

Teen caught vaping? For desperate parents, a supportive approach makes all the difference

Winning the war on youth vaping requires a 'safe harbour' where desperate parents can seek help without shame.

Teo Yik Ying

The first person to discover that a teenager is vaping in Singapore is usually not a police officer, but a parent or fellow student who finds vapes hidden in school bags, pencil cases or the bedroom.

The immediate reaction is often fear and uncertainty: Will seeking help get the teenager in trouble with the law, bringing punishment and stigma? And if the teenager is already addicted to nicotine, what can they do before things spiral further out of control?

For many years, Singapore's approach towards vaping was anchored primarily around deterrence: prohibit vaporisers early, enforce the law firmly, and prevent vaping from becoming socially normalised. But the country's updated Tobacco and Vaporisers Control Act, which came into force in May, also reflects an important evolution in strategy.

Singapore's war against vaping has entered a new phase. While enforcement against suppliers and traffickers remains critical, the changes reflect a growing recognition that youth addiction cannot be addressed through punishment alone.

STRONGER ENFORCEMENT STILL MATTERS

This shift is taking place against an increasingly worrying global backdrop. At the recent World Health Assembly that I attended, public health leaders and policymakers described remarkably similar concerns across Asia and Europe:

Flavoured vaporisers marketed aggressively through social media, children becoming addicted to nicotine at increasingly younger ages, schools struggling to keep pace with the concealability of modern vaping devices, and a growing body of evidence that vaping is not replacing nicotine addiction but expanding it.

Longitudinal studies from the United States, Europe and Australia consistently demonstrate that adolescents who vape are substantially more likely to subsequently smoke regular tobacco cigarettes. Public health practitioners globally are now confronting the troubling reality that vaping has amplified nicotine dependence among youth at a scale never previously seen.

At the assembly, I found myself repeatedly drawn into conversations about Singapore's heightened stance against vaping. Countries around the world clearly viewed Singapore as one of the few jurisdictions willing to address the problem decisively.

Our new legislative changes reflect this stance by doubling down on enforcement and deterrence. Harsher penalties have been introduced. Smuggling and distribution offences now carry significantly heavier fines and mandatory imprisonment for suppliers and traffickers – a recognition that today's vaping ecosystem is organised, transnational and highly profitable for those willing to take risks.

The law also enables the authorities to target dangerous compounds such as etomidate found in K-pods and drug-laced vaporisers, signalling clearly that

vaping is no longer solely about nicotine.

These tougher measures remain necessary. Countries that delayed decisive action against vaping are now grappling with widespread youth nicotine dependence and entrenched commercial vape industries that have become politically and economically difficult to reverse. When neighbourhood mom-and-pop shops become financially dependent on vape sales, governments have to confront significant economic and political resistance from communities whose livelihoods have become intertwined with the vape industry.

Singapore avoided this scenario because of its longstanding prohibition stance. But enforcement alone cannot fully resolve the problem of youth addiction that Singapore now faces, which requires a supportive, nuanced approach.

ESTABLISHING A 'FAMILY SAFE-HARBOUR'

Many youth caught vaping are not hardened offenders, but individuals struggling with addiction, peer influence, and sophisticated digital marketing ecosystems designed to normalise nicotine use.

There are also the well-intentioned parents trapped between fear and helplessness. They worry about disciplinary consequences in schools, offence records, social stigma, and whether seeking help might inadvertently expose their own children to enforcement action.

The legislative changes recognise this. The Government has simultaneously expanded

rehabilitation pathways, cessation support, and counselling interventions aimed at creating a more effective and realistic pathway out for youth already trapped in nicotine dependence.

It has also given the assurance – delivered in Parliament by Minister of State for Health Rahayu Mahzam – that children reported by their parents for vaping would not be prosecuted. While not yet explicitly codified into law as a formal immunity provision, this is an important signal of a more nuanced and supportive approach.

In many ways, this reflects a move towards what we may call a "family safe-harbour" approach – the simple but important principle that public health systems function best when individuals and families are not punished for seeking help early. If families become too fearful to seek help for their loved ones, intervention often comes only after addiction has become deeply entrenched.

But a delicate balance is needed between enforcement and support. When a child persistently refuses to quit despite counselling and support, enforcement measures may still become necessary. There is no perfect equilibrium between the strictures of the law and the realities of adolescent behaviour, family dynamics and addiction.

THE FIGHT CONTINUES

The vaping issue is a multifaceted one, with behavioural, social and technological elements to grapple with. And several unresolved challenges remain.

In schools, traditional anti-vaping messaging that is

largely centred around health risks and punishment has diminishing effectiveness over time. Research from the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health has shown that adolescents are often far more influenced by peers than authority figures.

Our social and behavioural research involving students from secondary schools and polytechnics suggests that interventions such as trained student peer ambassadors, anonymous reporting channels, earlier intervention before disciplinary escalation, and clearer assurances that seeking help will not automatically result in punishment may be far more effective in enabling early detection and support.

The objective should not simply be to identify offenders but also to spot vulnerability before addiction becomes entrenched.

The digital and cross-border nature of vaping distribution also poses another unresolved challenge. Teenagers now encounter vaping not merely through physical access, but also through algorithmically amplified social media ecosystems, overseas online sellers, encrypted messaging platforms, and cyber-enabled distribution networks that are difficult for any single country to tackle.

Our enforcement strategies must therefore evolve accordingly. Stronger cooperation with neighbouring countries and regional regulators will become increasingly necessary. So too will greater platform accountability for illegal vape sales, payment blocking mechanisms against illicit sellers, and more sophisticated digital enforcement

capabilities. If our regulations are unable to keep pace with technology, enforcement will perpetually remain reactive.

PREVENTING A NEW NICOTINE GENERATION

Singapore today has one of the lowest rates of smoking in the world. We cannot allow vaping to reverse that progress.

For a period, there were worrying signs that might happen. Even as smoking prevalence continued to decline, vaping prevalence appeared to rise steadily despite its illegality. There was a real danger that Singapore could experience nicotine substitution rather than genuine reduction.

But there are now reasons for cautious optimism. The stronger enforcement posture adopted since the second half of 2025, the intensified public communications campaign, and the tougher legislative framework that took effect in May collectively signal that Singapore is determined not to normalise vaping.

The next phase of Singapore's anti-vaping journey will not be won through legislation alone. It will depend on whether we can build a society where prevention begins earlier, intervention becomes more compassionate, enforcement grows smarter, and seeking help carries less fear and stigma. Only then can we prevent the emergence of a new nicotine generation.

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In Singapore's war against vaping, there is a growing recognition that youth addiction cannot be addressed through punishment alone, says the writer. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG