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Ref:DM/SAH

26th September 2023

Dear Parent/Carer

Vapes and the Dangers for our Children

I am writing to you to share my concern about the issue of vapes and how they are significantly increasing the risks to our children.

The issue of vaping and its consequences has occupied a substantial proportion of my time in the last year. Part of that is the management of this issue amongst a large group of teenagers as schools are often at the sharp end of societal change. Equally, I have spent time working with other headteachers, to try to enlist much wider support for a change in the law.

It is with this in mind that I am writing to you. It is my intent to raise awareness to help your children to make sensible and informed decisions. In addition, we should be able to use our voice as a community to create the environment for change.

An article published by The Independent on 18 May this year highlighted startling statistics that you may have seen:

- Nationally, the number of children trying vaping has risen by 50% in the last year.
- Data from a recently released report shows a rise in experimental vaping among 11- to 17-year-olds, from 7.7% last year to 11.6% this year.

This increase is perhaps unsurprising given that the marketing of vapes has been directed specifically at young people. 'Bubble gum' flavoured vapes marketed on social media with cartoon characters are designed to appeal directly to children, not adults. This is not permitted with tobacco, but there appears much less regulation for vapes.

This rise in usage has generated three key areas of concern: health, safety and environmental. I will deal with each in turn.

Health

Although vaping was initially introduced as a means for people to give up smoking, the evidence around long-term health is unclear. Vapes are illegal to purchase under the age of 18 years old and the NHS does not recommend the use of vapes for children under this age.

A significant concern is associated with the level of nicotine in vapes and the issues for children who become highly addicted. The additional content of vapes is also raising health fears. A recent BBC investigation found that children could be inhaling more than twice the daily safe amount of lead and nine times the safe amount of nickel.

Many vapes are now being adapted and include the introduction of cannabis and other illegal substances. The message is much clearer. We cannot be certain about the content of vapes and should assume that the vast majority are highly harmful to young people.

Safety

A secondary aspect that you may not be aware of is the supply chain for young people, whether that be through purchasing at a shop or from those who are selling these without licence to do so. We are aware of reports of local shops selling vapes to those who are clearly school children. Whenever we receive this information, it is immediately passed to the police.

Furthermore, we have seen evidence supplied to us from Avon and Somerset police that suggests children as young as 8 years old are experimenting with vapes and there is increasing concern around criminal activity that creates business models to supply younger and younger children.

Vapes are acting as a gateway drug for criminal gangs who are looking to exploit young people.

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Environmental

The evidence is now extensive about the large environmental damage that disposable vapes are having. It has recently been reported that around 5 million disposable vapes are thrown away every week. This is much more likely amongst young people.

The vapes themselves contain lithium batteries. A Parliamentary report in 2022 estimated that 10 tonnes of lithium were being thrown away every year, equivalent to the batteries inside 1,200 electric vehicles.

Schools in Somerset are finding that students are flushing disposable vapes down toilets and a number have now had to engage in substantial cost to unblock drains as a consequence.

Moving Forwards

In the last decade, we have seen a very positive decline in smoking amongst young people. To achieve that, it took concerted efforts to change the marketing rules, limit the sale and distribution and take it out of common social situations. Vapes have been allowed to fill that void, but we should believe that the same change can be achieved with a coordinated effort.

I am therefore asking for your support, firstly, at a local level:

- Please talk with your children about the dangers of vaping and the possible health, safety and environmental implications. You may find this website helpful: <https://parents.actionforchildren.org.uk/behaviour/challenging-behaviour/im-worried-about-my-child-vaping>
- Please warn your children about buying, handling or accepting anything from others and the risks associated with this in relation to criminal activity.
- Please report any concerns you have relating to the illegal sale of vapes to Avon and Somerset police at <https://www.avonandsomerset.police.uk/report/>
- If you have concerns about your child using vapes, please talk with our pastoral team.

We can also influence change at a regional and national level by writing to our local politicians. A number of countries have now banned disposable vapes and such a move would make a significant difference here. Equally, marketing restrictions should be placed on all types of vapes so that they are not directed towards children.

Our local politicians for the school are as follows:

James Heapey, MP: james.heapey.mp@parliament.uk

Councillor Peter Clayton, peter.clayton@somerset.gov.uk

Councillor: John Cook-Woodman, john.cookwoodman@somerset.gov.uk

Councillor: Alistair Hendry alistair.hendry@somerset.gov.uk

Councillor Mike Murphy mike.murphy@somerset.gov.uk

School's Response

As a school we will maintain our robust line on vapes in school as part of our duty to keep students safe. Students have been informed that the possession, use, or dealing in vapes will result in suspension. In addition to this deterrent, we will:

- Continue to provide educational input into the dangers of the use of vapes through RSE lessons and assemblies.
- Work with young people and families to provide support and signpost external assistance wherever necessary, particularly where individuals are seeking to quit.
- Work with local and regional schools in sharing good practice and support effective safeguarding practices.

I have seen this community work collectively to achieve great things for our children. Our school is highly regarded for its cohesive strength and that has worked very well during difficult times, such as the pandemic. I believe that we can use that strength to create change where it is now needed to protect our young people.

Thank you for your continued support.

Yours faithfully



Dan Milford
Principal

Cc James Heapey MP, Cllr Peter Clayton, Cllr John Cook-Woodman, Cllr Alistair Hendry, Cllr Mike Murphy