

**Workforce
Briefing**

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Volatile Substance Abuse

Volatile Substance Abuse

Introduction

Volatile substance abuse (VSA) is the deliberate inhalation of volatile substances such as lighter fuel, glue or aerosols. It accounts for more deaths in young people aged 10-16 in England and Wales than do illegal drugs.

Data from the annual Department of Health survey *Drug use, smoking and drinking among young people in England and Wales* show that volatile substance abuse (VSA) among young people aged 11-15 remained stable at around 7% between 2001 and 2005, although data from 2006 show a slight decrease to 5.1% (www.ic.nhs.uk/statistics-and-data-collections/health-and-lifestyles/drug-misuse/smoking-drinking-and-drug-use-among-young-people-in-england-in-2006--release-of-headline-figures).

VSA can create a powerful hallucinogenic effect within an extremely short time, which, combined with the comparatively ready availability and low price of volatile substances, contributes to the prevalence of their use among this age group being second only to cannabis.

This briefing paper outlines the competencies required to work with VSA and provides details of training resources available to those with a professional responsibility for the welfare of young people.

We acknowledge the contribution of Simon Boyton, Step Ahead and Barbara Skinner, SOLVE IT, in the preparation of this briefing.

Competencies needed to work with VSA

To work in the field of substance misuse, any individual should be able to demonstrate a number of core competencies. For those working with adults, the core competencies are:

- communication skills;
- health and safety;
- continuing professional development; and
- principles of care.

For those working with children and young people, the core competencies are:

- child and young person development;
- safeguarding children and promoting welfare;
- effective communication and engagement;
- supporting transitions;
- multi-agency working; and
- sharing information.

In addition to these core competencies, specific skills and knowledge are required to work with VSA. The skills and knowledge set out in the sections below have been categorised according to the Health Advisory Services treatment tiers:

- **Tier 1** - universal, generic and primary services providing drug education, information, identification and referral;
- **Tier 2** - services with some specific drug and alcohol knowledge, providing drug prevention and targeted education, advice and general counselling services;
- **Tier 3** - specialist drug services that work with complex cases (often multi-agency), usually offering a care plan;
- **Tier 4** - services providing very specialised and intensive forms of intervention for drug users with complex care needs.

Specialist drug and alcohol workers would be expected to demonstrate skills across Tiers 1 to 3. Those working in Tier 2 services would require skills appropriate to Tiers 1 and 2, and those with only occasional exposure to VSA would require basic skills and knowledge at Tier 1.

Skills and knowledge specific to VSA

Tier 1

- Knowledge of the basic signs and symptoms of VSA
- Knowledge to refer individuals with VSA problems to the appropriate channels
- To have a basic awareness of VSA and the ability to perform an appropriate assessment
- To have an understanding of the risks of VSA to the family and community
- Awareness of the correct emergency action to be taken in the event of a VSA-related incident
- To be able to identify VSA products and their methods of use

Tier 2

- Ability to take a more detailed VSA history, identify risks and apply knowledge of VSA at a level appropriate to Tier 2 case work
- Knowledge of sudden death related to VSA
- The ability to distinguish and work with issues around harm minimisation and abstinence when dealing with VSA
- A more detailed understanding of the signs and symptoms of use and a good working knowledge of the VSA referral network at Tier 3, with the ability to make referrals to appropriate agencies
- Ability to apply knowledge and communication skills to limit experimentation and further misuse
- An understanding of the risks to family and community and when and how to act
- An understanding of the risk factors specific to particular client groups, such as school excludees
- An informed understanding of the varied individual reasons for VSA
- An understanding of the availability and trigger factors involved in persistent use and how this related to legislation, e.g. the legality and ready availability of the substances used
- An understanding of the health and safety issues associated with working with volatile substance misusers and the ability to avoid dangerous situations

Tier 3

- Ability to take a full VSA history and to identify and act on risk factors
- Knowledge, skill and ability to perform a full VSA assessment
- Ability to apply the skills and knowledge necessary to work with VSA at Tier 3 in a one-to-one setting
- Excellent communication skills
- Ability to understand and deliver safe treatment within both a harm minimisation model and an abstinence model, and to understand the dangers of the harm minimisation model in relation to VSA
- A thorough understanding of the signs and symptoms of VSA to permit a distinction between chronic, acute and occasional VSA to be made
- Ability to understand, identify and diagnose the phases of VSA, including acute withdrawal
- Understanding of the symptomatology of chronic VSA and of the appropriate response to chronic VSA symptoms, including referral to professionals at Tiers 3 and 4, e.g. cardiology
- Ability to apply knowledge of VSA in order to limit experimentation and further misuse
- Knowledge and skill to respond to each referral as a crisis intervention
- Excellent communication skills to support Tiers 1 and 2 on a client-centred basis
- To have sufficient knowledge to deliver training to those at Tiers 1 and 2
- Advanced understanding of the complexity of triggers
- Advanced understanding of the risks to the family and community
- Skills to provide specialist family support on VSA
- Ability to perform an environmental diagnosis of risk, e.g. the petrol in machines used in prisons, where volatile substances are assumed not to be available
- A thorough understanding of the long-term consequences of VSA on health, crime, family, etc.
- An advanced knowledge of VSA legislation and its application

Specialist Tier 3 skills at Tier 1

Accident and Emergency services and paramedics must be aware of the role of adrenalin in VSA and its physiological implications.

Psychiatric liaison

By virtue of their expertise and role within the health service, psychiatric liaison staff should have VSA knowledge and skill as listed under Tier 2.

Training resources

SOLVE IT

Resources

SOLVE IT (www.solveitonline.co.uk) offers a range of general and targeted resources, which include:

- A one-hour presentation package for businesses, including Health and Safety obligations and specimen policy documents; and
- The *Development of a Life* skills workbook, which is a tool for those working with children and young people.

Training

SOLVE IT offers a DANOS-compliant four-week training module on VSA for professionals working with young people. Subjects studied include:

- Issues in relation to young people and VSA
- The prevalence of VSA
- Products abused and methods of abuse
- The effects and consequences of VSA
- The signs and symptoms of abuse
- Possible reasons for abuse
- Knowledge of emergency action
- Legislation in relation to VSA
- Harm minimisation
- Where to access support

Projects and services

1sttopshop aims to reduce the harm caused by VSA to the individual, their family and community by enabling those seeking help to access all the services they may require in one place. The 1sttopshop can provide the first contact with:

- SOLVE IT's family support and counselling service for volatile substance users, particularly young people, their family and community members, many of whom may be vulnerable;
- TIME 2 SOLVE IT, the UK's first VSA counselling and drop-in service for adults.
- education co-ordinators for primary and secondary schools;
- young people's outreach services for those who are vulnerable or at risk;
- training facilitators;
- National Development Officers; and
- support for professionals in relation to VSA.

Also available from SOLVE IT are:

- a workshop for retailers, which is usually undertaken in conjunction with Trading Standards;
- specific presentations for statutory agencies such as the fire services, police, health workers and teachers; and
- the annual VSA conference, which is intended for those working with young people and in the fields of drugs, health and justice.

Re-Solv

Resources

Re-Solv (www.re-solv.org) is a national charity dedicated to the prevention of solvent and volatile substance misuse and has a range of resources targeted at various sectors and groups:

- Education – teachers' packs include videos and DVDs such as *A Loaded Gun*, *Safe is Sound*, *Hazard Crew* and *Chicken*, which have been distributed to every secondary school in the UK.
- Retail – *A Loaded Gun* retail awareness campaign.
- Adults – leaflets aimed at raising awareness of VSA, including *A Bombshell?* and *The Greatest Danger for your Child is in your Home*.
- Professionals – training materials for professionals, such as the social services training pack.

All materials are available to order at www.re-solv.org/publications.asp.

Training

Re-Solv undertakes training for professionals from a wide range of services. Recent training events have been either multi-disciplinary or targeted at a single group, such as foster carers. More than 2,300 people have registered on Re-Solv's on-line training course, which provides a useful briefing for professionals who may come into contact with VSA. It is free of charge and has received external accreditation. Information is available at www.re-solv.org/training.asp.

Projects and services

- The VSA weblog provides an updatable source of current information for professionals. Information is sent by e-mail to all those registered for the service.
- The Youth Liaison Project aims to generate information about young people's attitudes, knowledge and behaviour in relation to VSA. The project will inform the development of resources for professionals and provide input into professional training sessions.

Other agencies and resources

Guidance on addressing VSA within the PSHE curriculum is available at www.teachernet.gov.uk/pshe/publishContent.cfm?sectionId=118&pageStart=1&subSectionId=270&subSubSectionId=283&contentId=235.

The Chantelle Bleau Memorial Fund (www.cbmf.co.uk), which is based in Bradford, offers a two-hour training course on VSA and has provided training to a number of statutory services and voluntary organisations in Yorkshire.

KFx offers a one-day course for professionals who may encounter clients with VSA problems. The course costs from £400 to £650 and further details are available at www.ixion.demon.co.uk/Course%20Outline%20VSA.htm.

Educari is an independent consultancy which conducts research into effective drug, alcohol, tobacco and health education for young people. Their work includes publications; website design and development; research, evaluation, policy analysis; and consultancy and training. Information on the organisation and the resources available are at www.educari.com.