

Information Bulletin

Knowledge - Creating Awareness for Safe Communities

Youth and Substance Abuse



In April 2016, the Provincial Health Officer of British Columbia declared a public health emergency in response to the rise in overdoses and illicit drug related overdose deaths. Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid, has been attributed to the increase in overdoses and drug related deaths. Beyond Fentanyl, conversations need to take place about the consequences of alcohol, prescription and illicit drug use and the impact they have on the health and safety of children and youth.

Facts About Drug Use in Youth

- Psychoactive prescription drugs (opioid pain relievers, stimulants, and drugs used to treat anxiety or sleep disorders) are the third most commonly-abused substances, after alcohol and marijuana, among Canadian youth².
- Youth may misunderstand that because prescription drugs are prescribed by a doctor they are less dangerous than illegal drugs.
- Prescription drugs are more readily available to youth. The abuse of prescription drugs by youth often involves obtaining these drugs from a friend, a relative or home.
- Youth (ages 15 – 24) continue to have the highest self-reported past-year use of illicit substances compared to other Canadians.³ 57% of youth between the ages of 15 and 24 in Canada have reported they have used drugs sometime in their life.³
- 13 is the average age at which students in grades 7 to 12 first used cannabis.³
- The top five substances used by youth, according to the 2010 *Canadian Alcohol and Drug Use Monitoring Survey* (CADUMS) were alcohol (71.5%), marijuana (25.1%), hallucinogens (4.6%), ecstasy (3.8%) and cocaine (2.7%).
- The intoxicating effects of alcohol and other drugs can have a greater impact on the reward centres in teenage brains, giving them more of a rush than adults. Teens may also be less sensitive to some of the negative effects of drugs and alcohol.⁴

Reasons for Youth Drug Use¹

- Peer pressure. Modeling examples of substance use in their home and social environments.
- To improve academic performance or enhance their experience partying and getting high on other substances. Stimulants can often increase alertness, energy and attention.
- Weight loss and to enhance performance in sports.
- Escape, boredom and self-medication.
- Coping with stress, anxiety, or undiagnosed depressive symptoms.
- Gain a feeling of self confidence. Drugs can lessen inhibitions and alleviate anxiety.
- Curiosity and lack of information regarding consequences of drug use.

Starting the Conversation

When children are not comfortable talking to parents or trusted adults they will seek answers elsewhere, even if the source is unreliable. Inaccurate information can increase the risk of engaging in unsafe behaviours or experimenting with drugs.

Parents, guardians, caregivers, caring adults and community members play important roles in the lives of children and youth. Protecting children and youth from the harms caused by drugs can be conversations which start early in a child's life and continue into adolescence. It is important to have conversations about drugs regularly before there is an urgent need.

Conversations with children and youth about the use of illegal drugs and prescription medications can be difficult. Parents who are informed and take time to educate themselves about the effects of drug use can provide their children with correct information and address any misconceptions. Parents are the strongest role model and influence in a child's life.



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Signs of Drug or Alcohol Use

Physical and health indicators

- Eyes that are bloodshot or pupils that are smaller or larger than normal.
- Frequent nosebleeds.
- Seizures without a history of epilepsy.
- Changes in appetite or sleep patterns.
- Sudden weight loss or weight gain.
- Deterioration in personal grooming or physical appearance.
- Unusual smells on breath, body, or clothing.
- Impaired coordination, injuries/accidents/bruises that cannot be explained.
- Shakes, tremors, incoherent or slurred speech.
- Impaired or unstable coordination.

Behavioral indicators

- Skipping class, declining grades, getting in trouble at school.
- Loss of interest in extracurricular activities, hobbies, or sports - decreased motivation.
- Changes in relationships and friends.
- Missing money, valuables, alcohol or prescription drugs.
- Increased requests to borrow money with nothing to show for the money spent.
- Acting isolated, silent, withdrawn, engaging in secretive or suspicious behaviors.
- Clashes with family values and beliefs.
- Frequently getting into trouble (arguments, fights, accidents, illegal activities).
- Preoccupation with alcohol and drug-related lifestyle in music, clothing and posters.

The Scare Factor Does not Work⁶

Fear-based "just-say-no" approaches to drug education do not work. Alternatively, resilience based approaches focusing on capabilities rather than deficits have been more effective.

Resilience based approaches engage youth, honouring their unique development needs and recognizes the importance of the community of all youth rather than just the individual.

Helping children and youth thrive involves guiding them to develop healthy relationships. Youth need to:

- Understand how to assess the complex ways in which drugs impact the health and wellbeing of individuals, communities & societies.
- Have an environment to explore and understand the reasons people use drugs, the impact of drug use and the social attitudes toward various drugs.
- Learn to develop social and communication skills in addressing discourse and behaviour related to drugs.
- Develop personal and social strategies to manage the risks and harms related to drugs.

Providing a Positive Influence⁵

There may be no such thing as an ideal family. All families have problems. Everyone, young and old, makes mistakes. What is most important is how the problem or situation is handled.

There are many things that parents and caregivers can do to help children grow and develop in meaningful ways that avoid abuse of alcohol or drugs. Research around positive youth development reinforces the idea that if parents, schools and communities focus efforts on supporting the healthy growth and development of children, we can prevent a range of problems (including substance abuse) in the process. Building on a child's strengths is the key focus.

- Be available. Provide support to all family members.
- Communicate with each other in a respectful positive way.
- Be involved in children's schooling, activities and relationships.
- Set boundaries, be a role model with high expectations for good behaviour.
- Promote healthy values that include being responsible
- Demonstrate a commitment to learning.
- Family attitudes and behaviours can play an important role in shaping the choices children and youth make.
- Encourage good use of time that includes recreational or creative activities.
- Help others in the community or at home
- Help develop social skills such as planning, decision-making and resistance skills.
- Assist children and youth to develop a sense of personal power and purpose.
- Promote high self-esteem, and a positive view of their own future.

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Risk and Protective Factors⁵

To understand how to prevent alcohol and drug abuse, it is important to understand the connection between risk factors and protective factors. Risk factors are life events, experiences or conditions that are associated with an increase in problem behaviour such as drug abuse. Protective factors protect against those behaviours.

As caring adults, it is most important to focus attention on a child or youth's strengths and protective factors. It is helpful to understand that children experience differing degrees of vulnerability to problems based on risk factors related to their personality, genetics, family upbringing, peer group, school, community and culture. It is important to note, a child or youth may identify with many risk factors. This does not propel them in the direction of becoming substance abusers.

Risk	Protective
<p>Individual</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having a difficult temperament, making it harder to form connections with people • Struggling with mental health issues such as depression or anxiety • Positive expectations of drugs along with easy access. Beginning to experiment at an early age 	<p>Individual</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having an easygoing, positive temperament, sociable, hopeful and able to cope with problems • Having strong self-esteem and good social skills • Feeling connected to school, family and supportive adults in the community • Negative expectations of drug use. Delaying use until later years, if at all
<p>Family</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiences with drug abuse or permissive attitudes about drugs • Stressful or non-supportive home environment • Parents who have unclear rules and expectations, poor supervision and inconsistent discipline and support 	<p>Family</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belonging to a family that discusses and models responsible drug or alcohol use • Having parents who strive to build close relationships with their kids and to set clear expectations and consistent discipline
<p>Peers</p> <p>Having friends who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use drugs and encourage drug use • have an excess of time or money and are not engaged in positive social activities • break the law 	<p>Peers</p> <p>Having friends who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • do not use drugs or encourage drug use • are engaged in school and other positive social activities such as sports, music, and art • positively influence decision-making
<p>School</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic failure, lack of commitment to school, withdrawn or aggressive classroom behaviour • Negative, disorderly and unsafe school climate • Low teacher expectations • Lack of clear school policies on drug use 	<p>School</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caring and supportive school environment • High expectations • Clear standards and rules for appropriate behaviour • Youth participation, involvement and responsibility in school tasks and decisions
<p>Community</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community norms that promote or permit substance abuse • Poverty with accompanying high crime rates and alienation • High rates of transition/mobility • Lack of cultural traditions and history 	<p>Community</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caring and supportive community • High expectations of youth • High level of media literacy in community (to counteract undesirable advertising messages) • Availability of community or faith based sponsored activities



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Resources:

Province of BC Mental Health & Substance Use Information: Provides a listing of services and resources available within BC to assist and support those experiencing mental health and substance use problems.

www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/managing-your-health/mental-health-substance-use

BC Mental Health & Substance Use Services: An agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority, providing a diverse range of mental health and substance use services for children, adolescents and adults across the province. Website provides listing of programs and services provided by BC Mental Health and Substance Use Services, along with a resource for members of the public and professionals.

www.bcmhsus.ca

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH): Canada's largest mental health and addiction teaching hospital, as well as one of the world's leading research centres in the area of addiction and mental health. Website provides information and resources in multiple languages for parents, educators and youth on topics related to mental health and addictions.

www.camh.ca

Centre for Addictions Research of BC (Uvic) - Helping schools resources: A webpage providing resources for educators, parents and community members to assist children and youth develop drug and gambling literacy.

www.uvic.ca/research/centres/carbc/publications/helping-schools/index.php

Drug Free Kids Canada: Comprehensive website designed for parents to learn about drugs and teen drug abuse. Website provides information to assist parents in talking to their children about drugs and drug abuse. A comprehensive and up-to-date source of drug information is provided, including drug description, street and slang names and images.

www.drugfreekidscanada.org

Fentanyl Safety for First Responders: A website developed by the Justice Institute of BC to provide first responders with safety information related to situations where opioids may be involved. Site provides information about fentanyl, safe handling, naloxone and job specific information.

www.fentanylsafety.com

Health Canada – Substance Abuse: Provides information about drugs and substances that have the potential to be misused or abused. Includes information for parents on how to talk to children and youth as well as getting help.

www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/substance-abuse.html

mindcheck.ca: A teen and young adult-focused interactive website where visitors can check out how they are feeling and connect to support early and quickly. Website provides youth oriented information on anxiety, social anxiety, depression, stress, substance use (alcohol and other drug use), psychosis, body image and eating problems.

www.mindcheck.ca

RCMP Centre for Youth Crime Prevention: Provides evidence-informed and age appropriate crime prevention messages, information, tools, and programs to prevent youth crime and victimization.

www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/cycp-cpcj/index-eng.htm

TeenMentalHealth.org: A website providing evidenced based training programs, publications, tools and resources that can be applied across disciplines to enhance the understanding of adolescent mental health and mental disorders.

www.TeenMentalHealth.org

References:

1. excerpted from Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) – *Prevention of Prescription Stimulant Misuse among Youth* – 2016
2. Health Canada - *Talking with Teenagers About Drugs* - 2014
3. CCSA - *A Case for Investing in Youth Substance Abuse Prevention* – 2013
4. excerpted from parentactionondrugs.org - *Stats, Facts & Talking Points about Alcohol & Other Drugs*
5. excerpted from Alberta Health Services - *Kids and drugs: A parent's guide to prevention*
6. excerpted from Centre for Addictions Research of BC - *Rethinking Drug Ed and Promoting Mental Wellness in BC Schools* - October 8, 2016 PowerPoint presentation deck

