefits of not vaping’, including ‘what’s safe and what’s too far’ and how vaping affects short and long term physical and mental health.
  - How vapes are made and what’s in them.
  - The differences between nicotine and non-nicotine vapes.
  - Addictive nature of vapes and that they’re ‘not just flavoured air’.
  - What to do if you want to stop vaping but feel as though you’re becoming addicted, including how to support friends ‘who are struggling’ with their vaping habit.
  - How to navigate social influences and peer pressures.
  - How vaping compares to smoking cigarettes or consumption of other drugs.
  - The reality of the financial costs and their impact.
  - State and federal Laws relating to vaping.
- “Addiction, the side effects, and financial costs of maintaining the habit are all topics I believe should be covered. I feel that a lesson would be best received by a qualified speaker from outside of schools or provided by a respected student leader rather than teachers themselves.” – 17 year old, male, Regional SA, Government school
- “i think that it shouldnt be taught as something terrible like smoking but they should definitely talk about the consequences and how it affects your later life but they should also talk about non-nicotine vapes compared to nicotine vapes.” – 16 year old, female, Regional SA, Catholic school
- “They should just be a bit less disciplinary and more open. Except of handing out suspensions if the kids caught with a vape maybe ask why they vape.” – 17 year old, male, Metropolitan SA, Government school
- “Just sufficient warnings so that if anyone is doing it without knowing the consequences they have the knowledge to decide if they want to continue after learning that it’s bad.” – 17 year old, male, Metropolitan SA, Independent school

## How should vaping prevention be taught?

**In terms of educating children and young people about vaping, respondents said that it should be taught:**

- from a young age
- by professionals, teachers or counsellors who have expertise, in relation to vaping and its impacts, as well as by student leaders or guest speakers who are engaging and relatable
- with a health focus as part of Health lessons, in a similar way to cigarette and other drug education; and
- without shaming or punishing young people but rather in a way that is ‘more open’ to understanding why young people vape.

## Current responses

“ *They’re trying but they aren’t thinking the way we think*” – 15 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Government school

**While some young people describe their schools’ response as ‘harsh but fair’, many young people felt that their school was over-reacting and that responses had gone ‘too far’.** These respondents felt that an ‘over the top’ or ‘extreme’ approach, even where well-intentioned, was unlikely to be effective in ‘getting the message through’. Indeed, a number of young people expressed concerns that some current responses, particularly those that are punitive, threatening, or invasive, were eroding trust between students and staff, and restricting students rights to privacy.

“ *i don’t like how teachers are just walking into the bathroom as it makes me feel uncomfortable and i think it is an invasion of privacy but i do understand that there aren’t many ways to stop vaping at schools.*”  
– 15 year old, female, Metropolitan SA Catholic School

“ *trying to get people to snitch isn’t good for that person or people their snitching on.*” – 16 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Government school

“ *very over the top, non trusting, and invasive towards students.*” – 17 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Government school

Young people raised specific concerns about responses in schools that:

- restrict access to school bathrooms, including locking or closing toilets, removing toilet doors, or requiring students to sign in and out of school bathrooms
- limit student privacy, including staff searching students’ bags or pockets, or the proposed installation of cameras or detectors in bathrooms
- punish and exclude students or threaten exclusion, including detentions and internal suspensions through to formal suspensions, exclusions and even expulsions
- try to get students to ‘snitch’ on other students who may be vaping
- punish and control all students ‘despite the fact that only a handful of people actually do it at school’
- judge, make assumptions about and ‘look down’ on students who vape; or
- show more concern for school reputation than student wellbeing.

Many respondents reported that these responses were unlikely to be effective in terms of reducing levels of vaping amongst students because they aren't based on any understanding around why students might vape and how addictive vaping is. In fact, some young people reported that such responses only make young people who do vape 'more cautious and sneakier', and that students feel uncomfortable or scared by such responses because they can reduce trust between students, as well as between students and staff.

- “ They've closed like all of the bathrooms which is unacceptable because we need to use the bathroom as human being especially those of us that have periods.” – 16 year old, female, Regional SA, Government school
- “ not much, just punishing if they're caught, it won't do anything but make everyone hide it better or want it even more.” – 17 year old, male, Regional SA, Independent school

Many young people understand that it is difficult to stop students vaping at school. Some young people said their schools were trying their best, including having an assembly or putting up posters, signs or Quitline stickers, but that these actions alone 'weren't much' or 'enough'.

They felt it was 'fair enough' for schools to ban vaping and 'set boundaries not allowing students to vape' in the 'same way they would to students smoking cigarettes'. While some felt it was fair for schools to confiscate vapes, others were worried that simply 'taking it away' is unlikely to adequately address the issue, particularly given how addictive vaping is and the fact that there is a profound lack of information and support available for students to quit.

It was common for students to report that a lack of education and information about vaping makes punitive and exclusionary responses

seem even more unfair. While some young people reported that their school was 'trying to educate us', others said that adults at school don't really 'talk about vaping' or 'explain why it's bad' so students 'aren't really aware of the impacts'.

Some students described a significant lack of understanding from adults, who assume students who vape are inherently 'bad' or 'naughty'. They said it was common for teachers to 'treat it like you can just stop but it's addictive'. Others said that teachers 'can't really talk' because 'most of them vape and smoke themselves'.

- “ they automatically see it as a bad habit, although for some people it may be a coping mechanism. so they ban it and punish the kids who do it.” – 14 year old, female, Government school
- “ Its not really talked about enough. I feel like there is a large percentage of people who don't understand how bad it can be for your health and think that it's safe. Outside educating people about that I don't see what more can be done thats within their control.” – 17 year old, Regional SA, Government school

While suspensions and exclusions were raised by students across all school sectors, young people in Catholic and Independent schools were most likely to mention expulsions, with reports that schools 'will expel anyone if caught' and that 'kids have been expelled'. Several students in non-government schools felt as though their school cared more about its 'reputation' than student wellbeing, while others reported that their schools use 'internal suspensions' because they are not recorded in the same way formal exclusionary practices are.



- “ I got expelled so I think reputation is put above health and well-being in private schools.” – 17 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Catholic school
- “ because my school is catholic, they don't do expellions or suspension as they don't want it on there record, so they just make stay in a room all day.” – 15 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Catholic school
- “ Schools don't seem to even acknowledge how its impacting their students. Personally I can't even use the public bathrooms within the school without stumbling upon 2 or more students exchanging large amounts of cash for disposable vapes they bought for a fraction of the price just down the road. Sure they tell us every now and then not to do it they seem to be blind to what is happening.” – 16 year old, male, Regional SA, Government school

## Better responses

**Most young people identified ways that schools could respond better to vaping.**

- “ talk about it dont just suspend someone who does it and keep it on the down-low, its not teaching anything.” – 16 year old, female, Regional SA, Catholic school

**Understand young people's perspective and educate in engaging ways**

**Overall, they wanted schools to 'educate before punishment' and to consider adopting a more balanced approach between 'doing nothing' on the one hand and 'expelling kids' on the other.** They said such an approach had the best chance of building trust and respect between students and school staff.

Respondents wanted teachers to talk to students more openly and to check in with them to gain a deeper understanding of why they might vape, how they feel about vaping and whether they needed more support.

In addition to understanding the reality of social pressures, young people want schools to consider the possibility of vaping as a coping mechanism to deal with general stress levels as well as anxiety or depression. Others wanted to highlight that vaping addiction is real and that some young people might not want to do it anymore, but are addicted so that schools can't 'just ignore it' or expect young people to 'just be able to stop' vaping without some support.

- “ Check if students are okay. Theres normally a reason people do it.” – 17 year old, male, Metropolitan SA, Government school
- “ Be open minded to the topic and understand how it helps with students stress.” – 18 year old, male, Regional SA, Catholic school

Young people consider education to be an essential part of an effective response to vaping at school. Rather than just being told 'vaping is bad so don't do it', they want information that explains **why** vaping is bad so that they can fully understand the risks vaping carries and make informed decisions. Young people want engaging and relevant education that not only provides them with 'the facts' but which also equips them with practical skills to navigate social influences with access support if they or their friends ever need it.

- “ Teach kids about it, so kids are equipped with the knowledge on vaping and make better informed decisions.” – 15 year old, female, Regional SA

“ *be real and honest. like one of my teachers said to my friend “if your gonna do it, because i know you probably will, just do it outside school” kids don’t respond if your all preachy.”* – 19 year old, non-binary, Metropolitan SA, Government school

## Offer support rather than punishment

**Although a small number of young people wanted their schools to take ‘more disciplinary action’, most young people emphasised that suspensions and exclusions should only be used as a last resort, after several warnings.** In the first instance, they said students should be offered practical support programs or services, treated with kindness, and provided with opportunities to talk to staff about what’s going on in their lives.

They said it was particularly important that schools did not physically search students’ bodies or belongings, and that they did not punish all students because of the actions of a small group, or make young people feel bad or ashamed. Those who are vaping regularly and are at risk of addiction should be ‘offered an alternative’, and schools should ‘see it as a call for help rather than just try to cancel it’.

“ *for those who are addicted it feels close to impossible to go without vaping for the school day and if they are that concerned about the health benefits then i personally think that suspending the student to stay at home for a few days is not going to prevent anything in the long run. it may sound dramatic but honestly if there were programs to help students with giving up vaping i know i would have at least attended it, because the majority of people i talk to don’t want to be vaping but do not know how to stop.”* – 16 year old, female, Remote SA, Government school

## Ensure schools are ‘no-vape zones’

**Many young people reported that policies to keep schools ‘vape-free zones’ are reasonable, as long as students are informed of the rules.**

Some students thought more should be done to detect people vaping. However, others were concerned that smoke detectors might have the unintended consequence of making students swallow the smoke or inhale for longer to avoid detection, potentially causing more damage to their lungs.

“ *Not heaps, keep it disallowed at school, otherwise no dramas.”* – 17 year old, male, Metropolitan SA, Independent school

“ *Not expell kids for vaping in breaks and after hours. Teachers are allowed a smoke break arent they.”* – 18 year old, male, Regional SA, Independent school

Although a significant number of young people were unsure what schools could do to better respond, many expressed concern about the kinds of approaches that, in their view, are **not** working:

“ *Genuinely don’t know. Toilet smoke sensors aren’t working, policing and restricting bathroom access doesn’t work, patting kids down is invading privacy and kids are still going to do it outside of school.”* – 17 year old, non-binary, Metropolitan SA, Government school

“ *don’t expel or suspend kids for vaping because many use it for anxiety which is mostly caused by school.”* – 16 year old, female, regional SA, Independent school

## PART 4

# Vaping in the community

Most young people were unaware of responses to vaping outside of school. Many noted that there is ‘barely a reaction at all’, that they ‘haven’t seen anything’ about vaping or that it isn’t talked about at all. There was a sense that responses outside of school – from governments and businesses, to parents, advertising and media platforms – are ‘doing even less than school’ and that vaping ‘needs more attention’.

“ There is little to no response, adults are the ones supplying young people with it, or not carding them at stores.” – 17 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Catholic school

“ Outside of school it is difficult to respond to vaping as its a legal and popular market. It comes down to parents being aware of it and preventing those who are underage the legal age to purchase one to deal with it accordingly, and further suppliers being thorough when selling these products.” – 16 year old, male, Regional SA, Government school

Young people noted that vaping is ‘easy to get away with’, with some young people describing the market for vapes as ‘legal and popular’. They reported that ‘adults are the ones supplying young people’ with vapes, and that ‘children vaping’ in public is more common than vaping at school and yet this is largely being ignored. While some respondents had seen ‘a little bit of talk on social media and tv’ about vaping, others said there was ‘a lot of unmonitored social media where kids are selling vapes’.

Young people said that the responses to vaping outside of school vary ‘depending on who it is’. Some adults in public spaces don’t seem to care about vaping while others don’t approve and try to discourage it – a few responding with anger and judgement. Some young people felt that adults either ‘say it’s bad but don’t do anything about it’ or ‘they act like we choose to get addicted’.

Young people noted a general lack of information about vaping across the community, let alone information made for or by young people. Some respondents said the information they have seen appears to be for adults, even though they ‘haven’t seen many adults vaping’.

“ Vaping is also not educated or communicated outside of school. The only time when vaping is ‘talked about’ is due to adults using the product.” – 17 year old, female, Regional SA, Government school

“ By the Government making it illegal to buy nicotine vapes, we are forced to buy them through dealers and importers and hence really expensive for people like myself who only use them as a cigarette substitute in order to quit.” – 18 year old, male, Regional SA, Independent school

Young people reported that parents are responding to vaping in various ways. They said some parents strongly oppose it while others facilitate it, even supplying vapes to their children. Others said that some parents are unaware that vaping exists, or don't do much 'because I'm almost 18' or 'unless they're strict' have 'given up' trying to stop their child vaping.

“ Poorly, many parents and people allow it due to the fact it's fruity and 'clean' rather than smoking a cigarette which is dirty and gross I guess” – 17 year old, male, Metropolitan SA, Government school

“ some of my friends parents supply their kids with vapes and i find that astonishing. some parents say it's a learning experience and they can do it a few times but no more than a few bc they don't want them getting addicted.” – 15 year old, female, Regional SA, Independent school

While many young people understand that their parents or carers 'don't approve' or 'don't like it because of health issues' related to vaping, they said when parents 'get mad' it 'can make kids want to do it more'.

Others said that taking vapes away 'can be ok but I think it's better to educate them on the consequences'. Others felt that parents were 'overreacting' and this was hypocritical given that 'they did the same thing when they were younger'.

A smaller group of respondents focused on police responses to vaping. Some of these respondents noted that police do not seem very concerned, while others said police were 'conducting searches on students and other teenagers'. Some young people expressed a view that not much can be done to respond to those who vape, as it's ultimately 'their choice' and 'their body'.

“ Police hanging around at local centres conducting searches on students and other teenagers” – 15 year old, female, Regional SA, Government school

“ I believe alot of them judge them too quick and if near shopping complexes or out in public or even our parents are quick to judge and jump on are backs” – 16 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Government school

## What can be done to better support young people who vape?

“ I think a completely different approach should be generated. Vaping is definitely a problem and most ppl my age know that, they just don't care. Conduct market research and understand how to tailor information to the target audience of 'Vaping Teenagers' – probably near impossible but that's my 2cents.” – 17 year old, male, Metropolitan SA, Government school

## Restrict supply

**While many young people are aware that vaping is a difficult and complex issue to address, they highlighted that the most effective responses ‘come down to’ limiting the supply of vaping products and increasing access to information and support for young people and parents.**

Regulating the supply of vaping products to make them harder to get was raised as an important part of ‘de-normalising’ vaping. Young people’s specific suggestions included to ‘stop importing them’, ‘stop selling them’ and ensuring ‘age limits’ on vape sales are enforced with ‘harsher consequences for shops selling them’ to under age customers and increased ‘monitoring of online sales’. Others focused on ‘jacking prices’ or taxing vapes to ‘make them unaffordable’.

There was a real sense that the adults and industry who control (and benefit from) the sales and marketing of vaping products should take more responsibility for protecting children and young people from vaping-related harm. Young people made specific suggestions that would reduce the appeal of vapes, including stopping ‘the fruity flavours’ and ‘fancy packaging’. Some respondents said regulating vapes in the same way as cigarettes could be effective, both in terms of reducing supply and challenging misconceptions that vaping is better than smoking, or a proven way to quit smoking.

- “ *Should be further regulated, it’s not healthy. Watching my friends become addicted is pretty upsetting. Sure, it’s better than hardcore drugs but all addiction is bad.*”  
– 18 year old, female, metropolitan SA, Independent school
- “ *stop getting mad at kids for vaping and start targeting the people who sell vapes to kids.*”  
– 16 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Government school

Some respondents noted that restricting access could initially cause a backlash, given how easy it currently is for young people to obtain vaping products. Overall, however, respondents felt restricting access to minors was a necessary part of an effective and holistic response, which must also ensure there is support in place for those who may be dependent or addicted to nicotine vapes and might struggle with withdrawals.

## Provide support programs

**Young people outlined the range of support programs, resources and services they would like to see in relation to vaping. These included programs ‘like the ones to quit smoking’, ‘easy support services’ similar to those created for drug and alcohol misuse. They also suggested offering a help line to ensure ‘24/7 support’ is made available in the same way it is for adults.**

- “ *stop treating kids with vaping addiction like they’re awful people because you would help an adult with one but not a child.*”  
– 15 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Catholic school
- “ *taking it away doesn’t help with addiction, kids will just find something harder and therefore stronger that they think ‘helps’ them.*” – 17 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Government school

Young people’s responses highlighted the links between vaping and stress or mental health issues. They explained that they ‘need more help with mental health’ and the best support would be to challenge the perception that vaping ‘fixes problems’ and to instead provide alternative and practical ways for young people to cope with stress and gain easy access to mental health support when it’s needed.

“ Not shaming young people if they are addicted to vaping, and supporting them rather than being prejudicial. Supporting/ influencing young people in not vaping as there are many health effects.” – 15 year old, female, Regional SA Catholic school

“ others validating why people vape and checking in with the mental health of people who vape will help discourage it by finding the root of the problem.” – 17 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Government school

Given that young females are more regular vapers than young males and reports that some young people use vapes ‘to substitute meals’, responses also highlighted the need for support to consider and address concerns relating to body image and eating disorders. There was a general sense that support will be most effective when received from peers and other young people, or from adults who are committed to genuinely listening and relating to young people.

### Better public health messaging

#### Noting the general lack of awareness and education about vaping in the community, young people highlighted the need for more public health information and campaigns.

They want young people at school and outside of school to ‘talk more about it’ and to raise awareness, provide ‘more facts’ and ‘clarify laws and punishment’ relating to vaping. They would like to see more advertisements and health warnings ‘like with smoking’ particularly as the current focus on cigarettes ‘makes it seem as though vaping isn’t “bad” in comparison’.

“ Have more presentations or flyers in doctors offices that explain the risks of vaping and the benefits of not vaping.” – 16 year old, female, Regional SA, Government school

“ social media warning or something when posting vape deals on stories mainly snapchat.” – 13 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Government school

While acknowledging the challenges of addressing powerful social influencers and peer pressure, young people believe it is important to ‘not make vaping look like a cool thing so that younger students don’t want to try it’. They want to be informed about the benefits of not vaping and be given practical support to build a ‘non-vaping’ identity.

Young people highlighted that the best way to ensure a public health campaign reaches and resonates with them is to engage with young people throughout its development. They suggested ‘conducting market research’ in order to understand what kinds of messages will resonate with young people and what the best way to deliver these messages will be, including the need to tailor approaches to different groups of young people.

As with the provision of support, young people reported that other young people are likely to be more effective ‘messengers’ than adults or ‘authority figures’ when it comes to public health communications.

“ Maybe relating to younger people more and taking on less of an authority figure which just makes them go against these responses more. I know that alot of young people have seen their parents go through cigarette addictions (including myself) and it can be eye opening to realise that our parents were in the same position when they were younger, leading them to long term addictions and health risks that were unknown at the time.” – 17 year old, male, Metropolitan SA, Catholic school

Young people want parents to be informed and equipped to engage with their kids and to be able and available to help them where needed. Some young people were concerned about parents facilitating their child's vaping and suggested that anyone supplying vapes to their child 'might want to educate themselves' first and then 'have a chat with their kid'.

“ This is difficult as outside of school there isn't much impact you can have on a large group of younger people. It comes down to the parents and the suppliers of these products.”  
– 16 year old, male, Regional SA,  
Government school

“ I think there needs to be more understanding about vaping and why some young people do use.” – 14 year old, male, Metropolitan SA,  
Government school

“ Accessing vapes are way too easy, all we have to do is go to a cheap servo often in cities and there we can buy a vape without because asked for identification of age. Also commonly now other young people will start selling vapes, they will buy them in bulk and sell them to people and offer to drop them at there house for an extra charge... there really needs to be restrictions put in place to make them not so easy to access and then the addiction would be forced to stop. I know many people, me included would be extremely angry at first especially when there in the first few days without nicotine but if adults want students to stop I truly believe it's the only way.” – 16 year old,  
female, Metropolitan SA, Government school

## Conclusion

**In order to respond to vaping appropriately and effectively, adults and decision makers in schools and across the community need to understand young people's diverse experiences, perceptions and influences in relation to vaping.**

### **This includes understanding:**

- why young people are vaping, including the links with stress, mental health concerns and appetite suppression
- the reality of nicotine addiction
- ease of access to vaping products for teenagers
- young people's concerns about vaping and their perspectives on current responses
- what young people know, don't know and would like to know about vaping; and
- information and support that will engage young people and address what they consider to be the 'real issues'.

