

Youth-Friendly North Shore

RESOURCE:

Approaches to Prevent, Delay, and
Reduce Youth Substance-Related Harms



About This Resource

Youth face numerous challenges in avoiding substance-related harms. Regularly reviewing organizational practices with staff, volunteers, and youth participants can help implement approaches to prevent, delay, and reduce these harms, creating a safer environment for youth from diverse backgrounds.

This resource stems from the Youth-Friendly North Shore Community of Practice activities held on March 6, 2024. It aims to support organizations serving youth in developing effective strategies to address substance-related risks. Practitioners can use this resource to enhance their efforts in promoting youth well-being.

Reference Resources

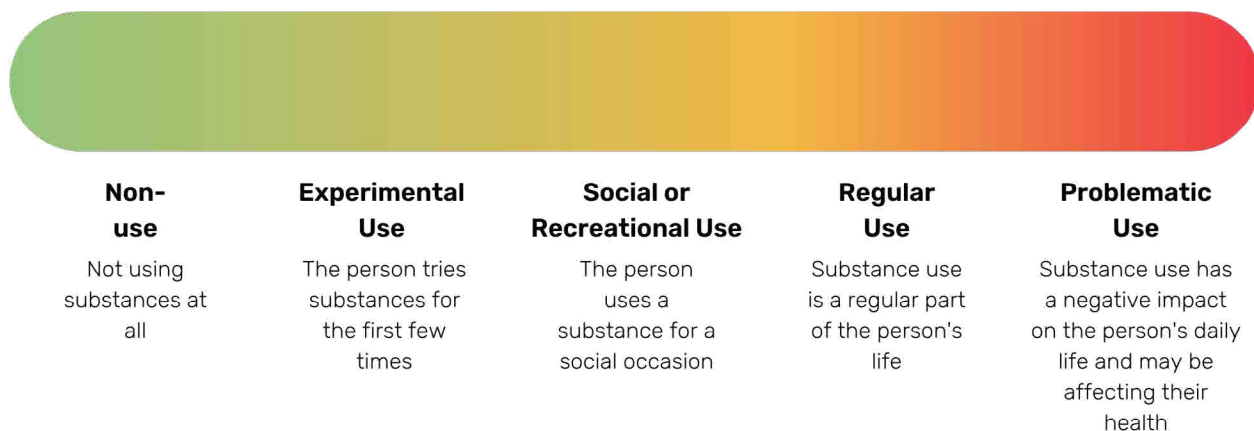
Review the resources below to support additional learning in this area:

- [The ABCs of Youth Substance Use](#)
- [Kelty Mental Health - Substance Use and Youth](#)
- [VCH Harm Reduction and Substance Use Roadmap](#)
- BC Centre for Disease Control - [Naloxone Training](#)

Background Information

Spectrum on Adolescent Substance Use

Use happens along a spectrum. When it becomes problematic is when people may need help and seek support. In those moments, the evidence shows that the most critical thing is maintaining connection, building trust, respecting an individual's autonomy but supporting them through a process of change.



Understanding Why Youth Use Substances

Gaining insight into the reasons behind youth substance use is critical for developing effective prevention strategies. The [2023 Adolescent Health Survey](#) provides valuable data that sheds light on the factors influencing adolescents' decisions to use substances.

Below are the key findings from the survey that highlight these underlying motivations:

Reasons youth used substances the last time (among those who had used alcohol or other substances)

Wanted to have fun	61%
Wanted to experiment	32%
Friends were doing it	30%
Because of stress	22%
Felt down or sad	20%
There was nothing else to do	11%
To manage physical pain	6%
Because of an addiction	5%
Thought it would help them focus	5%
Felt pressured into doing it/to fit in	3%
To change the effect of another substance	2%
Didn't mean to (e.g., drink was spiked)	2%

Note: Youth could mark all that applied.

Consequences of substance use experienced in the past 12 months (among youth who had used alcohol or other substances)

Was told they did something they couldn't remember	29%
Passed out	22%
Got injured	13%
Argued with family members	12%
School work or grades changed	9%
Lost friends or broke up with romantic partner	7%
Damaged property	7%
Had sex when they didn't want to	5%
Got into a physical fight	4%
Got in trouble with police	4%
Overdosed	2%
Had to get medical treatment	2%
Used alcohol or other substances but none of these happened	55%

Note: Youth could mark all that applied.

Stages of Adolescence

At every stage of adolescent development, there are opportunities to build resilience as the brain and body mature. A 2015 systematic review of evaluated substance use education programs revealed that all developmental stages offer different possibilities for harm prevention. However, the universal and targeted approaches at each developmental level must differ for them to be effective.

To learn more about considerations for supporting youth who may be using substances at various stages of adolescent development, refer to [The ABCs of Youth Substance Use – Delivering Substance Use Education](#).

Communication Approaches

Effective communication is essential when working with youth, particularly in preventing, delaying, and reducing substance-related harms. To support youth facing these challenges, consider the following approaches:

- **Non-judgmental Approach:** Show warmth and compassion, both verbally and non-verbally. Brief moments of connection matter.
- **Visibility:** Ensure youth feel seen and heard by sharing your observations with trusted adult allies for their safety and support.
- **Positive Relationship:** Maintain a caring relationship by showing interest in their passions, like hobbies or activities.
- **Focus on the Individual:** Address any concerning behaviors, such as declining grades, with empathy and respect, prioritizing their dignity.
- **Readiness for Change:** Assess their readiness informally and offer support without pressure. If they seem open, encourage discussions about seeking help.

Learning Activity

Instructions on Using this Guide

Facilitation Guidelines

Before starting, assign a facilitator for the discussion. The facilitator must create psychologically and professionally safe conditions and support the learning needs of all participants. Bringing in an external facilitator can help team members focus on the learning activity.

Form a Group

Form small groups of 4 to 10 people, including your youth team members specifically or members from different teams in your organization.

Set Ground Rules

Establish ground rules to ensure all participants feel safe sharing their thoughts and beliefs.

Here are some suggested guidelines as a starting point:

- Be curious, not judgmental.
- Listen to learn, not to debate.
- Engage respectfully, even when you disagree.
- Agree to maintain confidentiality.
- No reporting or evaluation connected to your participation.

Set an Objective

Treat this as a learning exercise for yourself, your team, and/or your organization. The common goal is to work together to reduce barriers to access for youth in your community.

Assign a Note-taker

Each small group should choose a note-taker to capture key discussion points and takeaways, especially any recommended changes in practice.

Discuss

Start by reviewing one scenario together as a group, either by reading it aloud or silently reading individually:

- Spend 15–30 minutes discussing the reflection questions for the scenario. If necessary, refer to relevant resources for ideas and strategies to overcome barriers.
- If reviewing multiple scenarios, discuss and capture reflections from one scenario before moving on to the next.

Action Steps

Ask each member to share one thing they will do differently moving forward. If the group identifies changes needed as a team or organization, agree on next steps to implement these changes.

Scenario 1: Addressing Vape Use While Maintaining a Safe Space for Teens in the Library

For the last few months you've noticed the same group of teenagers frequently come into the library around 6pm and stay till close.

They usually take up the round table in the back and talk softly while working on what looks like homework. Today you notice for the first time that two youth are taking occasional puffs from a vape. The library is a substance-free space and has a zero-tolerance policy.

notes

Discussion Questions

- What do you do? What is your objective and what dynamics do you need to keep in mind?
- How do you engage with these youth?
- What resources or supports can you offer them? How do you assess their readiness for resources or supports?
- How can your actions impact their wellbeing?

Considerations

- Library policy and expectations of library management
- Challenges of ensuring safety
- Maintaining policies while not alienating youth so they stop coming, etc.
- While engaging youth in dialogue: What is fair? What would they do if they were you?

Scenario 2: Addressing Vape Use While Maintaining a Safe Space for Teens in the Library

You staff the teen drop-in space at agency X. Usually there are between 15–20 youth that come by to hang out and join in the daily activities. However, you have noticed that some of the girls are now hanging out with the 20(ish) year olds that smoke cannabis by the skate park.

You recently learnt that cannabis use can be damaging for developing brains, and from past experience you know that these older youth often share their weed. You are concerned about the health of your program participants.

Discussion Questions

- What do you do? What is your goal?
- How do you approach and/or support the teenagers who come to your drop-in center?
- How do you engage the youth, develop rapport and promote open and honest dialogue?
- How do you engage with the older youth that are hanging out at the skatepark?
- What resources or support can you offer them?
- How can your actions impact their wellbeing?

notes

Scenario 3: Navigating Conversations About Substance Use with Youth

A group of youth you work with seems extremely excited today. You overhear some of them talk about the party at a friend's house tonight. Apparently the parents are away and someone has ordered a keg of beer. You hear someone say "Someone got the molly!"

Discussion Questions

- How do you engage the youth in an open and honest conversation? Perhaps exploring a safety plan.
- What are some ways you could support youth to think about the potential risks associated with their substance use behaviours?
- Can you support them to develop a safety plan?
- What resources or support can you offer them?
- How can your actions impact their wellbeing?

notes