Starting the conversation when you are concerned about drug use

1. Prepare for the conversation

If you are concerned that your child might be using drugs, keeping the lines of communication open is important. This will help to keep them connected to you, even at the most challenging of times. Starting the conversation about a young person’s drug use can be tricky. Having that initial conversation may not meet all of your expectations and resolve everything, but it can be a critical first step leading to ongoing conversations in which you are considered a trusted confidant. Here are some tips to getting started:

- **Gather information** to make sure you understand what drug your child may be using and its effects. Relate this information to what you are observing in your loved one, and see whether it applies to their situation. Have a clear idea of what it is that concerns you about their drug use.

- **Arrange a suitable time to talk** where you will have some privacy and won’t be interrupted. You might have to do this in a location that your loved one feels comfortable in, rather than expecting them to come to where you feel comfortable. For some people, talking whilst looking into each other’s faces can feel very confronting, so think about whether you can walk and talk, talk whilst you are driving, or sit side-by side.

- **Only start the conversation with someone when they are not currently under the influence of drugs.** If this is difficult, try to pick a time when they seem
less intoxicated than others (for example, in the morning). Avoid starting conversations when they are on their way out of the house.

- It is OK to ask directly about drug use; but don’t make assumptions that they are using drugs, how often, or why they use it. Use this as an opportunity to find out what it’s like in the life of your loved one. Aim to make the conversation relaxed and give the person a chance to express their views.

To start the conversation, you might say:

- “I’ve noticed a few changes in you lately, and I’m a bit worried that you aren’t all that happy…what’s going on in your life at the moment?”
- “How are your friends going? …I haven’t seen them in a while”
- “I haven’t heard you talking much about school at the moment…how’s that going?”

- Have some specific examples ready that demonstrate the behaviours that you are worried about, in case you get a “like what?” in response. Choose examples that also demonstrate your suspicions about their drug use.

2. Express concerns but avoid being judgemental or confrontational

- The conversation will be most effective if you avoid judging or lecturing. This can be extremely difficult! But you are more likely to get through to the young person if you have a two-way conversation rather than lecture them. Be aware of the language you are using. Don’t label the person an “addict” or other negative terms as this is only going to make them feel worse and less likely to open up to you. Let them know you care about them. People are more likely to listen if they feel valued and respected.

- Try to use statements which include “I” as this doesn’t put the blame on them. Instead of saying “You make me feel worried when you use this drug” say something like “I feel worried about your drug use”.

- Listen to the young person and express your concerns in a supportive and non-confrontational manner. Evidence suggests that “motivational” conversations are most helpful. Asking the person to talk about what they “like” about using drugs can be a good way to open up the dialogue. Remember, as devastating as drug use can be, it is performing a function for the person using the drug (see Why do young people use drugs?).

- Understanding the young person’s reasons for using will be important to determine how they can still get their need met, without using the drug. After speaking about sought after effects of the drug, you can change tact by saying “Are there any things you don’t like so much about using the drug?” It is useful to open a conversation where the young person can voice some of the negatives they have noticed related to drug use. Watch Making the Link for video demonstrations of how to have motivating conversations with young people.

3. Communicate that change is possible, but can take some time

- Let them know you are available to talk in the future. Adjust any expectation that this first conversation will cover all of the above points, or give you the opportunity to air all of your concerns. This first conversation can serve as an important first step in an ongoing conversation about drug use, and it is important to make sure the person knows that you are keeping the door open for future discussions. Ask “permission” to check in with the person again in a week, or a fortnight, etc., to see how they are going.

- Be prepared for the possibility that the young person may not believe their drug use is dangerous. They may become upset or angered by the things you are saying. At this point, it is important to stay on the topic of their drug use and related behaviours, rather than bring up other aspects of their character or any disagreements you may have had in the past. A negative reaction does not mean the conversation was futile – it may take some time for them to process what has been said.

- Communicate that there is effective help available to help people reduce or stop their drug use, and that you will support them to find and access the right services when they are ready. If the young person does not want to change, encourage them to learn how to reduce their risk of harm until they’re ready to stop using the drug.

- Recovery is often a long and difficult process. It would be unreasonable to expect changes to the person’s behaviour straight away. However, you have taken the important first step by starting a conversation with them.

4. Look after yourself

Supporting a loved one can be extremely challenging, and it is important to look after yourself too.

- Remember you can’t force the person to change. Only they can take steps to cut down or stop their use.

- Take time out for your own needs and activities.

- Get support by speaking to trusted friends and attending events or support groups in your community.

5. Getting support
It can be difficult to make the decision to seek help, but in most cases the sooner you reach out for support, the better. You may want to discuss your concerns with a friend that you can trust. Your General Practitioner or family doctor can also be a good starting point – they can confidentially discuss your concerns with you and refer you on to other services if you need additional support. Visit Where to get help for a full list of support services.

Evidence Base
This factsheet was developed following expert review at the NHMRC Centre of Research Excellence in Mental Health and Substance Use and National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW.