


A RESOURCE PACKAGE
FOR GENERAL PRACTITIONERS

Alcohol, other drugs and mental health in young people.

Date published: May 2023



This resource is a 'snapshot' of evidence-based information for general practitioners. It covers:

- having age-appropriate and non-stigmatising conversations about alcohol and other drugs (AOD) with young people and/or their parents/carers
- understanding the function of AOD use in young people
- recognising when a young person might have co-occurring mental health and AOD needs
- what AOD-specific and dual diagnosis services are available for young people
- resource options for young people/parents and carers who are seeking more information about AOD.

This work was developed in collaboration with the Royal College of General Practitioners Victoria with funding from the Victorian Department of Health. Therefore, some information may not be relevant to other states/territories.

The function of AOD use in young people

Experimenting with, and using, alcohol and other drugs (AOD) can be part of life for many young people (12-25 years).^{1,2}

As part of their development, young people are natural risk-takers, explorers and experimenters –this can include AOD.^{1,2}

And, just like adults there's many reasons why young people use AOD:

- for fun
- for confidence
- to enhance mood
- to relax
- to be able to sleep/dream
- to stay awake
- to fit in with a group/socialise
- to increase sexual experiences
- to cope with physical or mental pain.^{3,4}

When young people are experiencing trauma or emotional pain, substance use can keep the trauma at bay.³

Many young people experiment with drugs and don't experience significant harm.^{5,6}

Not all drug use leads to dependence or significant problems.

But, when AOD is causing a young person harm – and even when they recognise this – it can be difficult to stop.



When do young people need support for AOD use?

There are situations where it's more obvious a young person needs AOD treatment or support.

For example, a family member or carer might bring their young person to an appointment, or the appointment might be booked by a young person's support worker.

In other situations it can be more difficult to determine if AOD use is an issue for the young person, unless they identify it as a problem themselves.

Flags to check in on a young person's alcohol or drug use include:

- low self-esteem
- changes in mood, appetite or sleeping patterns
- emotional distancing
- mental health needs
- poor school performance
- loss of interest in activities
- school disengagement
- poor connection with family, school and community
- relationship issues
- employment and financial issues.^{3,7}

If a young person is experiencing these issues and drug use is not involved, they may still need support. Suggesting they connect with a youth support service like [headspace](#) can be a good first step.

Even if they are using drugs, they may not see that as the problem or may not yet have trust in you to comfortably talk about what is going on for them.

In this situation it can be useful to have conversations with a young person over multiple sessions.

Young people's level of AOD use can change dramatically from one appointment to another, so it may be more useful to build up a picture of the pattern of AOD use over time.⁸

There are a number of assessment tools that you can use to help determine the severity of substance use. See page 44 of Dovetail's 'practice strategies and interventions: youth alcohol and drug good practice guide', linked here: [dovetail_gpg_3_practice-strategies-and-interventions.pdf](#)

Mental health and AOD use

Some common mental health symptoms experienced by young people are:

- hopelessness
- anxiety
- low mood
- irritability
- lack of quality sleep
- negative or racing thoughts.⁹

A young person experiencing mental ill health may use alcohol and other drugs to reduce mental health symptoms and experience temporary relief, for example using cannabis to relax or go to sleep or using ecstasy to enhance their mood with friends.¹⁰

Conversely, other young people may find drug and alcohol use triggers their first symptoms of mental ill health.¹¹

AOD in young people can escalate when their mental health condition is present or untreated, and vice versa. This can worsen the symptoms of each condition.

You can read more about AOD and mental health in young people [here](#).



Barriers accessing AOD support

Young people may not think their AOD use is an issue, or might want to 'fix it' on their own.¹²

They might be scared, embarrassed or worried about talking to a GP.

They may be concerned about legal ramifications and confidentiality.⁸

Some young people may also distrust health professionals due to a past negative experience where they believed help was unavailable, ineffective or difficult to access.

This means they could be uncomfortable, defensive or hostile if AOD is raised.^{13, 14}

They may also be reluctant to address their AOD use due to other barriers, such as:

- treatment costs and medication (reassuring them that treatment is available from public health services can counter this)
- having to take time off school or work
- travel costs
- feeling stigmatised.¹²

These barriers can be intensified for those belonging to historically excluded communities:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young peoples
- lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or intersex (LGBTIQ+) young people
- multicultural young people who have been discriminated against
- young people who have had contact with the criminal justice system
- young people with a physical or mental disability.¹⁵

Being aware and responsive to the needs of diverse young people can help them feel safe, supported and more willing to access help.

If you're concerned about the young person's substance use and they are reluctant to talk, or are not ready to make a change, you may need to build trust with ongoing longer appointments.

This can be difficult within the constraints of GP appointments being short, one-off consultations. **But it can help to let the young person know the door is open anytime if they want to talk or access support.**

Talking to young people about drug use in a GP Setting

When young people feel safe to chat with GPs and other health professionals about their AOD use, it can help them minimise harm and get the right kind of support, if needed. This isn't always easy, but here are some things that can help:

Be the young person's ally.

Build rapport to create trust and respect. This can mean talking about 'lighter' and non-confrontational things.

Start the conversation by exploring what they like about their alcohol and drug use, and what motivates them to use it. This shows you're interested in listening and understanding their viewpoint, rather than lecturing or judging.¹⁶

Use non-stigmatising language. If a young person feels judged this can stop them from seeking support, and may negatively impact their health, wellbeing, employment or education.^{17,18}

You can read more about stigma and words to choose in a professional setting here: [the Power of Words – Alcohol and Drug Foundation \(adf.org.au\)](https://www.adf.org.au)

Create safe spaces. This can include:

- clinic posters encouraging young people to speak to their GP about substances use needs
- affirming posters and brochures for people with diverse identities. There are great organisations and resources that can help with creating more diverse and inclusive clinic environments:
 - [Minus18 – Inclusive workplaces training](#)
 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural safety framework [health.vic.gov.au](https://www.health.vic.gov.au)
 - [Youth Disability Advocacy Service – supporting young people with a disability](#)
- reassuring the young person your conversation is **confidential**. If the young person is underage, there may be certain situations where a parent/guardian will need to be notified. This includes if:
 - it is necessary to prevent a serious threat to public health, safety or welfare
 - the young person is at imminent risk of harming themselves
 - the young person is at imminent risk of harming others.¹⁹ See [here](#) for more information.
- asking curious, empathetic and open-ended questions about their AOD use:
 - 'Tell me a little bit about your substance use...'
 - 'What do you like about your substance use?'
 - 'If you stopped using substances is there something you would miss about it?'
 - 'Could you tell me about what worries you about your substance use?'

Youth AOD service snapshot

There are many different types of AOD support options for young people.



Outreach support

Youth AOD outreach workers meet with young people at home, school, cafes, parks, etc. to provide non-judgemental counselling and support for AOD use.



Centre-based counselling and case management

Youth-friendly, non-judgemental centre-based support for young people experiencing AOD needs.



Dual diagnosis counselling and case management

Counselling and support for young people experiencing co-occurring mental health and AOD needs. Many youth AOD services now provide dual diagnosis counselling and support, or work closely with mental health services to provide integrated care.



Family-focused counselling

Counselling involves the young person together with parents and/or significant others, so the family can work to improve relationships, increase understanding of issues and support the young person's treatment goals.



E-support

Online or phonenumber support.



Day programs and 'drop in' centres

Safe non-judgemental spaces, staffed by AOD and youth workers, where young people with AOD issues can go during the day. Suitable for young people not engaged in school or work, and who have limited supports. Young people participate in structured programs, recreational activities or access services such as primary health, therapeutic support or basic needs like showers and washing machines.



Home-based withdrawal

A young person is supported by outreach workers to help them withdraw safely at home.



Youth residential detoxification programs

(for ages 12–21 or 25, depending on the service provider)

Safe and supportive environments, staffed 24/7 by youth AOD workers, where a young person can stay for up to two weeks to withdraw from alcohol or other drugs.



Youth residential rehabilitation

(for ages 16-20 or 25, depending on the service provider)

A young person lives with a group of others in 24 hour accommodation, staffed by AOD support workers, to help them achieve their treatment goals. Involves a structured therapeutic program, i.e. psychosocial education, life skills, group and individual therapy, art, music, animal care, etc.



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residential rehabilitation

(for ages 16-25)

Bunjilwarra Koori Youth Alcohol and Drug Healing Service is a 12 bed residential rehabilitation service for Aboriginal young people (Vic. based).



Dual diagnosis/integrated care models

A holistic approach that focuses on treating a young person's AOD and mental health needs at the same time.



Young parents' program

Supports young people who are pregnant or parents and experiencing substance use needs.



Forensic support

AOD-focused programs and support for young people engaged in the juvenile justice system.

If the service accessed isn't quite the right fit for the young person, let them or their parents/carers know there are other workers or other services available and encourage them to keep trying until they find a worker or service that is the right fit.

Referral pathways for young people with AOD or co-occurring needs and their family/friends

YoDAA (Youth Drugs and Alcohol Advice)	<p>Online resources and phonenumber support for young people and concerned parents/carers</p> <p>Referrals to local youth-focused support services</p>	<p>1800 458 685 https://yodaa.org.au/</p>
headspace	<p>Specialises in engaging young people with concerns relating to mental health, physical health and alcohol and other drugs</p>	<p>1800 650 890 https://headspace.org.au/</p>
Family Drug Help	<p>24hr phonenumber providing practical help, information and support to families and friends affected by someone's alcohol or other drug use</p>	<p>1300 660 068 https://www.sharc.org.au/sharc-programs/family-drug-gambling-help/</p>
Path2Help	<p>Online tool providing tailored support and information to the specific needs of loved ones of someone who uses alcohol and other drugs</p>	<p>https://adf.org.au/path2help/</p>
DrugInfo	<p>Confidential alcohol and other drug phone and email information and support line</p>	<p>1300 85 85 84 https://adf.org.au/resources/druginfo/</p>



Additional resources and reading

<p>RACGP Alcohol & Other Drugs GP Education Resource Library</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resources for GPs to support patients who use alcohol and other drugs. • Resources include clinical approaches, patient handouts and case scenarios.
<p>Alcohol and Drug Foundation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence-based information on alcohol and other drugs. • Includes comprehensive Drug Facts pages, harm reduction information, information for family and friends, ADF Library, translated materials, webpages on topical AOD issues and where/how to access help and support.
<p>Talk about it – A guide to having open conversations about alcohol and other drugs with young people</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed to help parents and carers talk to their children about alcohol and other drugs. • Explores how to have these conversations with young children through to teens, why young people might use alcohol and other drugs, and how to recognise when a young person may need help.
<p>Text the Effects</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anonymous SMS service that provides confidential info about the effects of drugs and harm reduction information in a quick and easy way. • Simply text the name of the drug you want to know more about for an immediate answer – anywhere, anytime.
<p>Alcohol, Other Drugs and Mental Health Needs in Young People</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written resource exploring the relationship between AOD use and mental health in young people.
<p>Positive Choices</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drug and alcohol information designed for teachers/schools, parents/families, students, culturally and linguistically diverse people, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. • Includes drug facts pages, webinars and resources on how to have the AOD conversation with young people.

References

1. Lancaster K, Ritter A, Matthew-Simmons F. Young people's opinions on alcohol and other drugs issues 2013 [06.04.2023]. Available from: <https://ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/newsevents/events/RP27-young-peoples-opinions.pdf>.
2. Sanci L, Webb M, Hocking J. Risk-taking behaviour in adolescents. Australian Journal for General Practitioners [Internet]. 2018 [06.04.2023]; 47:[829-34 pp.]. Available from: <https://adf.on.worldcat.org/oclc/7984731362>.
3. Crane P, Buckley J, Francis C. Youth alcohol and drug good practice guide 1: A framework for youth alcohol and other drug practice. Brisbane: Dovetail; 2012 [06.04.2023]. Available from: https://www.dovetail.org.au/media/1186/dovetail_gpg_1_framework-for-youth-aod-practice.pdf.
4. Currie C, Zanotti C, Morgan A, Currie D, De Looze M, Roberts C, et al. Social determinants of health and well-being among young people: Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study: international report from the 2009/2010 survey, 2012 [cited [06.04.2023]:[271 p.]. Available from: https://www.academia.edu/18146377/Social_determinants_of_health_and_well_being_among_young_people?auto=citations&from=cover_page.
5. Stone AL, Becker LG, Huber AM, Catalano RF. Review of risk and protective factors of substance use and problem use in emerging adulthood. Addictive Behaviors [Internet]. 2012 [06.04.2023]; 37(7):[747-75 pp.]. Available from: <https://adf.on.worldcat.org/oclc/5901966411>.
6. Tsantefski M, Gruenert S, Campbell L. Working with substance-affected parents and their children : a guide for human service workers. [S.l.]: Routledge; 2020 [06.04.2023]. Available from: <https://adf.on.worldcat.org/oclc/1237350992>.
7. National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA). Why do adolescents take drugs? 2014 [11.04.2023]. Available from: <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/principles-adolescent-substance-use-disorder-treatment-research-based-guide/frequently-asked-questions/why-do-adolescents-take-drugs>.
8. Crane P, Francis C, Buckley J. Youth alcohol and drug practice guide 3: Practice strategies and interventions [Dovetail Good Practice Guides]: Dovetail; 2013 [06.04.2023]. Available from: https://www.dovetail.org.au/media/1188/dovetail_gpg_3_practice-strategies-and-interventions.pdf.
9. Black Dog Institute. Depression in adolescents and young people: Black Dog Institute; 2020 [11.04.2023]. Available from: <https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Depression-in-adolescents.pdf>.
10. Boys A, Marsden J, Strang J. Understanding reasons for drug use amongst young people: a functional perspective. Health Education Research [Internet]. 2001 [06.04.2023]; 16(4):[457-69 pp.]. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1093/her/16.4.457>.
11. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2019, Canberra: AIHW; 2020 [11.04.2023]. Available from: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/illegal-use-of-drugs/national-drug-strategy-household-survey-2019/contents/summary>.
12. Reardon T, Harvey K, Baranowska M, O'Brien D, Smith L, Creswell C. What do parents perceive are the barriers and facilitators to accessing psychological treatment for mental health problems in children and adolescents? A systematic review of qualitative and quantitative studies. European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry [Internet]. 2017 [11.04.2023]; 26(6):[623-47 pp.]. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-016-0930-6>.
13. Salaheddin K, Mason B. Identifying barriers to mental health help-seeking among young adults in the UK: a cross-sectional survey. Br J Gen Pract [Internet]. 2016 Oct [11.04.2023]; 66(651):[e686-92 pp.]. Available from: <https://adf.on.worldcat.org/oclc/6838531206>.
14. Aguirre Velasco A, Cruz ISS, Billings J, Jimenez M, Rowe S. What are the barriers, facilitators and interventions targeting help-seeking behaviours for common mental health problems in adolescents? A systematic review. BMC Psychiatry [Internet]. 2020 [11.04.2023]; 20(1):[293 p.]. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-020-02659-0>.
15. Department of Health. National Drug Strategy 2017-2026 Canberra: Department of Health; 2017 [11.04.2023]. Available from: <https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/national-drug-strategy-2017-2026.pdf>.
16. The Centre for Youth AOD Practice Development. Youth AOD Toolbox - Interventions with young people in the 'pre-contemplation' stage [11.04.2023]. Available from: <https://www.youthaodtoolbox.org.au/1-interventions-young-people-pre-contemplation-stage>.
17. Chi FW, Sterling S, Weisner C. Adolescents with Co-Occurring Substance Use and Mental Conditions in a Private Managed Care Health Plan: Prevalence, Patient Characteristics and Treatment Initiation and Engagement. The American Journal on Addictions [Internet]. 2006 [11.04.2023]; 15(s1):[s67-s79 pp.]. Available from: <https://adf.on.worldcat.org/oclc/110623998>.
18. Alcohol and Drug Foundation. The Power of Words: Having alcohol and other drug conversations: A practical guide: Alcohol and Drug Foundation; 2019 [11.04.2023]. Available from: https://cdn.adf.org.au/media/documents/The_Power_of_Words-Practical_Guide.pdf.
19. Victoria State Government. Information for Parents and Carers: Doctors in Secondary Schools 2017 [01.02.2023]. Available from: [https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/programs/health/Consent%20and%20confidentiality%20-%20Parent%20information%20sheet%20\(Revised%20-%20May%202017\).pdf](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/programs/health/Consent%20and%20confidentiality%20-%20Parent%20information%20sheet%20(Revised%20-%20May%202017).pdf).

Read more evidence articles on this topic in the ADF Library



**Alcohol
and Drug
Foundation**

The Alcohol and Drug Foundation is Australia's leading source of alcohol and other drugs (AOD) information.

Find up-to-date information, articles and resources and access the Drug Information Directory.

Visit adf.org.au or call 1300 85 85 84