



Factsheet – March 2025

Underage vaping

What is vaping?

Vaping is using an electronic or e-cigarette (a 'vape'). Vapes are filled with a liquid known as e-liquid, e-juice or vape juice. The vape heats the liquid until it becomes a vapour, which is then breathed in.

The liquid comes in a variety of 'flavours' that might appeal to children (e.g. berry, cola, mint).

E-cigarettes can be bought pre-filled with liquid. They can also be disposable or refillable, and some contain nicotine. You can also get nicotine-free vapes.

Vaping is relatively cheap compared to smoking, especially if using disposable e-cigarettes.

It's illegal to sell nicotine products to under-18s, or to supply nicotine vapes to under-18s.

Why do I need to be concerned?

Aside from the health and nicotine addiction risks, pupils may be at risk of consuming vape products containing other drugs such as:

- THC (the psychoactive ingredient in cannabis)
- Spice (a synthetic drug made to mimic cannabis)

As it's illegal for anyone under 18 to buy vapes, pupils may ask adults to buy vapes for them, or buy them directly from a dealer. These adults could coerce them into sexually abusive situations, or involve them in 'county lines' gangs – especially if the pupils become addicted to nicotine.

What to look out for

- Children who are struggling to concentrate
- Mood swings, frustration, anxiety and paranoia
- Coughing or signs of asthma that the pupil has suddenly developed
- Lingering, sweet smells in school or on pupils' clothing
- Cartridges, bottles and disposable vapes in bins
- Children hiding in school, or trying to sneak off-site

What to do

- Know our drugs policy, and our policy on searching and confiscating
- Speak to our designated safeguarding lead (DSL), or deputy, if you have any concerns about a pupil, and record your concerns

If you suspect that a pupil may have e-cigarettes on them

Follow your school's or organisations policy on searching and confiscating, making sure to put safeguarding first:

In advance, familiarise yourself with your school's searching and confiscation policy including e-cigarettes/vapes. Note that these are not automatically classified as 'prohibited items' that you can search for and confiscate under the [DfE's guidance on searching, screening and confiscation](#) and the Education Act 1996. If you want to search for e-cigarettes/vapes in your school, you must first list them as a banned item in your school policies.

Your behaviour policy should set out which items are banned or prohibited items, and therefore can be searched for.]

- Only the headteacher and members of staff authorised by the headteacher have the power to search a pupil for a prohibited or banned item, regardless of whether the pupil agrees. This is based on paragraph 10 of the DfE's [searching, screening and confiscation guidance](#).
- Assess how urgent the need for a search is and consider the risk to other pupils and staff
- Explain to the pupil why they're being searched, how and where it will take place, and seek the pupil's informed co-operation. Where possible, you should avoid presenting the idea that a pupil can be sanctioned for refusing to consent to a search, as this may imply that the pupil didn't freely consent
- You **must** have another staff member with you as a witness and the searcher **must** be the same sex as the pupil (unless you believe that there is risk of serious harm **and** it's not reasonably practicable for a member of staff who is the same sex as the pupil to do the search or for another member of staff to be present)
- Always make a detailed record of searches in our safeguarding reporting system
- Tell the DSL about any searches where you had reasonable grounds to suspect a pupil had a prohibited item. Involve the DSL immediately if you believe a search has revealed a safeguarding risk or the pupil requires support as a result of the search itself
- If you're not sure of the legal status of any drugs you find, treat them as controlled drugs. If it's definitely not a controlled drug, you can still confiscate it if you think it's harmful to good order and discipline in school
- If you find e-cigarettes or other vaping accessories (e.g. vape fluid):
- Don't return them to the pupil – either retain or dispose of them

If you think a pupil is under the influence in school

Think safeguarding and prioritise the safety of the pupil involved and the pupils around them

If you think they need medical help, seek it – from first aiders, the school nurse, 111 for non-emergencies, or 999 for emergencies

If you think the pupil is at risk of harm, tell the DSL immediately

Sources

With thanks to safeguarding expert Sara Alston for her help with this factsheet.

[Drugs: advice for schools, GOV.UK – DfE](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/drugs-advice-for-schools)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/drugs-advice-for-schools>

[Education Act 1996](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/56/section/550ZA)

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/56/section/550ZA>

[Keeping Children Safe in Education, GOV.UK – DfE](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-education--2)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-education--2>

[Searching, screening and confiscation in schools, GOV.UK – DfE](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/searching-screening-and-confiscation)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/searching-screening-and-confiscation>

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