

How young people see vaping

What research is telling us



Executive summary

The increasing popularity of vaping among young people is alarming. Youth vaping has more than doubled in the last 5 years; a quarter of 11-15-year-olds used a vape last year and 1 in 4 children reported trying vaping in 2023.¹

While vapes may be tobacco-free, they deliver nicotine and harmful chemicals that can cause lasting damage - from lung problems and obesity to addiction and even genetic changes that could affect future generations²⁻⁴

The fruity flavours, bright colours, and child-facing branding make vaping attractive to young people, along with the ease and cheapness of disposable vapes.

Young people must be active partners in addressing the vaping crisis - they don't want to be "the experiment" for understanding vaping's health impacts, as powerfully shown through the LifeLab Youth Panel's work on co-creating vaping education resources

Recommendations



Involve young people in creating policy solutions to the issues facing their generation, it is not good enough for adults to recognise the problems they have facilitated and to assume they know the solutions. In order for change to happen, we have to understand **the world as young people see it**.



Apply the precautionary principle to public health measures such as the use of vaping to reduce harm from tobacco smoke.⁵ This asserts that the burden of proof for potentially harmful actions by industry or government rests on the **assurance of safety** and that when there is **credible evidence for the potential of serious harm**, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason to postpone measures to prevent harm.⁶



Commit to prescription-only nicotine-containing vape products being available to help people stop smoking as implemented in Australia in 2021⁷



Context

The Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) and the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) have run various calls for evidence and consultations to tackle vaping. Following election of the new government, the original Tobacco and Vapes Bill⁸ was revised and brought to Parliament in Nov 2024⁹. This bill will ban the sale of all vaping and nicotine products to under 18s along with banning advertising and sponsorship of vapes. The bill will also allow regulation of flavours, packaging and display of vapes to reduce appeal to children. Accompanying this bill, legislation brought forward by

Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) will ban the sale and supply of disposable vapes.¹⁰ The proposed changes are anticipated to begin in June 2025.

It is currently illegal for young people under the age of 18 to purchase and use vapes, so whilst welcoming this new legislation, there is a clear need for education and engagement for children and young people to accompany these changes. To ensure effectiveness, materials should be co-created with young people to ensure engagement, relevance and appropriateness.

What is the LifeLab Youth Panel?

The Youth Panel recognises the value and contribution of young people by allowing them to actively create and implement solutions that could improve their own health and that of their peers. This panel focused on the role vaping plays in their lives and developed resources to support schools and youth organisations to engage and educate young people about the dangers.

Research aim

To co-create an evidence-based and lived experience informed education resource.

To do this, the research asked:



- What are the motivations of young people to experiment with vaping?
- What engagement levers will be most effective for education resources?
- What could be the long-term consequences of vaping for young people?

Research findings

The research revealed the growing concerns that young people, teachers and parents have about vaping and how we should be engaging young people about the scale of the problem.

Motivations of young people to experiment with vaping

Manufacturers' marketing tactics

The appealing colours, unique and attractive packaging and youth-friendly flavours make them appealing to young people. Flavours were highlighted, as popular varieties mimic sweet flavours or fruit flavours (giving a sense of healthiness). Vape devices are also named to resemble confectionery, e.g. 'Elf Bar'.

"They put it in shop windows all colourful; this flavour, that flavour, unicorns, milkshakes; what do you expect kids to do?"

Ease of purchase

Due to widespread availability, prominent, colourful displays, and low cost, vapes are easily obtainable.

"Teenagers go out to town on the weekends, and there's a vape shop right there and it's got the smells, it's got the lights; you go around the corner, "Oh look, two more vape shops"; you go around the corner, "Oh look, they have this free"; they're everywhere and every shop displays the vapes right at the window."

Normalised social activity

Young people didn't feel there was peer pressure but rather that vaping was simply becoming normalised.

"I believe that children look at vaping as a social activity just like adults have a couple of pints at the pub over a conversation, children will vape in the toilets or on the bus whilst talking about teachers and subjects."

Perceptions of harm

Young people felt the lack of knowledge of long-term effects led peers to dismiss the unquantifiable risk.

"Vapes such as "elf bars" come in bright colours and flavours that children love, so although children are aware of what could happen, they still find vapes really attractive and want to use them because they are this new thing that everyone is using, so the consequences do not seem as much of a big deal."

Vaping as a gateway to smoking

Young people commented their peers weren't vaping to stop smoking, but had directly started vaping. Worryingly, young people identified that vaping was a gateway to smoking for some of their peers.



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Effective engagement levers

Communication is key

We know simply giving information is not sufficient for behaviour change and this is particularly true for young people. We need to listen to, understand and build on teenagers' values¹¹ – they highlighted the impact on the environment. Co-creating with young people to ensure relevance and authenticity. Messaging and making any sessions interactive and not simply fact-giving.

“Things that we can actually see, not just words, because we don't really listen to what we're being just told; if we actually see examples of what happens later on in life or what could be the damages of it, it could be more effective.”

Long-term consequences

The health of future generations depends on the actions and decisions made by young people today – long before they are parents. Smoking at a young age has been shown to cause epigenetic changes in children, with increased risk of asthma, obesity and wheezing.¹²

“We cannot simply wait for a couple of generations to pass, to learn more about the long-term consequences of vaping for young people, as we did with smoking. The effects of nicotine on epigenetic markers are clear – this may create an inherited impact that is passed on to future generations – we are at risk of not only letting down this generation of young people but also their children.”

The Research Team

LifeLab is an innovative evidence-based educational intervention which shows adolescents first-hand how their diets and lifestyles lay the foundations for a healthy life, and how their own health is linked to the health of children they may themselves have in the future. The team is made up of:

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