

## Smoking - how to discourage your children

Fifty-seven per cent of Victorian adult smokers commenced smoking between the ages of 15 to 19 years. Smoking is an addiction that causes or contributes to a wide range of diseases including cancers, heart disease and emphysema. The best protection against smoking-related illnesses is never to smoke in the first place.

However, children entering their teenage years are experimental, curious and vulnerable to peer pressure. Whether your child becomes a smoker or not is ultimately their decision.

It is not always possible for parents to prevent their child from trying cigarettes, but the use of various strategies can reduce the likelihood of a child wanting to smoke or becoming a regular smoker.

### Children and smoking

Selected Australian statistics include:

- Around one tenth of school students have tried smoking by age 12.
- About two per cent of 12 year olds are current smokers (defined as having smoked in the week before the survey).
- By the time they are 17 years old, around 46 per cent of school students have tried smoking and 14 per cent are current smokers.
- Smoking becomes more common as students progress through school.
- Around 112,000 boys and girls at school aged 12 to 17 years are current smokers. If they were all to continue to smoke, it is estimated that around 56,000 would die prematurely from smoking.

### Why children smoke

Some of the reasons why your child may try smoking cigarettes include:

- Peer bonding and the desire to fit in with friends
- To copy parents or older brothers or sisters who smoke
- The wish to assert their growing independence
- The desire to appear more grown up and sophisticated
- Curiosity
- To imitate actors or models with appealing images in movies or magazines.

### Be a good role model

If you don't want your child to smoke, it is important to set a good example by being a non-smoker yourself. Research shows that children are less likely to smoke if their primary role models are non-smokers.

If you have found quitting difficult and are still a smoker, share your experiences with your child. For example, tell them how demoralising it feels to be hooked on smoking when you don't want to be, or how much money you wish you hadn't wasted on cigarettes over the years. Let them see they can learn a valuable lesson from your mistake.

Ask your children for their support during your next quit attempt. If your child can witness how tough quitting cigarettes can be, they may want to steer clear of smoking completely.

## Take a stand against smoking

Other suggestions to reinforce the non-smoking message include:

- Don't permit anyone to smoke in your home.
- Don't send your child to buy cigarettes for you or anyone else.
- Encourage sport and physical activity for all family members.
- Discuss the issue of smoking with your child when seeing other people smoke.
- Don't let your child light a cigarette for you or anyone else.
- If there are adult smokers in the house, make sure they keep their cigarettes where your child cannot access them.

## Educate your child

Symptoms of many smoking-related illnesses tend to develop in middle or later life. Trying to explain the long-term risks of smoking to a child or teenager may not have much of an impact, since 20 or 30 years or more into the future is an unimaginable eternity to them. Mention these long-term risks, but try to emphasise the immediate risks to their health and wellbeing.

Suggestions of immediate risks include:

- Reduced fitness levels
- Nasty smelling breath
- Stained teeth and fingers
- Unattractive to non-smoking peers
- Wasting money that could be used for clothes, CDs or other items
- The difficulty of stopping smoking once symptoms of addiction to nicotine appear. Many young people develop symptoms even if they don't smoke every day, and for some, symptoms can develop within days to weeks of starting to smoke.

## What to do if your child is already smoking

If your child is already smoking, or if you suspect they may be, try to avoid angry confrontations. Threats and bullying rarely work. Instead, attempt a reasonable 'adult-to-adult' conversational tone. Find out what they find appealing about cigarettes. For example, peer pressure is important. Don't try to force your child to stop seeing their friends who smoke.

You could try expressing your disapproval about smoking, while allowing your child to indulge in other conformist behaviours such as buying the same style of clothes as their friends. Alternatively, help your child to question the value of always following the crowd. Use this as an opportunity to encourage your child to think and act independently.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Quitline Tel. 13 7848 (13 QUIT)

## Things to remember

- Research shows that children are less likely to smoke if their primary role models – their parents – are non-smokers.
- If you have found quitting difficult and are still a smoker, share your experiences with your child and help them learn from your mistake.
- Emphasise the immediate risks of smoking to your child's health and wellbeing, such as bad breath and less money in their pocket.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Quit

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