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**NICOTINE DEPENDENCY:** Children in local primary schools from grades 4-7 are increasingly abusing e-cigarettes known as vapes and health experts believe this is accelerating nicotine addiction in earlier ages. ***Pictures: SUPPLIED***

**If a VPASA member is found to be selling to young children they will be expelled from the association. VPASA prohibits the sale of vapes to people in school uniform and prescribes that shop owners ask customers who look under 25 for proof of ID, failing which the sale can be refused**

# Pupils becoming hooked early as vaping on rise

## *Children as young as grade 4 diagnosed with addiction*

TAMMY FRAY

East London primary school pupils, some as young as grade 4, are vaping — even on school grounds — leaving teachers battling nicotine-fueled behavioural issues and a growing addiction crisis.

Vapes, or e-cigarettes, are battery-operated devices that deliver nicotine, flavourings, and chemicals in an aerosol. Introduced to SA in 2014, they retail from R80 to more than R4,000, depending on features. Marketed as a safer alternative for smokers, they still pose health risks.

Vape sales remain unregulated as parliament has yet to pass the Tobacco Products and Electronic Delivery Systems Control Bill of 2022, but retailers cannot sell these products to under-18s. East London has many vape retailers, but only Vuse in Hemingways Mall and Vaperite in Vincent are registered with the Vapor Products Association of SA (VPASA), a self-regulating industry body of vapour product manufacturers and importers.

With minimal oversight, minors easily access vapes.

Athalia Flanagan from Thetha Nathi Counselling Services says their social workers handle daily cases of primary school pupils caught using substances at school. While past cases involved cigarettes, dagga, Xanax, tik, and lean, vapes are now the most common.

Some grade 4 pupils show signs of addiction, with one admitting to substance use since the age of nine.

Flanagan said: "The children are struggling with major behavioural issues and mood swings due to cravings and being under the influence at school. They become disruptive or skip going to class.

"Our social workers noticed vapes are a gateway to harder substances."

One school told GO!&Express that its pupils, driven by nicotine addiction, were caught this year stealing vapes from a nearby store. A teacher at the school said that in the first seven weeks of the school year, teachers had noticed a twofold increase in vaping incidents compared to the previous year with 20 pupils implicated, compared to seven last year.

The teacher added: "We are deeply concerned about the dramatic rise in vaping. While our pupils are not involved in hard-core drug use yet, the pervasive advertising and easy availability of vapes have created a serious problem.

"We have seen a rise in associated behaviours such as stealing vapes or money. The subtle nature of vaping makes it challenging to detect but its prevalence is a serious worry."

A school in one of East London's poorest communities says vaping is rising due to its normalisation in the area. This challenges the stereotype that vaping only affects pupils from fee-paying schools, showing it impacts minors across all backgrounds.

A teacher told the GO!&Express: "The vaping products are available and easily accessible to minors because the shops in the community disregard age restrictions in pursuit of profit.

"Our school has implemented disciplinary actions against pupils found vaping or in possession of vaping products. We offer counselling and we conducted a two-week substance abuse programme with a focus on vaping.

"We would appreciate assistance from law enforcement in conducting regular patrols. We urge parents to educate their children about the consequences of vaping."

Hudson Park Primary School's principal Garth Lumb said the school was aware of the increase in vaping among pupils and had used the curriculum and after-school programmes to drive prevention campaigns.

Lumb said: "Vaping is a growing challenge and we take proactive measures through life orientation lessons and strict policies to deter its use but we cannot address this issue alone. We encourage conversations between parents and children."

VPASA's Asanda Gcoyi said the association strongly condemned vaping among children and believed the slow pace of passing the bill and proliferation of unscrupulous sellers was to blame for vapes ending up in the hands of children.

Gcoyi said: "VPASA represents 60% of the vaping industry comprised of businesses who are voluntarily submitting to good practices through self-regulation. These businesses commit not to sell vaping products to minors, to advertise responsibly and ensure good quality products are sold.

"Two VPASA members have branches in East London compared to the steep number of retailers selling vapes in the city. This speaks to an urgent need on the part of local sellers to be more willing to submit to standardised norms and practices. The biggest culprits are those selling at garages and fuel stops.

"If a VPASA member is found to be selling to young children they will be expelled from the association. VPASA prohibits the sale of vapes to people in school uniform and prescribes that shop owners ask customers who look under 25 for proof of ID, failing which the sale can be refused.

"In SA we have a plethora of individuals who are unvetted or do not even own a company, buying products straight from China and selling them from an unofficial premises, even directly from home.

"Those not registered with VPASA do not want to be subjected to regulation because they are taking advantage of a grey area and do not care if their products end up in the hands of minors.

"Vaping cannot be addressed in isolation from other substance abuse concerns facing youth including underage pregnancy, and we need to give children the correct information about the risks of vaping."

Local vape retailer, Smoking Hot said they check IDs with every vape purchase and encourage even young people of legal age to avoid vaping at all. When questioned as to why they are not registered with self-regulating bodies like VPASA, they vowed to take up membership imminently.

Owner Branden Xu said: "I have two children so I take this seriously.

"Given all the appealing flavours out there I can see that it will be especially inviting to younger people. It is written in big words on the boxes to warn them that nicotine is addictive.

"We don't encourage people to start vaping, especially young people, as vaping is addictive and we like to think of ourselves as looking out for the health and wellbeing of others."

Prof Catherine Egbe from the University of KwaZulu-Natal said she was not surprised that primary school pupils were vaping, as the industry deliberately targetted young users.

"The vaping industry claims to self-regulate but this is a smokescreen to delay government action. The bright colours, sweet flavours, and strategic retail locations reveal a clear marketing push aimed at children," she said.

Egbe warns that early nicotine addiction harms brain development, affects academic performance, and increases the risk of using other substances like dagga and cocaine. "Nicotine disrupts concentration, emotional regulation, and can cause withdrawal symptoms that interfere with learning. It's also linked to cardiovascular disease, asthma, and DNA mutations that can lead to cancer."

She urges the government to pass the bill to regulate e-cigarettes and curb reckless marketing.

Egbe also called for schools to launch awareness campaigns, implement anti-vaping policies, and ensure that consequences for vaping were educational rather than punitive.

Sam Filby, a research officer at the Research Unit on the Economics of Excisable Products at the University of Cape Town, said: "Our research on 25,000 high school pupils nationally found that almost 20% of pupils were using e-cigarettes. Seeing it now among primary school children suggests that vaping habits are forming even earlier," she said.

"Primary school pupils may not even recognise the risks they're taking. Addressing this requires age-appropriate education and peer-led awareness programmes," she advised.

The Eastern Cape department of education's Mali Mtima said there were plans to work with local churches to create interventions at community level and that 500 pupil support agents and 49 contracted social workers were dispatched to schools with severe social challenges.

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