

Evidence Brief

Nine Good Practices for Engaging Youth in Substance Use Prevention Programs

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work, Google Scholar, and online databases using the following key terms: "substance use," "prevention," "program," "best practices," and "youth."

Summary of Evidence

A. Risk Factors for Youth Substance Use

There is no single cause of problematic substance use among youth. A range of interacting risk and protective factors across different domains (e.g. individual, school, community, and family) shape young people's experiences with substances. These factors are "dynamic and span across the social contexts in which youth grow up" (Tam, 2018, p. 23).

Some of the risk factors for youth substance use include (CAMH, 2010, p. 11):

- Alcohol or other drug use among family members
- Poor school performance
- Poverty, family conflicts, chaos or stress
- Having friends who drink or use other drugs
- Not fitting in socially, or being excluded because of race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, abilities or other factors
- Emotional, physical or sexual abuse
- Experiencing discrimination or oppression

B. Nine Good Practices

1. Provide relevant, accurate, and unbiased information.

Studies show that young people want relevant, accurate, and unbiased information about substance use (Representative for Children and Youth, 2018; Valleriani et al., 2018). Fear- and abstinence-based approaches, such as the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) program, have been shown to be ineffective (Pan & Bai, 2009; West & O'Neal, 2004). These programs can undermine education efforts by providing information that is biased and at odds

with young people's experiences. The most effective approaches to substance use education reflect young people's lived realities and focus on harm reduction (Jenkins et al., 2017; Slemmon et al., 2019; Valleriani et al., 2018), acknowledging the risks and benefits of substance use and empowering young people to make informed decisions.

2. Address social norms.

Perceptions of what is 'normal' influence young people's substance use, and youth generally overestimate the prevalence of use among other youth and adults (Nadin, 2015). Youth workers can provide accurate information on prevalence rates and highlight the number of young people who do *not* use substances. For example, while youth in Ontario do use cannabis at a higher rate than other age groups, 81% of grade 7-12 students report not using this substance in the past year (Boak et al., 2017). This approach is particularly impactful during early adolescence, when youth are focused on peer relationships and social acceptance (Onrust et al., 2016).

3. Foster a non-judgmental environment.

Organizations should foster a safe, supportive, and non-judgmental environment in which young people feel comfortable asking questions, expressing their curiosity, and sharing their experiences with substances. Youth workers can promote open dialogue by asking open-ended questions, using simple and direct language, and using innovative resources, such as films (Valleriani et al., 2018). It is important to acknowledge that some youth will use drugs and discuss the differences between appropriate and problematic use.

Keep in mind that stigma can act as a barrier to engaging youth in open conversations around substance use (Valleriani et al., 2018). Stigmatizing environments may prevent youth from sharing their experiences and discussing problematic use. Organizations should reflect on whether stigma may be embedded in the program and/or in staff's personal values.

4. Engage youth in program development, implementation, and evaluation.

Organizations can ensure that programs are relevant to young people's experiences by involving them in program design, implementation, and evaluation (Jenkins et al., 2017; Nadin, 2015; Valleriani et al., 2018). Engage youth as credible partners whose input is valued, while avoiding tokenism, adultism, and negative youth stereotypes (Valleriani et al., 2018). Programs serving Indigenous youth should engage youth in program development in order to ensure that programming is culturally-relevant and safe (see #8).

5. Consider a peer-based approach.

Engaging youth in program delivery is an effective way to ensure that information is relevant to

young people's experiences. Peers are often seen as more credible than adults because they share a common understanding of social status, peer culture, and youth norms, and their messages may be more likely to resonate with young people (MacArthur et al., 2015). Evidence suggests that peer-led interventions can be effective in preventing substance use among youth (MacArthur et al., 2015). Youth may also feel more comfortable discussing their experiences with someone who is "close to their age and who 'gets it'" (Valleriani et al., 2018, p. 15).

6. Ensure programming is age- and developmentally-appropriate.

Substance use education programs should be tailored to the cognitive, emotional, and social development of the youth they target (Onrust et al., 2016). Information should be relevant to young people's knowledge and experiences with substances. Elementary school-aged youth benefit most from basic skills training, while early adolescents may be more receptive to a social norms approach (see #2). Programs for youth who are already using substances should focus on behaviour change and harm reduction (Nadin, 2015).

7. Reach out early.

Programs are most effective before youth are exposed to substances, and before any use or experimentation occurs (Nadin, 2015; Tam, 2018). Opening a dialogue from a young age may also normalize talking about substance use and make it easier for young people to reach out for help if they need it (Representative for Children and Youth, 2018). Education is especially important at key transition points, when youth generally begin using substances, such as the middle school years (Tam, 2018).

8. Make programming culturally-relevant and safe.

Programming should be culturally-relevant and safe for youth with a variety of intersecting identities and experiences. For example, cultural connectedness is a source of resilience for Indigenous youth and can help reduce substance-related harm (Representative for Children and Youth, 2018). Organizations serving Indigenous youth should provide these youth with "substantive and meaningful ways to (re)connect with their cultures and communities" (Representative for Children and Youth, 2018, p. 47); consider hiring Indigenous staff and provide cultural safety training for non-Indigenous staff.

9. Include a skills-based component.

Knowledge-only approaches (i.e., programs that focus primarily on substances and their effects) can lead to increased knowledge but do not produce significant changes in youth behaviour (Nadin, 2015; Tam, 2018). Evidence shows that the inclusion of resistance and life skills training (e.g. decision-making, assertiveness, communication, anxiety management, problem-solving, etc.) makes programming more effective in preventing and reducing

substance use among youth (Faggiano et al., 2014; Stockings et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2015; Weichold & Blumenthal, 2016). The most effective education programs make space for learning and experimenting with new skills.

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