

Parental monitoring and its impact on alcohol and other drug use

Parents and carers can play a significant role in preventing, or at the very least delaying, adolescent alcohol and other drug use. Factors that have been shown to have a positive impact on protecting children from alcohol and other drug related harm include:

- **an authoritative parenting style that combines strictness and warmth**
- **appropriate parental monitoring of a child's activities**

Monitoring a child involves parents being aware of a range of aspects of their child's life including what they are doing; who they are with and where they are.

As well as knowing the 'what', 'who with' and 'where', parental monitoring also includes:

- **the expectations parents have regarding their teen's behaviour** and what rules need to be made
- **the actions parents take to keep track** of their teen and how the rules are enforced
- **the ways parents respond when their teen breaks the rules** and what the consequences are and how they are enforced

Monitoring should be age-appropriate and should change as the child gets older to match their stage of development. Appropriate levels of behavioural control need to be applied that supports trusting and non-intrusive parent-child communication. This encourages disclosure by the child, thus ensuring that parents are able to access accurate monitoring information.

Although parents sometimes doubt their influence, particularly during the teenage years, research indicates that parents play an important role in preventing, or at the very least, delaying adolescent alcohol and other drug use.

Parents can protect against adolescent substance use when parenting skills, parent-adolescent communication and levels of warmth and affection are high. Attachment to the family and low parental conflict are also considered to be protective factors that may contribute to teens choosing not to use drugs.

There are two main protective factors, however, that are supported by research evidence and they are as follows:

- **an authoritative parenting style that combines strictness and warmth**
- **appropriate parental monitoring of a child's activities**

For information on parenting style, please see the fact sheet 'Parenting style and its impact on alcohol and other drug use'.

Parental monitoring

When parents are aware of a range of aspects of their child's life —what they are doing, who they are with, and where they are, we say they are **monitoring** their child.

As well as knowing the 'what', 'who with' and 'where', parental monitoring also includes:

- **the expectations parents have regarding their teen's behaviour** – what rules are being made?
- **the actions parents take to keep track of their teen** – how are the rules being enforced, i.e., how do you know that the rules are not being broken?
- **the ways parents respond when their teen breaks the rules** – what are the consequences and are they being enforced?

Adolescents whose parents use effective monitoring practices are less likely to make decisions that can negatively impact a wide range of health behaviours, such as having sex at an early age; smoking cigarettes; drinking alcohol and being physically aggressive or skipping school. The effect of this supervision has been found to persist as young

Parental monitoring and its impact on alcohol and other drug use

people age and has been found to be effective in both single and two-parent households.

Studies have also found that parental monitoring can not only prevent future drug use, but can also reduce current drug use in some cases. Put simply, the greater the perceived parental control, the lower the adolescent's alcohol and other drug use.

As children develop into teenagers, parents often view them as more independent and less in need of monitoring. At the same time, adolescents may not be willing to share as much information as they once did and there is often increasing conflict as the relationship between parent and child changes. But consistent monitoring throughout the teen years is critical as teens' desire for independence increases the likelihood of risky behaviour. Studies confirm that parents and the family remain important through this time, although their role often changes to a less directive way of parental monitoring.

Friendship choices

Parental monitoring not only directly decreases the likelihood of substance use, it can also affect a child's friendship choices. Research has shown that teens who perceive that their parents provide substantial support are less likely to have with friends who use drugs, and those who do have friends who use drugs are less likely to start using drugs themselves.

Parental knowledge

A crucial element of monitoring is 'parental knowledge', which represents what the parent actually knows versus what information parents are trying to get. Monitoring represents the seeking of information, while knowledge deals with the possession of the information, i.e., asking a child where they are going and who they will be with may not actually result in accurate information and, as such, parents are encouraged to do more than simply access information from their child.

Age-appropriate monitoring

Monitoring needs to be age-appropriate and change over the course of the child's life to match their stage of development. Appropriate levels of behavioural control need to be applied that supports trusting and non-intrusive parent-child communication. This encourages disclosure by the child, thus ensuring that parents are able to access accurate monitoring information.