

Responding to substance use in schools (including vapes and other nicotine products)

Guidance for education authorities and schools



Fairness

Equality

Respect

Inclusion



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

Ministerial Foreword



Every child and young person in Scotland deserves to learn in an environment where they feel safe, supported and able to flourish. Positive relationships, clear expectations and a strong sense of belonging are fundamental to wellbeing and to engagement with learning.

Most children and young people do not use substances. However, evidence from our Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research 2023 highlighted emerging concerns, particularly in relation to vaping, alongside increased reporting of alcohol and other substance use in school. Where substance use does occur, it can cause harm, undermine wellbeing and learning, and affect the wider school community.

Substance use among children and young people is shaped by a wide range of social, family and community factors, and cannot be understood or addressed in isolation. It is therefore important to recognise substance use as a wider public health issue, requiring coordinated action across education, health, families, communities and services.

Schools play an important role within this broader public health approach. Where concerns do arise, schools and their partners are often well placed to identify issues early and to respond sensitively and effectively, while maintaining safe, consistent and inclusive learning environments for all children and young people.

This guidance builds on Scotland's long-standing commitment to children's rights, wellbeing and inclusion. It is firmly grounded in the UNCRC and Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC). It recognises that behaviour is communication, and that substance use may signal wider distress, unmet need or vulnerability in a child or young person's life.

The purpose of this guidance is to support education authorities and schools to develop clear, fair and proportionate local policies for preventing and responding to substance use. It emphasises a whole-school, trauma-informed and non-stigmatising approach that prioritises young people's wellbeing and safety, while setting clear expectations that substances are not appropriate in school environments. It also recognises the importance of partnership – with children and young people, parents and carers, health services, and community partners – as part of a shared, preventative approach to supporting healthy choices and long-term wellbeing.

Education authorities have a key role in providing leadership, consistency and support to schools, while allowing the flexibility needed to respond to local needs and circumstances. Schools, in turn, are best placed to apply this guidance in ways that reflect their values, communities and existing relationships and behaviour frameworks.

Taken together, this guidance complements the wider suite of national relationships and behaviour policy and guidance, supporting inclusive environments that promote safety, respect and wellbeing, and helping to shape positive outcomes for all of Scotland's children and young people.

Jenny Gilruth MSP

Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills

Purpose

The purpose of this guidance is to support education authorities and schools¹ to develop or update local policies and responses to substance use among children and young people in schools. The guidance covers all substances including alcohol, vapes and other nicotine products, and illegal drugs, which will collectively be referred to as ‘substances’ throughout.

This guidance is for education authorities, health boards, public schools, school nurses and partners working with schools. Independent and grant-aided schools may also find it of interest.

The guidance relates only to substance use by children and young people. Education authorities and schools should have separate policies for responding to substance use by staff, parents or visitors.

This guidance does not apply to the lawful use of prescribed medications within schools. The management of prescription medicines are covered in [Supporting children and young people with healthcare needs in schools: guidance](#).

This guidance does, however, apply where prescription medications are used by children or young people for whom the medication has not been prescribed.

In this guidance, a distinction is made between illegal substances and age-restricted substances². Expectations in this guidance apply to both categories, recognising the differing legal frameworks and potential harms.

Education authorities are responsible for ensuring that their policies and practices take full account of the relevant legal requirements. This guidance is non-statutory and aims to support education authorities to make decisions.

Context

Most children and young people do not use substances. However, vaping was identified as an emerging issue in the [Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research \(2023\) \(BISSR\)](#). In addition, BISSR found reports suggesting that the number of pupils being under the influence of drugs or alcohol has risen since 2016. This is important as substance use can have an impact on wellbeing and learning, and can increase the risk of disruptive behaviour.

Substance use by children and young people in schools can also impact the sense of safety, belonging and wellbeing of other pupils and staff, particularly where use occurs in shared spaces such as toilets or social areas. Schools have a responsibility to maintain an environment that supports all pupils to feel safe and ready to learn.

¹ Throughout this guidance the term ‘school’ (as defined in section 135(1) of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980) means an institution for the provision of primary or secondary education or both primary and secondary education being a public school, a grant-aided school or an independent school, and includes a nursery school and a special school; and the expression ‘school’ where used without qualification includes any such school or all such schools as the context may require.

² Illegal substances refers to drugs controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. Age-restricted substances refer to products which are legal but prohibited for sale to children and young people under 18 (including alcohol, tobacco and vaping products).

Research³ indicates that alcohol remains the most commonly used substance among adolescents; vaping is now more common than cigarette smoking; and cannabis use in Scotland is above international averages. Further information on the evidence base can be found in the accompanying impact assessments for this guidance.

Substance use among children and young people is shaped by a wide range of social, family and community factors. Support for young people's substance use when attending school therefore sits within a broader public health approach to learning, as set out within [Scotland's Population Health Framework 2025-2035](#), which focuses on improving health and wellbeing, education, and justice outcomes among our school-aged population.

In addition, while schools serve important functions in supporting children and young people, their role in preventing and responding to substance use forms only part of a broader preventative strategy that requires action at individual, community and structural levels.⁴ Taking a broader public health approach, coordinated action across families, community partners and local services is essential to support positive long-term health outcomes and to help young people develop the knowledge, confidence and decision-making skills that enable healthy choices.

Preventing and responding effectively to substance use supports the wellbeing, safety and reputation of the school and its community. In alignment with the wider approach to relationships and behaviour policy in Scottish schools, this guidance is set in the context of promoting positive relationships and behaviour. While education authorities, schools and their partners cannot address every wider social or community driver, they play a crucial role in early intervention, prevention and support.

Understanding substance use in children and young people

While experimentation and risk-taking may be a part of adolescent development, substance use may also signal wider wellbeing or safeguarding concerns in a child or young person's life, including unmet needs, concerns at home or in the community, or difficulties with relationships, mental health or learning.

Children and young people's substance use may come to a school's attention in a range of ways, such as arriving under the influence of a substance, using substances during the school day, avoiding particular spaces or peers, or changes in attendance, engagement or behaviour. Use may also occur in specific environments, such as toilets or unsupervised areas of the school.

In developing their policy for responding to a child or young person's substance use, schools should give consideration to the following:

- some children or young people may use substances as a coping mechanism to manage distress, anxiety or other harmful behaviours (such as self-harm);
- experiences of substance use and related harm can vary across different groups of children and young people, including those who face inequality or marginalisation. Schools should be mindful of how factors such as discrimination, community context, stigma or barriers to support may influence a child or young person's experience and needs;

³ [Vaping and smoking among Scottish adolescents: ASH SmokeFree GB Youth survey 2025 results – gov.scot.](#)

⁴ [Consensus approach on prevention of substance use harm among children and young people.](#)

- substance use can carry addiction risks;
- substance use can impact other children and young people who may experience distress or anxiety in response to observing substance use among peers;
- substance use may be an early indicator of childhood trauma and other adverse experiences;
- absence or changes in attendance patterns may be an early indicator of substance or alcohol use. Staff should be alert to emerging patterns and respond through existing wellbeing and Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) processes. Responses should prioritise support and take account of any increased risk to a child or young person's wellbeing if they are disengaged from school. See [Included, engaged and involved part 1: promoting and managing school attendance](#) and [Included, engaged and involved part 2: preventing and managing school exclusions](#) for further guidance

Key principles

The following principles, aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and GIRFEC, are for education authorities and schools to consider when developing policies and responding to substance use in schools:

- substances covered by this guidance are not suitable for children and young people and should not be used in schools. Scientific evidence shows that an alcohol-free childhood is the healthiest and best option. Public Health Scotland advises e-cigarettes (vapes) are not suitable for children. Article 33 of the UNCRC provides that appropriate measures are to be taken to protect children and young people from the illicit use of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances, which includes measures to prevent the use of children and young people in the illicit production and trafficking of such substances;
- responses should balance the child or young person's wellbeing, safety and behaviour. Schools should prioritise understanding individual pupil needs, including social or family circumstances, while ensuring that expectations around substance-related behaviour are clear, fair, and consistently⁵ applied, in line with the [fostering a positive, inclusive and safe school environment guidance](#);
- a collective community response is key: children and young people, staff, parents⁶, visitors and partners should work together to uphold a safe and healthy learning environment. Developing the local policy in partnership with the whole school community is a key part of achieving this. Co-production strengthens engagement, ownership and shared commitment across children and young people, staff and parents;

⁵ Consistency in approach does not mean the same response should be used for every child or young person in every situation. There should be consistent expectations and boundaries, however, the response when expectations are not met may be different to reflect a child or young person's specific needs and circumstances. ([fostering a positive, inclusive and safe school environment guidance, 2025](#)).

⁶ Throughout this guidance the term 'parent' (as defined in section 135(1) of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980) includes guardian and any person who is liable to maintain or has parental responsibilities within the meaning of section 1(3) of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 in relation to, or has care of a child or young person.

- schools may also wish to consider the social norms promoted through school events and the wider school community. Approaches such as alcohol-free or tobacco-free school events can support consistent messaging to children and young people, promote inclusivity for all families, including those affected by addiction, and contribute to a healthier school culture;
- schools should remain alert to any wider safety risks to children and young people arising from substance use or related activity within the school community, and should involve Police Scotland where appropriate;
- parents should be recognised as essential partners in promoting a safe, healthy school environment. Education authorities must endeavor to ensure that schools are health-promoting⁷

Policy development

Substance use policies should be developed within a clear education authority framework. Education authorities are to provide strategic oversight and guidance, helping to ensure consistency across schools. Schools should develop their own policies in line with the education authority policy.

Features of a substance use policy should fall within three broad categories:

- setting expectations on substance use;
- whole-school approaches to prevention;
- supporting wellbeing and managing incidents

The considerations in relation to each of these as part of policy development are set out below.

1. Setting expectations on substance use

Schools should:

- set clear expectations around substance use for all children and young people, for both illegal and age-restricted substances, linked to school values;
- outline the roles of parents and staff in reinforcing and supporting these expectations;
- set out the actions the school will take when expectations are not met, consistent with the wider relationships and behaviour policy framework and the [fostering a positive, inclusive and safe environment guidance](#);
- consider how these expectations apply on the school premises, in school grounds, and at any school-organised events or trips;
- recognise that although a small number of older pupils (for example, S6 pupils aged 18) may legally purchase and use certain age-restricted substances such as alcohol, tobacco or vapes, these substances remain inappropriate within school. Policies should make clear that expectations apply consistently to all pupils while on school grounds or taking part in school activities, regardless of age;

⁷ As set out in section 2A of the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000.

- develop their policies in collaboration with their school community and engage with children and young people, parents and staff. This may be done through school councils, where available. Effective implementation relies on the support and cooperation of all members of a school community;
- communicate policy clearly with pupils, staff and parents in accessible formats and in child- and parent-friendly language. Information should be easy to find with minimal jargon so that expectations are understood and applied consistently across the whole school community

2. Whole-school approaches to prevention

Substance use prevention is enhanced by a whole-school approach that reinforces children and young people's wellbeing, dignity and participation, and promotes good decision-making, resilience and positive relationships. A school's policy regarding substance use should have regard to a number of elements of prevention.

Substance use education

Schools should:

- plan learning around substance use, usually through health and wellbeing curriculum delivery and in the context of both personal development, including building coping skills, and the life and ethos of the school;
- work meaningfully with children and young people to shape substance use learning, ensuring their views, experiences and questions inform what is taught and how it is delivered, in ways that are safe, age-appropriate, non-judgmental and supportive;
- ensure that learning on substance use is evidence-based. When selecting materials (including any guest speakers), schools should consider their source and avoid resources that may not provide balanced or health-aligned information;
- embed citizenship education that promotes responsibility, respect, builds resilience and focuses on positive decision-making skills;
- consider learning that considers marketing/targeting tactics and commercial interests of relevant industries, rather than a focus only on individual behaviour

The Curriculum Improvement Cycle and a national review of teaching resources on substance use is underway and will provide updated materials.

School estate

Schools should be alert to in-school absence and consider how the school's physical environment and layout may contribute to risks or prevention of substance use on the school estate.

Where particular hotspots are identified (for example, toilets or secluded areas), schools should take appropriate preventative and supportive measures while ensuring the safety, dignity and privacy of children and young people who require to use the facility or space. Further guidance can be found in [Included, engaged and involved part 1: promoting and managing school attendance](#).

Wider community approaches

Schools should:

- work closely with partners, including school nurses⁸, school counsellors, drug and alcohol services, youth workers and Police Scotland to provide consistent messages about substance use. Outreach or community services may help reach young people who are disengaged or whose school attendance is irregular;
- be aware of wider local authority activity that supports prevention, including licensing measures or local restrictions around schools. Aligning school messaging with local authority and public health communications, and maintaining clear communication channels with NHS, social work and youth/community partners, supports consistent and coordinated prevention

3. Supporting wellbeing and managing incidents

Schools should ensure their substance use policy makes clear how the wellbeing needs of children and young people will be identified and supported. Substance use may indicate underlying distress, unmet needs or wider safeguarding concerns. Responses should be grounded in GIRFEC principles and a trauma-informed, nurturing and non-stigmatising approach.

Policies should set out:

- clear arrangements for escalation of concerns and the involvement of partners as appropriate, in line with the GIRFEC process and aligned to the school's staged intervention processes, for example, where responses should involve a Principal Teacher or a member of the senior leadership team, or might involve Educational Psychology or outside agencies, such as social work or Police Scotland. Schools should seek advice from their education authority where appropriate;
- how staff will record concerns or incidents involving substance use, and how these will be followed up appropriately;
- arrangements for engaging with local partners and requesting assistance from/ referring to specialist support services, including school counselling, school nursing and external agencies, to ensure coordinated, holistic support for children, young people and families;
- a trauma-informed approach to supporting any child or young person involved in substance use;
- how parents will be informed, including when and how communication will take place;
- how risk assessment processes will be used to prevent and respond to substance-related safety concerns, consistent with [national risk assessment guidance for schools](#);
- processes for managing confiscated substances (see [Legal Considerations](#) section for more information);

⁸ Substance use is one of the ten priority areas for school nurses: [Specialist school nursing: priority areas and pathways – gov.scot](#).

- arrangements for regularly reviewing the policy to ensure the commitment of new staff, pupils and parents and to reflect learning from implementation, changes in law, wellbeing and safeguarding needs and emerging substances. Reviews should also consider the policy's impact, informed by feedback from the school community

Responses and support

Policies should also set out how schools will respond to substance use in ways that are proportionate, consistent and aimed at supporting wellbeing and learning. Responses should align with the school/education authority relationships and behaviour policy and national guidance on [Fostering a positive, inclusive and safe school environment](#). In determining an appropriate response, schools should balance the wellbeing, safety and behaviour of the child or young person, their peers and staff. Responses should take account of any additional support needs and consider whether behaviours linked to substance use may reflect sensory, communication or regulation needs, for example.

Examples of responses may include:

- discussion with the child or young person and, where appropriate, parents;
- confiscation of the substance (with permission – see [Legal Considerations](#) section);
- pastoral or peer support;
- encouragement to quit with appropriate support offered;
- referral to school counselling, nursing or external services;
- signposting to youth or community support or third sector;
- consideration of the physical environment and any adjustments that could be made;
- consideration of whether a risk assessment is required, in line with national and local guidance, particularly where substance use poses potential safety risks to others;
- restorative conversations when appropriate

Responding in the moment

Where a child or young person appears to be under the influence of a substance, their wellbeing and safety, and that of the wider school, should be the immediate priority.

Where immediate medical attention is required, first aid should be provided and 999 called.

Where immediate first aid is not required but the child or young person is unable to participate safely in learning, a member of the senior leadership team should contact their parent(s) to collect them so that they can be monitored at home and, if required, access appropriate medical support. Decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis, prioritising the child or young person's safety and wellbeing.

Where the substance is an illegal substance, Police Scotland should be contacted.

Schools should also recognise that some children and young people may be affected by a family member's substance use. In line with GIRFEC and local child protection procedures, including [national child protection guidance](#), schools should respond sensitively to any concerns, consider whether the child or young person may have additional support needs, and work with partners to safeguard their wellbeing.

If staff have concerns that a child or young person is at risk of being exploited or trafficked in the drug market, they are to respond in line with national and local child protection policies.

Following an incident concerning substance use, schools should consider whether the child or young person requires additional coordinated support. This may include updating existing wellbeing assessments, developing a Child's Plan where multi-agency support is required, or identifying additional support needs. Planning should focus on proactive support, safety and the child or young person's ongoing engagement in learning.

Consistent with the national approach in '[Included, Engaged and Involved: Part 2: preventing and managing school exclusions](#)', exclusion should only be used as a last resort when all reasonable preventative and supportive measures have been exhausted. Any reduction in time in school should be minimal, proportionate and focused on supporting the child or young person's wellbeing, engagement in learning and positive outcomes.

Staff should have access to professional learning around trauma-informed, non-stigmatising approaches and having sensitive conversations with children and young people about substance use. Schools should also consider the [standards of support for young people accessing support or treatment for alcohol or drugs](#) which set out what young people should expect when seeking help.

Parental engagement

Parents are essential partners in prevention and early intervention. As partners in education, parents play a key role in supporting the school to address any emerging concerns around substance use. A Parent Council may provide support in developing and reviewing policies, information and signposting for support.

Engagement should be proactive, respectful and solution-focused, keeping the child or young person's wellbeing central while applying the school's policy consistently.

Schools should:

- contact parents early when substance use concerns arise, agree practical supports, and keep communication channels open;
- explain clearly the health, safety and (where relevant) legal reasons for school expectations around substance use;
- record discussions and actions, review progress, and follow local safeguarding procedures if there are concerns about a child or young person's safety and wellbeing;
- ensure communication is accessible and culturally appropriate, offering flexible options (in person/phone/digital)

Where parents permit or tolerate their child's substance use, schools should restate expectations and focus on harm reduction and supports. Where differences arise between the school and parents regarding next steps, early, open and sensitive dialogue should be maintained. Schools are to work with parents to clarify respective roles and responsibilities, ensuring that all decisions prioritise the child's best interests, health, safety, rights and overall wellbeing. If disagreements remain unresolved, schools should seek advice from the relevant education authority officers or partners as required.

Legal considerations

Schools may wish to consider the following legal considerations when responding to substance use by children and young people in schools. Schools and education authorities should seek their own legal advice where appropriate:

- school staff do not have the statutory right to search pupils. Staff may ask a child or young person to show the contents of their pockets or bags but should not undertake a search or attempt to investigate whether they are in possession of an illegal or age-restricted substance, as this could raise safeguarding, privacy and potentially other legal issues;
- if staff suspect a pupil is in possession of an illegal substance the school should contact Police Scotland. Some products may look legal but could contain illegal substances;
- in cases where an illegal substance is suspected if the child or young person does not agree to show the contents of their pockets or bag, they should be asked to remain where they are and Police Scotland should be contacted;
- if an age-restricted substance is suspected and the child or young person does not agree to show the contents of their pockets or bag, staff should respond in line with the school's relationships and behaviour policy – for example, by contacting parents and providing the necessary support;
- confiscated substances or devices (including vapes and lithium batteries, for example) should be stored and disposed of safely in line with local health and safety procedures, and where appropriate, in consultation with Police Scotland

Recording and Monitoring

Schools should record substance-related incidents in line with local reporting procedures to identify patterns or hotspots, to inform prevention and support planning.

Education authorities should use information from schools, alongside data from wider partners, to support oversight, identify emerging or shared risks, and inform prevention and support activity.

Appendix 1

Policies

[Getting it right for every child \(GIRFEC\) – gov.scot](#)

[Behaviour in Scottish schools: research report 2023 – gov.scot](#)

[Included, engaged and involved part 1: promoting and managing school attendance – gov.scot](#)

[Included, engaged and involved part 2: preventing and managing school exclusions – gov.scot](#)

[Fostering a positive, inclusive and safe school environment](#)

[Schools – violent, aggressive and dangerous behaviour: risk assessment guidance – gov.scot](#)

[Whole school approach framework to mental health and wellbeing – gov.scot](#)

[Specialist school nursing: priority areas and pathways – gov.scot](#)

[Preventing Harm, Promoting Recovery: Scotland’s Alcohol & Drugs Strategic Plan Alcohol and Drugs Strategic Plan](#)

[National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021 – updated 2023 – gov.scot](#)

[Relationships and behaviour in schools: national action plan 2024 to 2027 – gov.scot](#)

Appendix 2

Further resources

Alcohol and drug support

Support services for children and young people

Below are some areas that can provide support for drugs and alcohol issues that children and young people may be facing. Please note within each local area there will be other services that can provide support.

- [With You](#)
- [Crew 2000 Scotland](#)
- [Know the score](#)
- [Honest information about drugs – FRANK](#)
- [Drug and Alcohol Advice for Young People – The Mix](#)
- [Safe4Me](#)

Support for family members

Families can be a key partner in providing support and improved outcomes as outlined in our drug and alcohol family's framework⁹ and vision and blueprint for holistic, whole family support¹⁰. In some cases, family members may need support themselves to address their own needs.

- [Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs](#) are an organisation that can provide support for family members.
- For young people who are affected by alcohol and drugs within their family [Routes – Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs](#) may be able to provide support.

Tobacco and nicotine products, including vapes

Information and support for children, young people and families

Childline: [Vaping, its effects and how to quit | Childline](#), free confidential helpline: 0800 1111

[NHS Inform](#) – evidence-based information on vaping, tobacco, alcohol and drugs

Quit Your Way Scotland, Phone: 0800 84 84 84 or [Online chat with an adviser](#)

Parent Club – [advice for parents on talking to children about vaping](#) and [Information and facts about vaping](#)

Young Scot [Truth About E-cigarettes – Young Scot](#)

⁹ [Families Affected by Drug and Alcohol Use in Scotland: A Framework for Holistic Whole Family Approaches and Family Inclusive Practice \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

¹⁰ [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Children and Families Collective Leadership Group – holistic family support: vision and blueprint for change – gov.scot](#)

To ensure a non-stigmatising approach to substance use, helpful wording and principles can be found in: [NHS-Borders-Language-Matters-Sept-2024.pdf](#).

[Healthy and Smoke Free Scotland](#)

Crew - [THC Vapes and Psychoactive Drugs](#)

Health/NHS Support

School Nursing Service - brief interventions and safeguarding support for children and young people concerned about substance use

Local GPs - can provide advice and referral to appropriate services

NHS Inform

Additional advice can be found at [Vaping addiction soon takes hold | NHS inform](#) and at [Fast Forward](#)

Mental health and wellbeing support

- [Who to Contact for Mental Health Support - Young Scot](#)
- [Breathing Space](#), Phone: [0800 83 85 87](#)
- [NHS 24](#), Phone: 111
- [Mind To Mind](#)

Local frameworks and resources

- [Substance Misuse | Renfrewshire Health and Wellbeing](#)
- [Resources for Alcohol and Drugs - NHSGGC](#)
- [Substance Misuse Framework Tayside](#)
- [Aberdeen City substance misuse education guidance](#)
- [Highland Substance Awareness Prevention and Education Framework 2023](#)
- [Resources - Scottish Drugs Forum](#)



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St Andrew's House
Edinburgh
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