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SUBSTANCE USE AND YOUNG PEOPLE

**A Guide for Families
and Their Caring
Communities**



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INTRODUCTION



IT IS NATURAL FOR FAMILIES AND CARING COMMUNITIES TO WANT TO KNOW WHY YOUNG PEOPLE USE SUBSTANCES. They often want to know about potential risks, and question whether the behaviours and attitudes they observe are normal. There is a lot of information and it's not always clear how to make sense of it or use it to help those you care about, especially young people.

Substances, including alcohol, have been part of our lives for thousands of years. People have used drugs to celebrate success, manage pain, deal with grief and sadness, and a way to begin the day or relax after work. For example, you may enjoy a cup of coffee at breakfast; relax with a beer while watching the game, or take pain medication after a root canal. Using substances has the potential to cause harm and indeed has harmed individuals and communities. Thus, it is important to understand why we use alcohol and other drugs and develop strategies to help shield ourselves from the potential harms of using substances.

Our behaviours and choices are influenced by a variety of factors including our biology, physical and social environments and life events. Community culture, institutions we interact with, as well as family and societal values, all influence our choices and actions. These factors interact in complex ways to create the unique world we each live in.

This guide offers supports to help parents, families and adult members of a young person's community (caregivers, friends, teachers, health practitioners or faith leaders) talk with young people about

alcohol and other drugs as they navigate individual life circumstances. We focus on fostering dialogue. This builds rapport and leads to caring and respectful relationships between children or youth and parents and other adults in the community. Strong relationships with caring adults are among the most important factors in protecting young people against harmful substance use.

In the following pages, we present four vignettes drawn from real life situations. After each story we provide a discussion to help us all explore the issues. In this, we include reflective questions and some suggested strategies. The questions help adults think about how their past and present experiences might influence the way they deal with a child or youth. The strategies highlight skills an adult might use to support the young person. Here are some tips to keep in mind as we move through the vignettes or to use when you talk to young people about using substances.

Ten tips

1. The young person in your life needs you. Your caring and wisdom are the basis of a strong relationship that can foster a sense of self-worth that will support the young person their entire life.
2. What do you and the young person enjoy doing together? Discovering and exploring mutual likes and dislikes can help you and the youth understand each other, building a relationship between two people as well as between an adult and a youth.
3. What interests does the young person have? What do they want to do in life? Understanding and supporting the young person's goals shows that you believe in them.
4. Share your life experiences and what you learned with the youth. This can foster discussions that can help the young person learn to solve their own issues, building confidence and resilience.
5. Life is a learning journey. Time and space are needed to reflect on what we have learned whether we are adults or youth. Allowing space for a young person to determine what experiences mean to them fosters a sense of ownership of their life and ability to decide what their next steps might be.
6. It helps to let young people know what you expect of them. Telling young people clearly and concisely what you want makes it easier for them to understand your values and ask questions where they may be confused. Subsequent discussion can produce a better result for both of you!
7. We are human and we all make mistakes. Mistakes are opportunities to learn together.
8. The young person in your life will challenge you! This is a natural part of growing up. Engaging youth in a respectful way and negotiating a shared solution demonstrates you value them while letting them know your needs and values.
9. Making time to talk with the young person shows that you value communication and that their thoughts and concerns matter to you.
10. Being a parent or caring adult means that young people look to you for guidance. Being a role model can be challenging. Engaging young people in conversation, letting them know you are doing your best and are interested in their thoughts, demonstrates that role models are people too. Perfection is not required!

VIGNETTE 1 ARIN'S JOURNEY



ARIN IS A 46-YEAR-OLD MOTHER OF A 15-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER. Her and her husband's family live in Iran. Arin's daughter recently became more curious about alcohol and going to parties with boys. This has been a big challenge for Arin, as she has a lot of fears about what will happen to her daughter if she drinks alcohol at a party. The very thought made her anxious and no amount of

information she has read on the topic has seemed to calm her fears.

After some reflection, Arin realized that in her upbringing there was a lot of concern about her during her teenage years. She also found that she and her husband were somewhat at odds about the issue of substances. Her husband was more permissive around alcohol than she felt was appropriate for their 15-year-old daughter.

Arin spent some time talking with her parents about how things were when she was a teenager and discussed the topic of drinking alcohol with her husband. She was eventually able to gain more clarity around how different things were in Iran when she was young. She began to feel more comfortable with the idea that things are very different now for young women in Canada. She was also able to remember that her daughter demonstrates good judgment. Eventually, Arin and her husband came to an agreement about what would be acceptable for her daughter in regard to going to parties, drinking alcohol and spending time with boys.

One evening, Arin's daughter asked if she could go to a party. Arin was prepared for this and said she could go, but gave her the conditions. They talked about using alcohol and what were ways her daughter could manage her own safety at the party. About two hours after her daughter left for the party, Arin received a phone call asking her to come pick her daughter up. It turned out that some older boys had shown up at the party uninvited. Arin's daughter soon became uncomfortable with the amount of alcohol being used and decided she wanted to go home. Arin's daughter's curiosity about alcohol was satisfied and she decided that she wanted to wait a few more years before starting to go to parties again.

IN THIS STORY, a young person is growing up and finding her way with peers, alcohol and parties. A connected, supportive family or community environment can help.

It is often believed the teenage years are filled with moodiness, insecurity, defiance and anger. A majority of youth do not experience these problems.

“An inescapable conflict is built into adolescence. Just when we become mature enough to want to make our own decisions, everyone starts telling us to work hard, plan ahead, not to drink, not to take drugs and not to sleep with anyone. When teenagers then press their elders for the reasons for their advice, those reasons are rarely forthcoming. A good example of this is the taking of illegal drugs. We all know that many people take drugs and seem to enjoy them, yet at the same time teenagers are continually told that drugs are ‘bad.’ All the sensible teenage mind can conclude is that someone out there is either wrong or lying. This is not being difficult, it is simply being logical.”

– Dr. David Bainbridge

The teenage years are often the first time many families think about their child’s potential interest in substances. This time can be difficult for some youth as they experience changes in their bodies, more stress and many social and school related expectations. Youths often spend more time with their friends, become romantically interested in others, and seek more independence during these years. They are also developing a sense of self and awareness of other people, which can lead to anxiety and worries about others’ opinions of them.

Young people may act a little differently. They may react to comments made by family members. They may not be interested in discussing personal issues they were open about in the past. This is generally part of the normal growth process for young people.

Gaining information about substance use can be helpful at this time. Selecting material relevant to the situation is often useful. For instance, it can be helpful to

know that it is more normal for an 18-year-old to have tried alcohol or have had 5 alcoholic drinks in a night than it is for a 13-year-old to do the same. Individual differences, reasons for use, and the ways people manage risks are important to reflect on when assessing a youth’s behaviour when using substances.

Every child differs in how easily they move from childhood to adulthood. Families must make decisions about how much independence to offer and when to offer it. Families can discuss how and when different types of independence, including use of substances, will be handled. Specific responsibilities and expectations accompanying each gain in independence will help the youth move more easily along the path to adulthood. Verbal agreements that all members are comfortable with may be put in writing if desired.

When preparing to talk with young people about substance use, we may hit barriers arising from our feelings or family relationships. These barriers can get in the way of open, thoughtful, and light-hearted conversation with youth. Reflecting on our feelings can help us become clear and develop a more solid position on the topic. Arin reflected on how growing up in her family was quite different from growing up in Canada. Also, that her husband's experience was different from hers even as they grew up in the same country. Can you think of any ways that growing up in your family influences how you think about substance use? How do you think current family relationships, or those with your friends and the youth you care about affect how you talk to youth about using substances? Here are some further questions that might help you think about these issues.

? Questions for reflection

- **What were your experiences with substances like when growing up? How did you feel about those experiences?**
- **How was substance use seen in your family, and how did you know?**
- **What other experiences do you think may have formed your approach to substance use?**
- **On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being "Not at all" and 10 being "Extremely"), how comfortable are you with the idea of your kids trying and using various substances?**
- **Are there events in your family history that you think might impact your current attitudes about substances?**
- **How much of your understanding of substance use is based on facts vs. your feelings? (you can assign a percentage value to each to help you think about this)**

Ultimately, we need to talk with the youth involved. How do you think you might have responded in Arin's situation? Talking with young people about substances helps them prepare for many life situations when they will need to make judgment calls about when, where and if to use a substance. Here are some ideas for preparing yourself to talk about substances with young people. Happily, these ideas can promote healthy conversations on topics other than substance use, such as romantic relationships and sexuality.

✓ Strategies for talking with youth

- Even young children know substances are a part of our culture. They see people drinking alcohol around them and medication ads on TV. It can be helpful to start conversations with them at this time. Talking about substance use happens naturally for instance, while preparing for a family celebration or at the dinner table.
- When we feel ready to talk calmly, clearly, and with humour, we are better able to have open and honest dialogue. This approach can help put people at ease and be more willing to talk, even about difficult subjects.
- Many of our thoughts and feelings are affected by past experiences. Reviewing our family's attitude and experiences with substances and our youthful memories of substance use can help us see where we stand on these issues today.
- The less anxious we feel the more able we are to think through things. Learning there are a range of experiences and approaches to using substances can help us feel less fearful and more able to discover out what will work for our family.
- How do we handle ourselves as we talk with others? How is my tone, do I sound interested or perhaps, angry and upset? How calm and loose am I? What is my body language saying right now? Am I listening to the other person?
- It is often more important how you say something rather than what you actually say. Conversations (including difficult ones), that start with open-ended, non-threatening questions help engage the youth in discussion and encourages them to share their thoughts and feelings. For example: "I've been hearing a lot these days about kids drinking in the bush on weekends. I'm curious what you think about these bush parties? What's your take on what draws some kids to them?"

"If you start early, you can help normalize it. You can bring it into a conversation as just part of growing up."

– A parent

VIGNETTE 2 ROGER'S JOURNEY



ROGER, 44, A SMALL BUSINESS OWNER, HAS BEEN A SINGLE PARENT TO HIS 18 YEAR OLD SON FOR THE PAST FIVE YEARS.

The son has regular contact with his mother, though he doesn't see her often as she lives several thousand miles away on the other side of the country. Roger and his son have had some ups and downs in an otherwise good relationship, but nothing Roger sees as abnormal, "things that happen in any family", he notes.

Last fall Roger's son started attending a college a two hour drive from home. Roger's son, together with two of his friends, rented a three bedroom townhouse close to the college. This allowed them to save on costs and provide mutual support in a new situation.

The son's posts on Facebook suggest he is having some difficulties getting himself to classes and submitting his assignments on time. During phone calls and visits home Roger's son says he is enjoying his newfound freedom and likes college. As there are no report cards or reports sent to parents in college, Roger has no idea what impact not keeping up with class work may be having on his son's grades or his life in general. Remembering his youthful experiences as a college freshman, Roger worries that his son may be 'partying' too much, not attending classes and that he may either not get good grades or worse, fail his courses.

Roger tried to broach the topic of using substances in recent discussions with his son, especially when he was home for two weeks at Christmas. The son

seems uninterested in the topic telling Roger, "Everything is OK". Roger's son admitted that he and his friends sometimes party (drink alcohol) on weekends. Roger's son is coming home for reading break and Roger will approach the subject of managing substance use with his son, but is not sure how it will go. Roger believes in his relationship with his son and that all will go reasonably well.

IN THIS STORY, a young person is moving from youth to young adult. Defining a sense of self, navigating social and romantic relationships, and refining thinking and reasoning abilities are among the challenges young people face on the way to adulthood. Physical changes (including puberty), moving from elementary to secondary school, and on to college or the working world are among the significant life changes young people encounter. These can be significant social and emotional changes for young people.

A key concern for parents and caring adults is helping young people develop a strong sense of self. This is one of the most important things we can do to help

young people reduce the risk of negative experiences when using substances. Helping young people develop a self encourages them to develop values and principles. Those values and principles may be quite different from our own! Encouraging open, thoughtful and ongoing conversations can help youth explore ideas and choose what kind of relationship they want to have—or not have—with alcohol and other drugs. Some information about why young people experiment with or use substances may help you in framing discussions with youth in your life.

Young people give a variety of reasons for using substances. These speak to the benefits the young person is seeking. Sometimes it is difficult to acknowledge that substance use has benefits. Yet, all of us, when we use psychoactive substances, do so in order to get some benefit. Young people are no different.

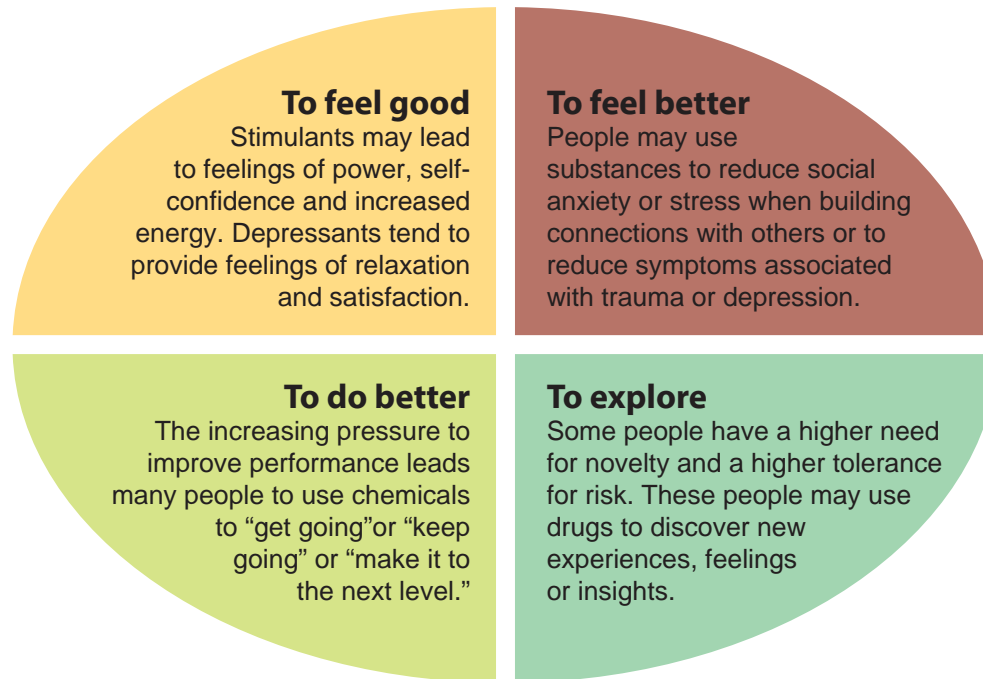
Substance use also has risks. Understanding and managing risk is as important as recognizing any possible benefits of using substances. According to the *BC Adolescent Health Survey*, about half of all young

people who reported using substances said they had at least one negative outcome when they used substances.

The reasons we use alcohol or other drugs influence our pattern of use and risk of harmful consequences. If it is mostly curiosity, occasional or experimental drug use may follow. If the reason for using substances is ongoing (e.g., a chronic sleep or mental health problem), then more long-lasting and intense substance use may occur. Reasons for intense short-term use (e.g., to fit in, have fun or ease temporary stress) may result in risky behaviour with high potential for acute harm.

Specific places, times and activities influence our substance use patterns and the likelihood of experiencing harms. Unsupervised teen drinking, for example, can be a particularly high-risk activity. Using drugs before or while driving, boating, or hiking in dangerous areas greatly increases the risk of injury.

Open and supportive conversations, clearly stated expectations for communication and behaviour, promoting good personal boundaries and appropriate handling of any consequences will help a young person understand there are strategies to take on the challenges of becoming an adult. Navigating the use of substances, a part of



life that interacts with virtually every aspect of development, can be one of the most challenging situations for youth, parents and caring supporters alike.

Is Roger's situation familiar to you? How do you think your feelings and experiences around growing up, leaving home, with fewer rules and restrictions might impact how you speak to a young person in your life? Here are some questions to consider when thinking about talking to a young adult about using substances. If you were Roger, how might you approach your son when he comes home from school? Roger is fairly confident the talk will go well. He has "been there" and might share those experiences with his son as a place to begin discussion.

Solid family relationships are a foundation for health and wellness for young people, while buffering them from a wide variety of concerns – such as illness, social difficulties (including alcohol and other drug use) and emotional health issues (such as depression and anxiety). Roger and his son have a history of relating well to each other. However, we can all use a little help improving our approach to challenging conversations. The following tips can help you talk with a youth about substance use in a way that encourages conversation.

Questions for reflection

- How much do I encourage my child to be who they are in our family?
- How much am I able to be who I am (as a parental figure) with them?
- How comfortable am I with differences in our family?
- How able am I to think through my responses to my child on important matters before I take action?



Strategies for talking with youth

- Are you ready to have an open, thoughtful, respectful conversation? If not, then perhaps the conversation should take place another time.
- A good setting can lay the foundation for a calm, open conversation. Do you have a favourite activity that you and the young person share and enjoy? Is the setting private? A quiet meal or a walk may be just the right time to talk.
- It often helps to start conversation on a lighter note. You might begin by asking the young person about themselves. What works best will depend on your relationship with



✓ Strategies (Continued)

the youth. If you know them well, you might need to know more about what's going on with them that day.

- Is the young person in a good place to have a conversation at that moment? If all cues say yes, it's a good time to talk, there are techniques for having a healthy conversation about substances

Techniques for healthy conversations about substances:

- **Open-ended questions** encourage conversation.
 - ↳ Lately, you talk a lot more about going to parties with your friends. As you know, things can get unpredictable with alcohol or other drugs around. What plans do you have for ensuring everything goes well?

💡 Do you have plans to handle the alcohol use that goes on at parties?

- **Active listening** shows *you want to understand* how the other person sees things. **Reframing** the youth's thoughts and feelings in a slightly different way helps move the conversation forward. It also helps identify what the youth means by what they said. A young person might say, "I don't really see the big deal with having a beer with my friends." You might respond, "It sounds like you think you're ready to handle casual drinking. What would responsible drinking look like to you?"
- **Self-motivating statements.** This can help young people find their own reasons for doing something. Asking, "What makes you interested in using...?" can help a youth reflect on why

they use substances. Paraphrasing answers ensures you understand the youth, and helps their thinking on the topic evolve.

- **Affirmations.** Acknowledge the other person's contribution to the conversation. For instance, "I really appreciate how seriously you're taking this conversation." When offered sincerely, this comment can generate a positive connection between yourself and a young person.
- **Summarizing the conversation.** This consolidates the discussion. If goals or next steps were outlined, this is a great way to ensure that everyone understands what has happened or is agreed on and how to proceed from here.

VIGNETTE 3 LINDA'S JOURNEY



LINDA IS A 54-YEAR-OLD TEACHER WHO LIVES ON VANCOUVER ISLAND. She has had very different experiences dealing with each of her teenage daughters learning about substances. Her eldest was never interested in drugs or alcohol and Linda always felt like she got a bit of “a free pass” with her. Her younger daughter has been a different story.

“She was 12 and smoking a joint, 13 and getting a bong – encouraging her friend’s little sister to try it and stuff like that.” While slightly concerned about her younger daughter, Linda has held the same position about substances, however, with both of her children. “I always want to have really open conversations, about all things, sex, drugs, whatever. And I think I did what most parents do – which is hope that your child is mindful of where they’re using, how much. That they’re not using too early or using too often...”

Linda’s husband has been equally involved in these conversations, often expressing his own side of things, “He’s been there and when these learning opportunities arrive with our daughter, he’s able to sit down with her in a respectful, non-confrontational way...he’s really great like that. We also talked about it together before we talked with her so that we were sure we understood each other.” Linda and her husband eventually decided to check in with a counsellor to make sure they were listening to and understanding each other, “We only went a couple

of times, but it helped us check in on our approach and get some practical strategies from the counsellor as well.”

Despite being a typical younger child – curious and experimental – Linda’s daughter’s substance use has never become problematic or escalated. Linda has taken several opportunities with her daughter to demonstrate the importance of managing the potential for harm when using substances.

“This summer we went to SunFest. She wanted to go on her own. It’s this big country music festival. It’s an environment where there are lots of things going on. I said, ‘you know I want you to go, but I want you to have an adult with you.’ It was kind of a bonding experience for us. We went with her friend and the three of us shared a hotel room. I know that they probably had a few ciders as part of that evening experience. We don’t **not** talk about it, but I don’t freak out about it. So when there’s some sort of event like that, I like to take the opportunity. It becomes a reason to have some of those conversations, which I think are so important.”

IN THIS STORY, a young person uses substances and does not seem to have encountered serious difficulties. Have you had similar or perhaps, different experiences when trying to talk with a youth you are concerned may be using substances? How do you make sense of what is happening?

Families affect the way young people view the world. Young people tend to view the world through the lens of 'my family'. This affects how youth see and respond to the world around them, including how they behave, handle challenges, and their general stress levels.

Families can feel very complicated at times. It may be helpful to learn a little bit about how families tend to interact with each other. For instance, when stress levels within the family are reduced, tensions tend to decrease between members. Reduced tension and stress can lead to greater resilience among young people. Resilience helps youth cope with challenges, deal with their feelings, bounce back from bad experiences, and move forward in the face of adversity.

Families share an emotional fabric, a specific way of relating to and being with each other. Every action can result in a reaction from others sharing the space. This is

why egg sandwiches are often explicitly forbidden on road trips! Young people are deeply tuned in to the family emotional environment. Families share feelings to different degrees, with some allowing more individual emotional space than others. The family 'norm' for talking about emotions will affect the young person's willingness to share their feelings. Family member reactions to emotional expression can influence a young person's ability to manage and express their feelings.

Linda and her husband set the stage for open communication and sharing feelings early in their family life. They understood that discussing situations beforehand, agreeing on a strategy and presenting a united front on the topic of substance use helped their children understand that talking with either parents would result in similar advice. This did not mean, as Linda noted, that everything was easy. Two children meant two unique individuals, with different lives. With diligence and mutual support the family was able to deal appropriately with the younger daughter's substance use.

One way to understand how interactions in our family might be affecting our children and their relationship to substances is to become an 'observer' of our family

dynamics. Asking ourselves reflective questions can also help us get at some of the dynamics in our family. Here are some questions to consider when thinking about how dynamics in your family may influence how you perceive and deal with a young person who may be using substances.

Questions for reflection

- **How easy is it for me to express opinions to my family about substances? What might contribute to any challenges I may have around that?**
- **Where does our family fall in terms of closeness? Are we well-connected but respectful of our differences? Do we seem to be in each other's business a lot? Or are we often a bit distant and superficial with one another?**
- **How comfortable are we having difficult conversations with one another?**



? Questions (Cont'd)

- **Where do our family concerns tend to fall? Do we seem to worry a lot about substance use in the family?**
- **What is my contribution to the dynamics in the family? Are there things I could do to manage myself better in my relationship with my partner, children or other family members?**

"It is important to not think of adolescence as involving several discrete, unconnected changes ... Everything is going on at the same time, and each aspect of teenage life affects every other."

– Dr. David Bainbridge

Interestingly, childhood is a great time for parents or caregivers to begin talking with their kids around responsible use of substances. There is increasing evidence that children are able to engage in simple

critical thinking and begin to make judgments for themselves. Developing these skills through conversation will help the child take part in more complicated decisions later on.

✓ Strategies for talking with youth

- **Try open-ended questions.** These encourage conversation. Saying, "I've noticed you seem to be more interested in using substances these days. Can you share with me a little of what that's about?" instead of, "Why are you smoking more weed?"
- **Reflective listening can be really helpful.** Restating what another person said (thoughts and feelings), allows more exploration of a topic. It also helps you better understand what the youth is saying, from their perspective. A young person might say, "I don't understand why you are having a problem with my smoking weed" You might respond, "It sounds like you think you're able to handle your smoking by yourself. What does smoking sensibly look like to you?"
- **Try statements that help young people motivate themselves.** This can help young people find their own reasons for doing something. Asking, "What makes you interested in using...?" can help a youth reflect on why they use substances. Paraphrasing answers ensures you understand the youth while aiding their thinking on the topic evolve.
- **Affirmations acknowledge the other person's genuine participation in the conversation.** For instance, "I really appreciate you talking with me and sharing how things are for you." When offered sincerely, this kind of comment can foster a connection between yourself and a young person.
- **Summarizing the conversation can help both people understand what happened.** This consolidates the discussion. If goals or next steps were outlined, this is a great way to ensure that everyone understands and agrees on how to proceed from here.

VIGNETTE 4 YIN YUE'S JOURNEY



YIN YUE, 50, AND HER HUSBAND, 51, IMMIGRATED TO CANADA FROM HONG KONG IN 1995. Yin Yue works in the pharmaceutical industry and her husband is an accountant. Their 17 year old son and 15 year old daughter were born in Canada. Yin Yue and her husband are proud they have been able to make a good life for their family. Substance use, other than small amounts of alcohol for special occasions, was tolerated in neither Yin Yue nor her husband's families.

Over the past several months Yin Yue has noticed that her son, a high school senior, increasingly spends time with his friends rather than taking part in family gatherings. Family is very important to Yin Yue. She misses hearing her son's laughter as he chatted with his grandparents during family visits. Last weekend, she found a box containing several cannabis cigarettes and two bags of some other substance she couldn't identify in the closet in his room.

Yin Yue showed the box and contents to her husband. Her husband became very angry and confronted their son that evening. The son admitted to smoking the cannabis cigarettes, but denied knowledge of the other substance. Smoking cannabis helped him relax, feel good, and accepted by his friends. After some investigation, Yin Yue's husband determined the other substance was crack cocaine. Yin Yue and her husband discussed the situation. They spoke with their son who told them he would no longer smoke cannabis. One evening several weeks later, the parents received a phone call from the hospital saying their son overdosed on a street acquired drug.

Both parents were extremely glad their son survived the overdose. Yin Yue was fearful the hospital may judge their son's behaviour and not offer further assistance. Her husband feared his son's behaviour might reflect on them in the community. Angry, confused, and scared, Yin Yue and her husband could not agree on how to help their son. At a meeting with a hospital social worker, the family agreed to try to improve their communication through conversations on using substances. Talking, leave alone conversation of overdosing and ending up in the hospital, seemed far out of reach to Yin Yue at that point.

Yin Yue worries her son may continue using substances in a dangerous way and there may be serious risk to his health, future and even his life if he continues to use drugs. The family is trying, but talking is hard. Though initially reluctant, the family decided to seek outside support as they gain more information and learn to talk with their son and now, their daughter. They hope to avoid such difficult situations in the future.

SUBSTANCE USE CAN SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASE THE CHANCE OF EXPERIENCING HARM.

Some ways of using substances are riskier than others. We do not know how, why or in what conditions Yin Yue's son used the drug, only that he experienced serious harm when he did so. Should Yin Yue's son continue to use substances in high risk ways, he may again experience severe harm, and a potentially devastating outcome.

Currently there is a toxic drug crisis in Canada. Drugs may contain substances other than what is named, for example fentanyl, in unknown amounts, that can cause overdose and death. This adds to the complexity of dealing with drugs purchased from an unregulated supply.

In this story, Yin Yue's son said that smoking cannabis helped him feel relaxed and accepted by his friends. This social anxiety is normal and everyone experiences it to some degree. It is not uncommon for people to use substances to relieve anxiety. Wanting to engage in a behavior because your friends are doing it is also normal but can lead young people to experiment more broadly with substances they might not otherwise try. Using substances in

these ways or in these situations can lead to a greater level of risk of harm for young people. Here is why.

Using substances can affect the 'feel good' system, a part of the brain that seeks out and manages feelings of pleasure and reward. Rewards result for example, from eating, sex, pleasant encounters with others and new or exciting activities. This can help explain why young people may be drawn to thrills, experimentation and spending time with their friends. However, there is potential for youth to feel not-so-good.

The effects of a substance can block or relieve certain feelings, such as anxiety. This helps us bypass feelings that are bothering us, but does not help us address the underlying reasons we are anxious. If you use a substance every time you are anxious or stressed, this can be dangerous. The brain does not discriminate between behaviour that generates positive consequences and those that may have negative outcomes. A question to keep in mind here might be, when is using a substance useful and when does it prevent us from addressing things that are really bothering us? Guidance and support from caring adults can play an important role for the young person.

Opportunities to discuss thoughts, feelings and desires to try new things, with parents and caring adults can help youth develop critical thinking skills. These skills will help when young people are tasked with navigating confusing situations, such as the first time they are offered a beer by a friend, or substances such as cocaine or heroin. Young people can also benefit from channeling their reward or pleasure-seeking instincts towards activities such as competitive sports or the arts, which can support their connection to others and their community, rather than activities that may disconnect them from healthy supports such as use of alcohol and other drugs.

Talking with a youth who has encountered serious harm when using substances may be anxiety producing and even frightening for parents or caring adults. Before talking, it is important that you have some clarity on how you feel, know where you stand on using substances and feel able to have a respectful conversation with the youth. Thinking about the following may help you gain a greater sense of what is happening for you as you prepare to talk to a youth.

THOUGH YIN YUE'S SON DID NOT OVERDOSE AT HOME, HE COULD HAVE DONE SO. If your child or young person comes home intoxicated or appears to be under the influence of other drugs, it is important to be as clear-headed as possible. If you are unsure of whether the young person has overdosed or not, it is better to treat the incident as an overdose.



? Questions for reflection

- Are there other things happening in my life that are contributing to my feelings in this situation? Your level of stress, issues at work or sleep deprivation can all affect how you feel about what is going on with your child.
- In the story, using substances such as alcohol was generally not acceptable in Yin Yue's family. How does my growing up or past use of substances, including caffeine and alcohol, impact how I feel about this situation?
- Thinking about the young person's motivations for using substances helps you put yourself in their shoes. Is there anything going on with the youth that has contributed to their decision to use? Is the young person dealing with difficult issues that I am not fully aware of?
- What is my main worry about my child's behaviour? Reflecting on your main concern will help you identify what you need to discuss with the youth and help keep the conversation on track.
- Sometimes young people use substances to cope with other issues in their lives. Are there things going on with us as a family right now that may be upsetting my child? Is my child facing other challenges that might be hard to cope with?
- Have I taken some time to discuss the situation with a partner, fellow caregiver, friend, or professional I trust? Getting someone else's perspective can help you remain calm and able to listen to the young person.

Responding to an emergency

- **TAKE A BREATH AND STAY CALM.** If your child or the young person is intoxicated, ensure they are safe. Try to find out what they took or drank. If you have assessed them and they do not seem to be in any danger, continue to check in on them periodically.
- If the young person cannot talk with you, is losing consciousness, or exhibits the signs of either alcohol poisoning or an opioid overdose, call 911. You can administer naloxone if you have it and know how to use it. Place the person on their side, in the recovery position, cover them with a blanket, and continue to monitor until help arrives.

Signs of alcohol poisoning

- Confusion
- Vomiting
- Seizures
- Slow breathing (less than eight breaths a minute)
- Irregular breathing (a gap of more than 10 seconds between breaths)
- Blue-tinged skin or pale skin
- Low body temperature- person feels cool to the touch
- Passing out (unconsciousness) and can't be awakened

Signs of opioid overdose

- Awake, but unable to talk
- Vomiting
- Loss of consciousness
- They don't respond if you speak directly into their ear or shake them
- Breathing is very slow and shallow, erratic, or has stopped
- Skin tone turns bluish purple (lighter skin tones), or is grayish (darker skin tones)
- Choking sounds, or a snore-like gurgling noise
- Body is very limp
- Face is very pale or clammy
- Fingernails and lips turn blue or purplish black
- Pulse (heartbeat) is slow, erratic, or not there at all

✓ Strategies for talking with youth

- **Take some time to rest and think through what happened.** While you may want to talk to the young person immediately, taking time to reflect can help you let the young person know you trust in the relationship you have with them. It also helps you prepare for an unhurried and thoughtful conversation with the young person.
- **Take a little time to focus on the details of the situation as well as the feelings involved.** This can allow you to separate the situation from the feelings while remain sensitive to both. Reflecting on tangible aspects of the situation (e.g., events you observed, words spoken) can give you a different perspective and help you talk with the young person about what

happened. It may also help you create a timeline of events that led to the current incident, perhaps weeks or months prior to the occurrence. This can help you connect the 'dots' between events, and develop a strategy for the next time the youth is faced with similar choices.

- **Is there something else I can do to help make this a learning experience for the young person?** Alcohol and other drugs are a part of the society the youth will continue to need to navigate. Is there anything from your knowledge or experience, or what other caring adults or professionals know that can help the youth be better prepared to deal with future substance use issues?

A final word ...

The journey into adulthood is an important and often challenging process. As bodies and minds mature, young people experience a range of physical changes, new thoughts, and feelings. The journey from middle school to high school, college, university or the working world, brings young people increasing levels of freedom from adult supervision. As they move out into the world, young people explore new things, wonder about who they are and imagine the kind of life they want. Experimenting with substances is often one of those explorations.

Substance use is common in our society. If we include caffeine and nicotine along with alcohol, cannabis and other drugs, using substances is a daily occurrence for most people. As we have seen in the stories in this guide, some young people are more affected than others by trying or using substances. And, some families have an easier time dealing with their children's exploration of substances than others. Many young people arrive at adulthood with few apparent effects from experimenting with or using substances. Here are some recent statistics illustrating this point.

According to the 2023 *BC Adolescent Health Survey*, the top five reasons youth use substances were:

- To have fun – Of those young people who used substances, 61% say they did so to have a good time
- Experimentation – About 32% of young people who used substances said they did so because they were curious and wanted to try them
- Their friends do it – Of young people who used substances, nearly a third (30%) said they sometimes did so because their friends used substances
- Stress – Twenty-two percent (22%) of young people who used substances cited stress as a reason for their substance use. However, more females (25%) than males (16%), reported stress as a reason for their substance use. Non-binary youth were the most likely to have used substances due to stress (33%).
- Feeling down or sad – was a reason for using substances approximately 20% of the time. Females were more likely to report using substances when they felt down or sad (24%) and males (14%). Thirty-one percent (31%) of non-binary youth reported using substances for this reason.

Young people reported using substances to manage pain, because they felt pressured to do so or were dependent on the substance a small percentage (6% or less) of the time.

The most frequently cited downsides of using substances were:

- Doing something the youth didn't later remember or passing out (22-29%).
- About 13% of young people said they got hurt (a physical injury) while using substances or had some kind of relationship issue (a fight with someone they care about) related to their substance use.

Few young people (less than 10%) reported that using substances affected their school work, or resulted in property damage, unwelcome physical or sexual contact, or legal problems. Less than 2% of young people said that using substances was a problem for them including overdosing, or other potential long-term effects.

Our growing up experiences and history of using substances affect the way we view substance use as parents or adults who care for young people. We may also disagree with a partner on what is appropriate for our children or how to deal with a range

of issues, including using substances. It is important that we build rapport and talk as a family in open and honest ways about using substances.

If we work at building positive and open relationships with our children and youth, they are more likely to seek us out to discuss their concerns, including using substances. When they do, they are giving us the power to have something useful to say to them. When used with care, that power can promote growth in everyone, including ourselves. Young people's experiences with us will influence how they approach substance use with their children. In this way we can 'pay it forward', supporting more engaged and caring relationships for generations to come.

If you would like more in-depth material on substance use and families, please explore the resources listed at the end of this guide.

FURTHER RESOURCES

ALCOHOL SENSE

<https://alcohol-dialog.openanswers.ca/resources/alcohol-sense-healthy-families-bc/>

This resource, part of Healthy Families BC, provides parents and adult influencers with tips, tools and videos for starting conversations that will help guide kids towards healthy decisions when it comes to alcohol.

BC ADOLESCENT HEALTH SURVEY 2023

https://mcs.bc.ca/about_bcahs

The BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS) is a questionnaire used to gather information about young people's physical and emotional health, and factors that can influence health during adolescence or in later life. The survey is conducted by the McCreary Centre Society in collaboration with the provincial government and public health system, and with the cooperation of BC's school districts.

CANNABIS USE AND YOUTH: A PARENT'S GUIDE

heretohelp.bc.ca/sites/default/files/cannabis-use-and-youth-a-parents-guide.pdf

This guide provides an honest and thoughtful discussion on cannabis so parents can make better decisions about cannabis use—or non-use—in the context of your family and

be better equipped to have productive conversations with their children.

HELPING SCHOOLS

<https://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/projects/archive/projects/helping-schools.php>

Resources designed to help educators and other adults in the school community stimulate students to think differently about drugs and to explore the meaning of drugs in human experience. The Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research is happy to provide consultation and support to schools, districts, and parent organizations. Contact helpingschools@carbc.ca for more information.

THE ART OF MOTIVATION

<https://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/publications/screening-tools/art-of-motivation/index.php>

This resource was designed to help school professionals and other adults engage in meaningful conversations with young people about their alcohol or other drug use. It applies the principles of motivational interviewing to support positive behaviour change.

SAFER USE SERIES

heretohelp.bc.ca/news/safer-use-series

This series of brochures provides information and tips for those who choose to use alcohol, cannabis or illegal drugs. The information provided is practical, balanced and non-judgemental.

ALCOHOL AND DRUG INFORMATION & REFERRAL SERVICE

211 within Regional Districts of Squamish-Lillooet, the Fraser Valley and Metro Vancouver; 1-800-663-1441 elsewhere in BC

Worried about drug and alcohol use? Whether it's for yourself or someone you care about, you can call this service for information, options and support. They can refer you to a full range of counselling and treatment services across BC. Services are confidential, multilingual, free, and available 24/7.



University
of Victoria

Canadian Institute for
Substance Use Research

cisur.ca

