



Re-Solv Guidance on VSA Policy for Schools

Volatile substance abuse (VSA) is the misuse of consumer products found in all our homes and high streets. Many people are either unaware that VSA exists or make the assumption that because these products are 'legal' they are 'safe'. In fact, volatile substances when inhaled can kill suddenly and unpredictably, and there is no way to avoid this risk.

What is 'VSA'?

A range of chemicals are described as 'volatile substances' because they readily evaporate at room temperature, giving off a 'sniffable' vapour. Volatile substance abuse or 'VSA' is when these substances are deliberately inhaled through the mouth and/or nose to achieve a change in mental state or 'high'. The most commonly misused products are butane gas from cigarette lighter refills, aerosols (such as deodorants or hair sprays), petrol and some glues.

VSA continues to be an issue for young people in the UK. Most recent statistics show that 3.5% of young people in England aged 11-15 have used volatile substances for the purposes of achieving a high in the last 12 months¹. For 11-13-year-olds volatile substances constitute the most misused drug. For 14 and 15-year-olds VSA is second only to cannabis¹.

8-10 young people die from the misuse of volatile substances every year across the UK. Over the last decade on record, 124 young people under the age of 18 have died from the abuse of these products².

Policy Considerations

It is essential that all schools have considered volatile substances under their current substance misuse policy. Further advice on how to write and implement a drug and alcohol policy can be found on MentorUK's website: <http://www.mentoruk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/12/Toolkit.pdf>

Butane cigarette lighter refills

The sale of this product is banned to under 18's in the UK under the The Cigarette Lighter Refill (Safety) Regulations 1999. Though banned, this product has still accounted for 52% of all deaths in under-18s (64 of 124 deaths) in the last decade on record².

This product should be included in any list of prohibited items. The legal status should allow for a no-tolerance position and the product should be confiscated and not returned.

Aerosols

When used for their intended purposes, aerosols are safe. They have been extensively tested for consumer safety. However, when misused aerosols can kill - In the last decade on record there were 76 deaths attributed to the abuse of aerosols. 48 of these deaths were in young people under the age of 18².

Within the category of aerosols, deodorants account for 71% of deaths (54 of 76 deaths), and air fresheners account for 13% of deaths (10 of 76 deaths)². The rest is made up of other aerosols such as hairsprays, fly sprays and cleaning products.

Schools need to consider the possibility of aerosol misuse and decide on a position that they are comfortable with. Things to consider might be that aerosols are limited to 1 per student, or that aerosols are to be kept in lockers when on school premises.

Other products

There is an extensive list of volatile substances that can be abused. In the UK the primary products are those listed above, though a school might also want to consider the misuse of petrol, nail varnish remover, 'poppers', nitrous oxide ('whippets'), computer duster sprays and some industrial strength glues. If you would like further advice, please contact us on the details below.

Schools might want to consider adding a line into their drug and alcohol misuse policy that effectively covers all volatile substances without naming specific products.

A school drug and alcohol policy is an essential tool for all education establishments and any well considered strategy will include VSA. The risk of ignoring volatile substances under any policy is the potential for a tragedy that reaches out beyond the school and into the community. Please consider the best way for your establishment to tackle this issue.

Re-Solv recommends that all schools educate their students about the dangers of VSA. If you would like further information on Re-Solv delivered VSA awareness sessions please contact us on the details below.

¹ *Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England in 2011*, NHS, 2012.

² All mortality statistics cited here are from *Trends in UK deaths associated with abuse of volatile substances, 1971-2009*, International Centre for Drug Policy (ICDP), St George's, University of London, UK, 2012.