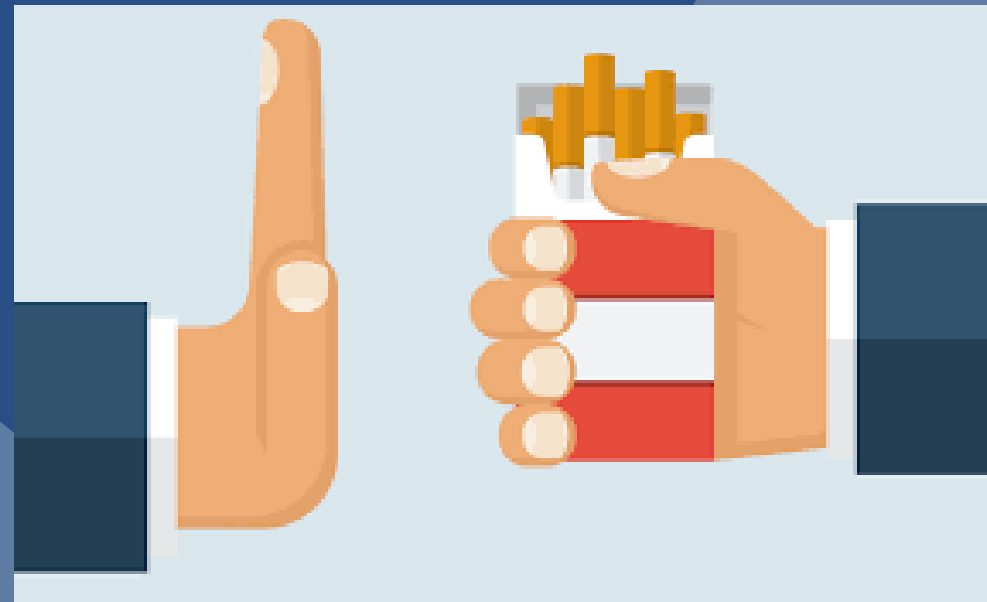


Behaviour, Choice and Influence

The psychology of decision-making and
resistance





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In this slide set, we'll explore:

- **The reasons people start using tobacco**
- **The influence that family, friends, peers and the media have on smoking behaviours**
- **Habits, triggers and cravings**

The specific triggers that can make someone want to use tobacco products

- **Building refusal skills and critical thinking**
How refusal skills help young people feel confident saying "no" without losing friendships or feeling embarrassed
- **Self-efficacy and autonomy in decision-making**

Why People Start Smoking

People start smoking for a variety of personal, social and emotional reasons. For many young people it begins with curiosity - wanting to try something new, especially if others around them are doing it. Some start because they want to fit in, feel accepted or avoid standing out in social groups.

Smoking can also be seen as a way to feel **more grown-up, confident or independent**, especially when portrayed this way in films, social media or by older peers.

Emotions also play a key role. Some young people turn to nicotine during times of stress, pressure, anxiety or boredom, believing it will calm them down or provide quick relief. Although nicotine may create a brief sense of relaxation, this effect is temporary and can lead to stronger cravings and more stress over time.

In some cases, people start because of family influences, especially if smoking or vaping is normal at home. Sometimes for young people vaping is a route to start smoking at a later date. Easy access to products, especially in the past with cheaper disposable vapes, has contributed to experimentation.

Influence of Friends, Family and Media

People's decisions to try or use tobacco products are often shaped by those around them. Friends and peers can create subtle pressure - if smoking is common in a group, it can seem normal, expected or even socially important. Young people may join in to avoid feeling left out or to match the behaviour of friends they admire.



Family influence also matters. When adults or older siblings smoke at home, tobacco use can appear routine or acceptable, making young people more likely to experiment themselves. Some may even have easy access to cigarettes if others in the household use them.

Media and cultural messages have historically glamorised smoking. Although tobacco advertising is now heavily restricted in the UK, films, TV shows, music and celebrity culture can still portray smoking as **stylish, rebellious or mature**. These impressions can shape how young people think about tobacco, especially before they fully understand the health risks.

Habits, Triggers and Cravings

Because nicotine is addictive, it can quickly create both physical and psychological habits.

Triggers that can make someone want to use tobacco products include:

- **stress**
- **break times**
- **boredom**
- **social events**
- **certain locations**



When nicotine levels drop, people can experience cravings, which may feel like restlessness, irritability, difficulty concentrating or a strong urge to smoke again. These cravings are the body's way of signalling withdrawal and can be powerful, even after short-term use.

Helping learners identify triggers and understand cravings makes it easier for them to build healthy coping strategies and avoid developing harmful habits.

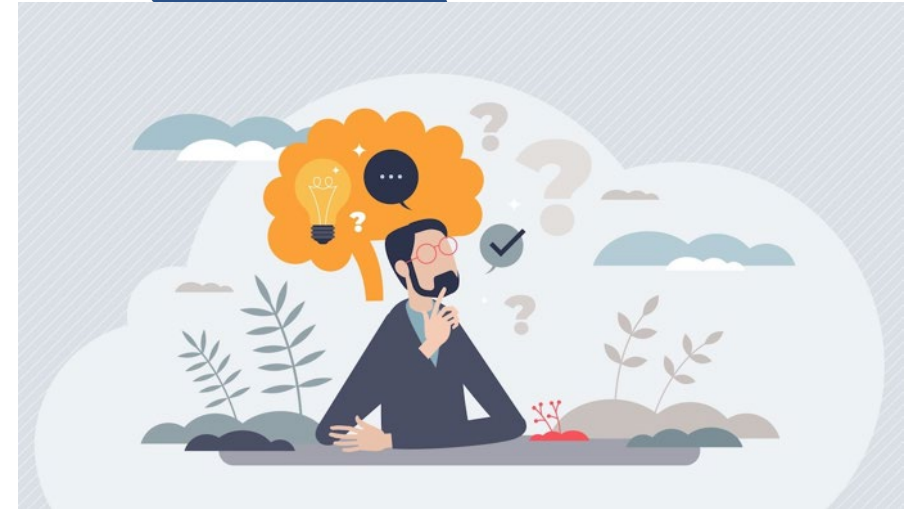
Building Refusal Skills and Critical Thinking

Refusal skills help young people feel confident saying “no” without losing friendships or feeling embarrassed.

Useful strategies include:

- **Suggesting an alternative activity**
- **Changing the subject or walking away**
- **Using humour**
- **Preparing a simple, firm refusal phrase (“No thanks - I’m not into that”)**

Critical thinking also plays an important role. Encouraging learners to question marketing messages, peer pressure, social media influences and myths about nicotine strengthens their ability to make informed, autonomous choices.



Self-Efficacy and Autonomy in Decision-Making

Self-Efficacy	Autonomy
Self-efficacy is the belief that you can make and stick to your own decisions, even when others around you are making different choices. Young people with strong self-efficacy are better at resisting pressure and more likely to choose behaviours that support their health, goals and well-being.	Autonomy is about understanding your own values, knowing what matters to you, and making choices based on your own judgement, not just what friends or others around you are doing.

Together, self-efficacy and autonomy help young people resist pressure, question unhealthy influences and feel empowered to make decisions they feel proud of. Strengthening these skills supports long-term resilience and helps learners stay in control of their own behaviour.

Summary

Smoking and vaping behaviours are shaped by social pressures, habits, emotions and media influence.

By developing awareness, refusal skills, critical thinking and self-belief, young people can make confident, informed decisions about their health.

Supporting these skills in school helps create a community where learners feel empowered, resilient and capable of making their own positive choices.

References

The information provided in this slide set took references from the following:

- [Why people smoke – PMC](#)
- [Smoking: Effects, Risks, Diseases, Quitting & Solutions](#)
- [Changes in Friends' and Parental Influences on Cigarette Smoking from Early through Late Adolescence – PMC](#)
- [Friends moderate the effects of pro-smoking media on college students' intentions to smoke – PMC](#)
- [Influence of family and friend smoking on intentions to smoke and smoking-related attitudes and refusal self-efficacy among 9–10 year old children from deprived neighbourhoods: a cross-sectional study - PMC](#)
- [Understand your smoking triggers and cravings - Better Health – NHS](#)
- [Teaching smoking refusal skills to adolescents](#)
- [Tobacco-refusal skills and tobacco use among high-risk adolescents - PubMed](#)