

# Responding to vaping at school: approaches that work.

## Schools should view vaping as a health issue rather than a disciplinary issue, addressing addiction and the impact of vaping on children and young people of all ages.

It is essential that a whole-of-school preventive health approach be taken to addressing vaping amongst young people. This includes responding to students who are already addicted to vaping, or who are found selling vapes in the school environment. It is important to apply approaches that will discourage students from taking up vaping as well as supporting those who already have. This includes establishing a clear understanding of what is expected of

students and what consequences there are when students are caught vaping at school, or selling vapes on school grounds.

Knowledge about the impacts of vaping and best responses to vaping is evolving. Schools need ongoing strategies and supports to ensure the approaches they use continue to prioritise student health and wellbeing and involve students in their design and implementation. This guide has been produced within this context.

### A school that adopts a preventive health approach to vaping has the following qualities:

- ✓ Primary schools, as well as secondary schools have strategies in place to prevent and address vaping.
- ✓ There are open and ongoing discussions about vaping and its impact on the health and wellbeing of all students.
- ✓ There is a focus on student health and support for those who may be addicted to vaping, and who may be experiencing nicotine withdrawal.
- ✓ There is a reduced emphasis on the numbers of young people vaping and instead the focus is placed on reducing the uptake of vaping. (ie vaping is not normalised in a way that makes it appear to other students that they may be missing out).
- ✓ Students are not treated with suspicion and restrictions to reduce vaping don't punish all students.

# What we know

Vapes, also called electronic-cigarettes or e-cigarettes, were introduced with the intention to help people quit smoking cigarettes. The laws around vapes and vaping are evolving so it's best for educators to check with their Education Director for the latest information.

It has never been legal to sell any kind of vape to a person under 18 years of age.

However, young people have still been able to access vapes easily, with many reporting that they're able to get them or buy them from friends.<sup>1</sup> While vapes can be easy to get, they can be difficult to quit.

Many research studies have found negative health outcomes relating to vaping that include poisoning, immediate inhalation toxicity, and lung injury.<sup>2</sup> Long-term health effects are still unknown, but they're likely to be concerning.

Many young people are concerned about becoming addicted to vaping given that the vapes they buy often contain high levels of nicotine, even those labelled as nicotine free.<sup>3</sup>

We also know vaping is something that is occurring in the context of our broader society. More needs to be done to counter online advertising and social media content around vaping, as well as introducing stronger public health messaging around the risks of vaping and its addictive qualities, particularly in relation to content aimed at children and young people.

“ 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

“ I know it's not good for me. I don't want to do it but with how reliant I am on nicotine it's either that or smoking.” – 18 year old, male, Regional SA, Independent School

“ How incredibly bad it is for you, yes on the contrary I 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

## Approaches that don't work...

It can be difficult for schools to respond to vaping while ensuring the rights of all students at the school are being upheld.

To address vaping some schools are reportedly taking actions which are often focused on punitive approaches. These include threatening students or suspending, excluding, and expelling students, installing (costly) vape detectors, searching school bags or lockers, or restricting access to toilets.

Suspending, excluding, or expelling students results in loss of learning time and is likely to increase a student's disengagement from their education and school.

Restricting access to toilets comes in many forms. It also raises issues around privacy and trust, as well as potential health concerns, missing lesson time, or even students staying home from school because they can't access the bathrooms.

These approaches can have many unintended consequences and are unlikely to work in the long term. They can also increase disengagement amongst students, impact on learning, and erode trust between students and teachers.

Use of punitive disciplinary measures and vape detectors on school students is also strongly discouraged by Australian research experts who highlight there is no evidence of the effectiveness of these measures.<sup>4</sup>

***“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**

“ 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

“ Talk about it. Don't just suspend someone who does it and keep it on the down-low, it's not teaching anything.” – 16 year old, female, Regional SA, Catholic 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

## A positive school response to vaping is one that ...

- 1** Focuses on health and supporting students who may be addicted to vaping and who may be experiencing nicotine withdrawal.
- 2** Does not threaten to suspend, exclude, or expel students in relation to managing vaping, because they know this will result in loss of learning time, and is only likely to further increase a student's disengagement from school.
- 3** Takes a preventive health approach that works with students to understand why they are vaping and to come up with school responses in the local context, without forcing young people to disclose their personal vaping status.
- 4** Integrates vaping education into a broader drug and alcohol strategy that begins in primary school and extends into secondary school.
- 5** Adopts broader school approaches to improving student wellbeing that may also help to reduce vaping.
- 6** Understands that young people need to be offered support rather than punishment and be provided with programs that can help them reduce uptake and regular use of vaping.
- 7** Seeks to tailor responses to the needs of individual students with opportunities for students to discuss what they think will work for them, including an offer of support from a wellbeing support leader or school counsellor.



# Approaches that work

International and domestic research over many years has found that the most successful approaches at minimising or preventing cigarette and vape use are those which take a whole-of-school approach. This includes student involvement in action groups focusing on policy and school change, lessons involving interactive discussions which include an exploration on reasons for vaping and consideration of the social context of vaping, and social and emotional learning curriculum.<sup>5</sup>

In my 2022 [vaping survey](#) of 950 South Australian young people aged 13–19 years there were 2 in 3 teenagers who shared that they had tried vaping, with 1 in 4 reporting they were regular vape users (vaping most days).

Other Australian studies indicate that a quarter to a third of teenagers have tried vaping, with regular use (most days) at about 4–9%.<sup>6</sup> One Australian study found the mean age of first use was 14 years<sup>7</sup> but there are also reports that some children are vaping in primary school.<sup>8</sup> Regardless of exact figures, there is concern that there is a growing number of teenagers who are vaping on a regular basis.

While some teenagers report they are vaping, it is crucial for schools to acknowledge that this does not mean all young people are vaping. Doing so has the effect of normalising vaping as something all or most young people do, and this can create the feeling amongst some young people that they may be ‘missing out’ if they don’t vape.<sup>9</sup>

It is also important to ensure we don’t create school environments where all students are treated with the same suspicion, and that restrictions designed to reduce vaping inadvertently end up punishing all students.

## Five approaches that work:

- 1** Focus on health and support
- 2** Take a whole-of-school approach to vaping
- 3** Develop a student-led vaping policy and action plan
- 4** Tailor responses to individual students
- 5** Improve student wellbeing more broadly

# 1

## Focus on health and support – not punishment



Schools need to facilitate responses to vaping that focus on health and support for students who may be addicted to vaping and who may be experiencing nicotine withdrawal.

Comprehensive and holistic approaches to vaping that focus on prevention and not punishment, and which will be long lasting and empathetic to the needs of students are best.

Schools can provide easy access to specific information about the impact vaping has on young people's health and wellbeing, and work to gain an understanding of why a student chooses to vape in the first place.

Schools can play a significant role in supporting students to avoid vaping altogether, or they can support students who do vape to quit early, particularly those who may have become addicted to vaping.

# 2

## Take a whole-of-school approach to vaping



A whole-of-school approach involves focusing on preventive health and on offering support to students who need it. It includes establishing clear responses to students who are found vaping and/or selling vapes, eliminating any ambiguity around school policy and ensuring students know what the consequences of vaping or selling vapes on school grounds will be.

Knowing what local context issues may impact on a student's decision to vape, as well as appreciating that students have different

understandings of vaping and different reasons for taking it up, will determine the effectiveness of the whole of school approach.

Also asking students how they think the school could best respond to vaping, including what consequences they think would act as deterrents to vaping and selling vapes, would form part of this approach.

### 3

## Develop a student-led vaping policy and action plan



One of the best ways to address vaping in schools is to work with students to develop a clear school policy and action plan. Development of the plan should be student led with school staff supporting the process of engaging as many students as possible across different year levels. Leadership groups such as the school's student representative council, or a dedicated working group, could help facilitate this engagement.

Once established, the vaping policy and action plan needs to be shared with the wider school community so that everyone is aware of its contents and what is expected of students, including the consequences of non-compliance.

School policies and action plans around vaping also need to be periodically reviewed and involve students in regular updates or changes as new laws, health advice, and Department for Education policies and procedures come into effect.

#### Resources available to assist with development of a Vaping School Policy and Action Plan:

- Referrals to Quitline or GP for addiction concerns.
- Behaviour support coach and team around the child approach with other providers to support student.
- Vaping falls under the [‘Smoke-free policy’](#) and [‘Alcohol, tobacco and other drugs incident management procedure’](#), available on the intranet. Other documents that may be relevant in particular circumstances include the [‘Behaviour support policy’](#) and the [‘Suspension, exclusion and expulsion of students procedure’](#).
- SA Health has prepared a series of comprehensive [fact sheets](#) about what vaping is, what vapes can look like, and what the health risks are. Schools are encouraged to circulate these resources to staff and students alike.
- Preparing the school's vaping policy and action plan could include the use of the [Voicelt Toolkit](#). This framework is a way for students to share their ideas while they work to ensure the final plan aligns with relevant education department policy and procedures.
- A source such as [‘Vape Check’](#) may be useful for staff members. This can be used with student input to help establish the reasons for vaping, the implications of vaping, and how to develop personalised plans to quit or cut down on vaping. Students may need additional support in relation to nicotine addiction and applying strategies to support them to quit vaping.
- The Department for Education [‘Vaping and e-cigarettes in schools’](#) intranet webpage outlines a holistic guidance for responding to vaping in schools. The guide includes different supports needed for students in relation to vaping, indicating a holistic approach to prevention and responding as follows:
  - Whole school education around dangers and health concerns.



## 4 Tailor responses to individual students



Some of the symptoms relating to nicotine use and withdrawal can include depression, feeling tense, irritable, frustrated, or anxious. Some users describe having difficulty concentrating, an increased appetite, and ongoing sleep problems.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to educating students and providing easy access to relevant resources, when teachers observe that a student has symptoms of vaping they need to work with that student to address them.

Some of the recommended techniques for supporting teenagers to quit vaping include counselling, encouraging students to try and go without vaping for longer periods, and using nicotine replacements (eg gum, patches) prescribed by a GP for 12–17 year olds.<sup>11</sup>

Background issues also need to be discussed. Some students may be vaping to quit smoking cigarettes, to stop going back to smoking cigarettes, or to cut down on the number of cigarettes they smoke.<sup>12</sup> Other students might have barriers to accessing support because they feel they will be left out by friends if they don't vape, or they might be vaping because they do not believe the health messages around vaping.<sup>13</sup>

Responses to students who are known to be regularly vaping at school need to be tailored to the individual. Allowing a student to have input into determining what they think will work best for them will help, along with ensuring they can access support from a wellbeing support leader or school counsellor if needed.

Confidentiality and mandatory reporting requirements in relation to any of these discussions need to be made clear to students and their parents, caregivers, and guardians from the outset.

If students are found vaping (or with a vape) for the first time, this is a chance for early intervention. Responses to students found vaping should be based on the following:

- Prioritise the wellbeing of the student.
- Notify the site leader (eg School Principal) of the incident.
- Ask the student to surrender any vaping materials (note: students bags and lockers are **not** to be searched without consent).
- Inform parents, caregivers or guardians and involve them in developing a holistic response.
- Arrange a meeting with relevant staff (eg, wellbeing support leader or school counsellor) where the student can discuss a plan to help them quit or reduce vaping.
- Recognise addiction in students and provide supports if required. This could include suggestions to contact out-of-school service providers such as GPs or the SA Quitline.
- Arrange for targeted education sessions with the student to keep the conversation and their motivation for quitting going in the right direction.

## 5 Improve student wellbeing more broadly



Many young people shared that they vape as a response to stress. However, the cause-effect relationship of vaping and mental health problems hasn't been clearly determined – and it is unclear if poor mental health leads to vaping or if vaping leads to poor mental health.<sup>14</sup>

To feel understood and connected to their school, students need to know their wellbeing is a priority. The Department for Education's Wellbeing and Engagement Collection (WEC) shows that many students in South Australia are reporting medium or low levels of wellbeing and peer belonging in their school environment.<sup>15</sup> This suggests that broader school approaches to improving student wellbeing overall will help to reduce negative coping strategies that include uptake of vaping.

- “ Check if students are okay. There's normally a reason people do it.” – 17 year old, male, Metropolitan SA, Government school
- “ 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
- “ 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

# Learning about vaping as part of your school's broader drug and alcohol strategy

To be most effective, learning about vaping should be interactive and participatory where students can engage with ideas and test their own knowledge.<sup>16</sup> Ideally vaping education needs to be integrated into a broader drug and alcohol strategy that is introduced in primary school and extended into secondary school.

Students can be involved in designing solutions to create engaging content that works in their local context, and which is integrated into a broader learning area on life skills.



## Ideas for education around vaping

There are multiple avenues for teaching and learning about vaping in schools. These can overlap or be combined to provide a more comprehensive approach that can include any or all the following:

- The Australian Curriculum (Foundation–Year 10) where ‘Alcohol and other drugs’ is one of the 12 focus areas of Health and Physical Education<sup>17</sup> can be included in Year 4 when discussing what drugs are, health information, and media advertising.<sup>18</sup>
- In Years 9 and 10 students can learn about the impact of vaping on the teenage brain and be informed about vaping to include laws, media and advertising as well as health impacts and addiction.<sup>19</sup>
- Ease of access to curriculum content on the Positive Choices website,<sup>20</sup> referred to on the Department for Education’s [‘Drugs and alcohol in schools’](#) webpage.

- Quit and Cancer Council Victoria have developed 'Seeing Through the Haze' curriculum resources which focus on critical thinking skills around vaping and smoking.
- Introduction of evidence-based external alcohol and drug education programs by private providers recommended by the Department for Education where government funding is available.<sup>21</sup> For example, Life Education's 'Take A Breath' program for Years 5 and 6 which was developed with teenagers in Australia<sup>22</sup> and Encounter Youth's 'Vaping & E-Cigarettes' Seminars for Years 7–12.
- Resources, fact sheets, and posters from departments and organisations like SA Health, Drug and Alcohol Services SA (DASSA), and the Cancer Council SA can be made available to students and displayed in prominent locations throughout the school environment.
- The whole school community of students, teachers, staff, and families, needs to be involved in learning about the legal and health aspects of vaping.
- Professional development and learning opportunities are needed for school leadership, teaching, and support staff.
- There also needs to be information for and engagement with parents/caregivers/guardians in relation to understanding the negative impacts of vaping, and ways they can support their children to prevent or respond to vaping, including looking for signs that their child may be vaping.
- Teaching and learning approaches need to be used together and embedded in the school vaping policy and action plan developed with students to thereby encourage ongoing conversations.



## What students say about vaping...

In my vaping survey of young people undertaken in 2022, many young people said school responses were likely to be ineffective because they aren't based on understanding why students vape and how addictive vaping is.

The survey found a range of reasons for why young people vape:

- Addiction
- Stress/stress relief

- Part of being a young person
- Peer pressure/normalised/cool.

Young people also shared that vaping may occur due to their lack of understanding about the negative health impacts, as well as the ease of buying vapes. Other Australian studies have highlighted the importance of taste and flavour, the 'hit' or 'head spins', and the marketing and promotion of vaping aimed directly at children and young people.<sup>23</sup>

These potential reasons for vaping are a useful starting point for schools to engage in discussions with their own students. Although it is important to open and maintain a dialogue with students, it is also important that students can speak about vaping without any fear of being forced to disclose their personal vaping status.

The group context of vaping also needs to be considered. While vaping alone may be a sign of addiction, students are often vaping in groups, so that an understanding of the social dynamics of peer group pressure becomes relevant. One Australian study indicates that perceived peer use of vapes correlates with children and young people having ever tried vaping.<sup>24</sup>

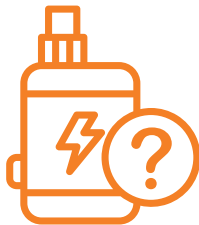


For more information about what young people are saying about vaping view the link below: <https://youtu.be/x74lwHwXnQI>

“ Be open minded to the topic and understand how it helps with students stress.” – 18 year old, male, Regional SA, Catholic school

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

“ I am confused about whether it’s illegal or not for minors.” – 14 year old, female, Metropolitan SA, Independent school



## What students want to know about vaping...

Many young South Australians want schools to teach students of all ages about vaping. They said in their responses to my vaping survey, that they want to know more about the following:

- 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.
- The addictive nature of vapes and vaping and understanding that vapes are ‘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.

# Ongoing management of vaping in schools

***“Responses to vaping must understand young people’s perspectives, offer support rather than punishment and provide programs to help with reducing vaping.”***

**Source: Department for Education Vaping & E-Cigarettes in Schools advice.**

Department for Education advice is clear – students need to be supported if they are found vaping. The [‘Vaping and e-cigarettes in schools’](#) webpage shows the steps to take if a student is found vaping at school:

- Remember, the health, safety and wellbeing of the student is paramount.
- Notify your principal or site leader of the incident.
- Consider the student’s support needs. This may include education and awareness or referral to counselling services or appropriate referral programs. Exclusionary measures are a last resort.
- Monitor and follow up on any intervention provided.

The broader issue of vapes being sold illegally in Australia, including by minors to minors, has contributed to young people selling vapes to their friends and associates at school. Recent changes to laws around the importation of vapes may help to reduce this.

When responding to students who are found selling vapes at your school, it is far preferable to centre efforts on supporting the wellbeing of the student concerned and to work from a health-based approach rather than apply a punitive response.

The Department for Education’s [‘Alcohol, tobacco and other drugs incident management procedure’](#) advises that the police must be contacted if vapes are sold to a minor, including by another minor.

I believe this action criminalises children and is unlikely to have an impact on reducing vaping in schools and only serves to disengage students from school. I urge the department to reconsider this aspect of the policy and assess the procedure against the higher order principle of centering the wellbeing of students, and working from a health-based approach rather than a discipline-based approach in the management of vaping in schools.

## Endnotes

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## The Commissioner's Role

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory position, established under the Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016 ('the Act'). The Commissioner's role includes advocating for systemic change to policies, programs and practices that impact the rights, development and wellbeing of South Australia's children and young people. This work is informed by the experiences and issues of children and young people themselves, with a specific focus on those who struggle to have their voices heard.

The Commissioner's strategic agenda was formulated with direct input from children and young people. Children and young people asked the Commissioner to facilitate their involvement in decision making, and to create opportunities for them to experience authentic participation. The Commissioner is working with a number of partners on this agenda, including ways in which children and young people can have input into the design and delivery of policies, processes and practices that relate to delivery of services aimed directly at them.

Thank you to the South Australian school students who participated in the Commissioner's Vaping consultations (2022)

Please note: All quotes have been reproduced verbatim.

Related content:

[Commissioner's Position Brief: Drug education in schools – what works, what doesn't \(2019\)](#)

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