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## Smoking - how to discourage your children

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### Summary

- Research shows that children are less likely to smoke if their primary role models – for example, their parents – do not smoke.
  - If you have found quitting difficult and still smoke, 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.
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The average age that young people in Australia start smoking is around 16 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 chooses to smoke regularly or not is influenced by a range of factors. 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 and doing so regularly.

### Why some children smoke

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

- peer bonding and the desire to fit in with friends
- copying 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, video games or social media.

While most forms of tobacco advertising have been banned, children are increasingly exposed to tobacco advertising and branding through the internet and social media, including Facebook and YouTube. In an Australian survey, younger children, girls, children from poorer backgrounds and children who have never smoked were more likely to report seeing tobacco promotions online.

Some groups of children are more at risk of smoking than others. These groups include children who experience depression, anxiety or emotional distress, children with mental health or behavioural problems, and children who have certain temperaments including poor self-control, rebelliousness, or who are prone to sensation seeking and risk taking.

### Be a good role model by not smoking

If you don't want your child to smoke, set a good example by not smoking yourself. Research shows that children are less likely to smoke if their primary role models do not smoke.

If you have found quitting difficult and still smoke, 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 children 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 you see 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 about smoking

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, as 20 or 30 years or more into the future is an unimaginable time 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
- being unattractive to non-smoking peers
- wasting money that could be used for clothes, music or other items
- the difficulty of stopping smoking once symptoms of addiction to nicotine appear.

Many young people develop symptoms of addiction 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 already smokes

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.

As teens experiencing stress, anxiety and depression are more at risk of smoking, encouraging a more holistic approach to health and wellbeing may also help. For example, having a good sleep routine, a healthy diet, doing exercise they enjoy, engaging in programs that support mental health such as mindfulness meditation, and other strategies that reduce anxiety and depression may help.

Read more about general issues facing [teenagers](#) and teenage health.

If your child wants to stop smoking, but is finding it hard, help is available. Quitline specialists know how to talk about smoking with young people and support them to quit.

Children aged 12 to 17 years may use a nicotine replacement therapy product to help them quit, but it's strongly recommended that they speak to their doctor or other trained health professional about it first.

## Children and smoking

Smoking becomes more common as students progress through school. One in eighteen school students

(approximately 5.5 per cent) have tried smoking by age 12, and this rises to one in seven by age 14 (approximately 14 per cent).

By the time they are 17 years old, around 40 per cent of school students have tried smoking and 12 per cent are 'current smokers' (defined as having smoked in the week before the survey).

#### **Where to get help**

- Your **GP (doctor)**
- **Quitline** Tel. **13 7848**

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