

Everyone is NOT doing it: How schools and parents should talk about vaping

April 5 2023, by Murooj Yousef, James Durl and Timo Dietrich



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

We work at Griffith University's [Blurred Minds](#) initiative. The program uses games to educate Australian high school students about alcohol, drugs and vaping. As part of our research, schools frequently tell us they do not have the tools and strategies to deal with the vaping crisis. In previous years, schools were most likely to seek our help for alcohol or

cannabis. Now, it is for vaping.

According to a 2022 study, [32% of New South Wales teenagers](#) aged between 14 and 17 years have tried vaping at least once. A 2017 [national study](#) found [13% of 12 to 17-year-olds](#) had tried it.

Unfortunately, our survey research also shows vaping is common among teenagers. But it also tell us young people understand it is unsafe and unhealthy. This suggests there are genuine opportunities for schools—and parents—to intervene and help young people avoid the serious harms associated with vaping.

What is vaping and why is it so dangerous?

E-cigarettes or "vapes" are battery-powered devices that resemble metal pens, USBs, watches, or other small box-like objects. Cartridges of vape liquids or "juices" are heated and converted into vapor, which the user inhales along with harmful artificial flavorings and chemicals and other potential contaminants from the manufacturing process or the device.

A single vape can contain as much nicotine as [ten packets of cigarettes](#).

Research shows vaping can cause [lung injury](#), [cardiovascular disease](#), [respiratory infections](#), other [serious, negative effects](#) including on brain development and the immune system. Not only can vaping lead to long-term addiction, but it is also associated with [other health](#) risks such as seizures, acute nicotine toxicity and burns.

What schools tell us

There are many reasons a teenager may vape. Most commonly, curiosity or [peer pressure](#) lead to their first experience. As researchers, we have

heard stories of young students trying vapes because they "taste like bubble gum", have "colorful designs" and "smell nice".

In 2022, we talked to almost 400 schools around Australia about their issues with vaping, alcohol and other drugs. Principals on the Gold Coast alone reported hundreds of thousands of missed [school](#) days and an increase in expulsions due to vaping.

We have heard of schools locking up toilets to avoid having a place for students to vape. But this only sees addicted students miss school to find somewhere else to vape. We also have heard from students being home schooled so they can continue to vape.

Schools know they have an important role to play in reducing the practice, but say punitive approaches are not helping students quit the habit.

What students say: Our research

Last year, we surveyed 2,777 students with an average age of 14 to help understand their attitudes towards vaping, alcohol and drugs. We found:

- Vaping is common among young people. 27% of students had vaped at least once before, 37% of this group said they do it several times a day
- But young people know it is not good for them. More than 96% said they believe vaping is unsafe (this includes 85% who said it was "totally unsafe"). More than 96% said they do not think vaping is healthy (this includes 89% who said they "totally disagreed" it was healthy)
- Students believe a lot more teenagers are [vaping](#) than there

actually are. Presented with the statement, "most Australian teenagers vape," more than 60% agreed

- Peer pressure is a factor. Respondents said they would find it harder not to vape around friends. More than 17% said they are "unsure about their ability to resist a vape" when alone, compared to 24% when with friends.

'I don't want your germs': How to talk about vaping

Going forward there are many strategies teachers and schools can use to empower their students not to vape. These include:

- Challenging the idea "everyone is doing it". Our research suggests young people think more people vape than actually vape. If they are concerned about fitting in, we need to give them the facts
- Empowering [young people](#) to know they can refuse to vape. This includes ways of saying no without being singled out. Examples of what students could say include, "I don't want to waste my money", "I've seen those explode," "I have asthma", "I don't want your germs," or "Have you heard what kind of horrible things is in those?"
- Understanding the impact on their health. This will enable them to make accurate choices about their well-being, rather than for what they think others want from them
- Don't preach. [Our research](#) shows teachers are seeing much better engagement when they use tools that include games, quizzes, videos and different media elements rather than a

lecture. If you are a teacher and looking for ways to engage your students, our researchers have developed [free games](#) and a [free online vaping module](#).

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