



Drug and alcohol support for young people

A Parent's Guide to Supporting Young People: Understanding Drugs.



@sthelensypdaat

ST HELENS
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Who Are We?

We are a team of professionals working together to support young people who use substances and are at risk of harming themselves or others. Our team collaborates with services like healthcare professionals (0-19 Service and Change Grow Live), counsellors (Barnardos), educators, youth justice workers, and the police to ensure that every young person's needs are met.

We offer flexible support at our offices in Lord Street, St Helens, or a location that suits the young person, such as their home, school, or a community venue. Our service is based on consent, and all work remains confidential unless we have safeguarding concerns. In such cases, we will discuss the situation with the young person and their parents or carers.

Common Concerns From Parents

"I'm worried my child might try drugs, but I can't watch them all the time."

"Our family doesn't have problems like that. Why would my child even take drugs?"

I found something suspicious in their room. How do I know if it's a drug?"

"Talking about drugs might make them curious. Isn't it better to avoid the topic?"

It's natural to feel uncertain or worried. This guide aims to address these concerns and provide tools to start meaningful conversations with your child.

Drugs and Young People

Contrary to common belief, most young people don't use drugs. Those who do often experiment briefly and don't continue. Only a small percentage develop long-term issues as they grow older.

What do we mean by “drugs?”

For the purposes of this guide, “drugs” include illegal substances (e.g. heroin, cocaine, cannabis), volatile substances (e.g. gases, glues, aerosols), and prescription medications misused recreationally.

Why Do Young People Try Drugs?

Young people may experiment with drugs for various reasons, including:

- **Curiosity or Peer Influence:** To fit in with friends or appear more grown-up.
- **Recreational Use:** To relax, feel more confident, or enjoy short-term effects.
- **Coping Mechanism:** To escape difficult emotions or memories, especially after trauma.

One of the biggest risks to anyone taking drugs is not knowing what is contained in the drug. Different powders or pills may look the same, but you can never be 100% certain what is in them or what the effect of taking them will be.



Talking To Your Child About Drugs

Start Early: Even young children might have questions about drugs. Use age-appropriate language and reliable facts.

Be Honest: Share your views and the risks associated with drug use in a calm, factual way. Your child is more likely to listen if they feel respected.

Find the Right Moment: Choose a relaxed setting for these conversations, like during a walk or after a relevant TV show.

Don't show anger or panic. Instead, focus on understanding and supporting them.

As children get older, they may be less likely to talk openly about things with their parents. Keep communication channels open by taking an interest in what they are learning at school. Make it clear that their safety and wellbeing are important to you.



In the Dark, or “In the Know?”

If your child does come into contact with drugs, your influence can mean they make healthy choices. If you make sure you know the facts, you can talk openly about the risks.

It's never too late to get clued up! Try the 'True' or 'False' quiz below:

	TRUE	FALSE
A If you're going to buy drugs, it's best to buy from someone you know so that you know what you're taking.		
B If you stick to drugs you've taken before, you're safe, because you know how you react to them.		
C It's hard to know the strength or purity of a drug - this can lead to accidental overdose.		
D It can be dangerous to mix different drugs - this includes mixing drugs and drinking alcohol.		
E Drug use is a “slippery slope”. You can soon end up using drugs like heroin if you start smoking weed.		
F If you give drugs to friends or other people, you can be charged with supplying, which can carry a hefty fine or prison sentence dependent on the drug or how much you have.		
G People with a conviction for drug offences can have problems getting visas to travel to some foreign countries or could affect getting certain jobs.		
H Volatile substances (including gases, glues and aerosols) can cause instant death.		

How Did You Score?

A, B and E are false:

- Even if you think you trust your dealer, you can never be sure what you're taking. Different batches can contain different substances.
- Drugs can effect everyone differently - you can never be sure how a drug will affect you - even if you have taken it before.
- All drugs have the potential to cause harm. Although some people who develop problems with drugs may start using things like cannabis, most young people do not become adults with long term drug problems.

C,D,F,G and H are true:

- Young people who may be admitted to hospital due to drug overdoses have usually been admitted because they have taken the drugs in combination with other drugs or alcohol or taken too much at one time.
- There have been some dangerous trends on social media - such as "chroming" or "huffing" aerosols, which some young people may have participated in (thinking they are safe), but there is no safe use of volatile substances.
- Drug convictions can have serious consequences if people want to travel, live or work in certain countries or do certain jobs.

The New Drugs Market

Social media platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok are now being used to advertise and sell drugs. Dealers often use emojis and encrypted messages to target young people, making this activity hard to trace. Help your child understand these risks and stay vigilant about their online activities.

Here are some examples of emojis being used to represent drugs use:

Cannabis 🌿 😴 😂 🌴 🍃 🍀 🍁 🌬️ 🌱 🔥 🚬 🧘

Cocaine 🤪 📢 ☁️ ❄️ 🧊 🔑

Ketamine 📢 😵 🔑 🐎 🐾

MDMA/ Ecstasy 🥰 😜 ❤️ ✖️ 💊 🍬 ⚡️ 🧨

Magic Mushrooms 🍄

Dealer Advertising 🤑 📦 👑 📡 💵

High Potency 🚀 💣 💥

Delivery 🚲 📦 📱 📦 ✂️

Large Batch 🍪 🥧



Nitazenes

Nitazenes are a new and emerging substance which are being used in a wide range of drugs including opiates (heroin), cocaine, ecstasy and ketamine. These are referred to as NSOs (Novel Substitute Opioids) and are extremely potent: a very small amount can lead to a fatality. Health officials are warning that there has never been a more dangerous time for people who use drugs. This is because you can never fully know what you are using, what is in the product and whether the drugs have been contaminated with other substances.

People who choose to use drugs are advised to never use them on their own, to use very small amounts to “test” the effects and to seek medical advice immediately if they experience any unexpected or unwanted effects. It is expected that the use of nitazenes will be used more widespread over the next few years.



Top Tips for Talking

- Before you start a conversation, make sure you know the facts about drugs.
- Think about how you might react if your child discloses that they have used drugs – it's best to stay calm and don't panic!
- If you're unsure whether or not your child is being truthful, don't directly accuse them – you will lose their trust and they will be less likely to open up to you.
- Pick a good time to talk with your child when you both have plenty of time to talk openly.
- If you know your child is using drugs, don't confront them whilst they are under the influence.
- Using drug-related stories in the media or on television, can be a good way to start a conversation - "Giving up Weed" C4 Documentary, "Drugs Map of Britain" BBC Series, "Running the Lines" (YouTube) are just some examples.
- Listen with respect to what your child has to say, and don't lose your temper with your child's opinions.
- Let them know you're there for them and that they can talk to you about drugs.
- Don't forget to set boundaries - make it clear what your house rules are and what you will and won't accept.

For more information on different drugs, use the FRANK website: **www.talktofrank.com**

To discuss any concerns you may have about your child, you can also contact us here at **YPDAAT** (ypdaat@sthelens.gov.uk), speak to your GP or school nurse or talk to a supportive contact in your child's school or college.

The Risks

Health

All drugs can affect a young person's health in different ways. Serious health issues resulting from drugs use can include liver, kidney and heart problems. Drugs like ketamine can cause severe problems to bladder, bowel and even the brain even after short term use - having life-long consequences or causing early loss of life.

There are also immediate risks, such as an overdose. Perfectly fit young people have died from a heart attack or seizure after taking drugs - especially from abusing volatile substances (like gases, glues and aerosols), ecstasy or cocaine.

Drug use can also affect mental health. If a young person is already at risk of experiencing mental health problems, the mental health risks from drug use may be increased. Some drugs can cause feelings of paranoia or bring about symptoms of psychosis.

Young people can feel depressed, self harm or have suicidal ideations during periods of drug use or after periods of drug use, during a "comedown".

Financial

Drugs aren't necessarily expensive. Ketamine can be bought for less than the price of a cinema ticket and some young people may find household products such as glue and aerosols at home.

However, frequent or problematic drug use can get people in debt and being in debt to a dealer poses serious risks to young people. Dealers will often charge interest on that debt and may physically harm the child. They may force someone to do other things to pay back the debt, such as sell drugs to other people. Young people who say they don't pay for their drugs and get them for free are at serious risk of being exploited – often being controlled to sell drugs, commit crimes or be forced to be involved in dangerous activities to pay for their own drug use.

Social

For some people, drugs are a way of bonding with friends and people they meet. However, it can start to take over their life and damage their relationships.

There is also the risk that friendships based around drug use will make it more difficult for some people to stop taking drugs.

Personal safety

If your child is “out of control” or having a bad experience on drugs, they are more vulnerable to assault

When they take drugs, young people are more likely to make decisions they'll regret—such as having unprotected sex. Taking drugs also increases the risk of being involved in an accident.

Signs of drug use:

There are no hard and fast rules to tell if your child is using drugs, but there may be some indicators to look out for, including:

- changes in diet
- weight loss
- lacking in personal hygiene
- losing interest in previous hobbies, sports etc
- refusing to go to school or getting into trouble at school
- unusual smells such as cannabis or frequent use of aerosols such as deodorants etc
- staying out late or going missing
- falling out with old friends and joining new groups of friends
- low mood or depression or anxiety
- argumentative

- secretive
- spending less time with family members
- demanding money
- money or items going missing from home
- red eyes, runny nose, nose bleeds
- frequent use of the toilet or bedwetting
- abdominal pains, blood in their urine

The above signs are not exclusive to drugs use, so it's important to speak to your child and seek medical advice if there any sudden changes in their health.

Exploitation

If your child also starts acquiring other items such as mobile phones, bikes, new clothing or devices or money - they may be at risk from exploitation. Young people will not identify themselves as victims of exploitation, often seeing people who provide them with such things as their friends. They may also be too worried or frightened to talk about this.

If your child is under the influence of a substance and you are worried about their immediate safety then seek medical advice or call 999 for an ambulance.

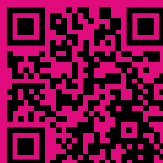


Who Can Help?

If you are concerned about your child, please contact us:

YPDAAT

Email: ypdaat@sthelens.gov.uk
Visit: www.sthelens.gov.uk/ypdaat
Phone: **01744 675 605**



You can also contact:

0-19 School Nurse Service: 01744 411277
Your GP Surgery
Your child's school or college staff

Mental Health Services

- Barnardos: 01744 753238
- Children and Adolescent 24/7 Mental Health Crisis Response Team: CALL: 01744 415 640
- YMCA Listening Service: 01744 415 260

Child Welfare

- Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH): 01744 676767
- Emergency Duty Team (out of hours emergencies from 5pm): 0345 050 0148
- You can also find information about children's services in St Helens by visiting the St Helens Family Hubs website: <https://sthelensfamilyhub.sthelens.gov.uk>

Online support

YOUNG MINDS Parent Helpline 0808 802 5544 youngminds.org.uk,
KOOOTH.Com, THE MIX Online chat service (4-11PM) TXT support
via SHOUT 85258 (24/7) giveusashout.org

If you have any information or concerns in relation to crime or criminal activity within your community then please report anonymously using the Merseyside Police online "Tell Us" form- <https://www.merseyside.police.uk/tua/tell-us-about/> or report directly to CRIMESTOPPERS 0800 555 111





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