



LET'S TALK

**Supporting Parents, Schools and Caring Adults
To Speak With Youth About Substances**

AN INFORMATION TOOLKIT FOR CARING ADULTS



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Territorial Acknowledgement

Before Canada and British Columbia were formed, Indigenous Peoples lived in balance and interconnectedness with the land and water in which the necessities of life are provided. Health disparities persist, which are due to the impacts of colonization and Indigenous-specific racism.

Healthy lands, healthy people.

Island Health acknowledges and recognizes these homelands and the stewardship of Indigenous Peoples of this land; it is with humility we continue to work toward building our relationship.

Resource prepared by Griffin Russell

School Health Promoter - Island Health

After many years of working with children, youth and families, this resource was prepared in recognition of the incredible efforts parents/caregivers, school staff and other caring adults invest toward helping children and youth navigate the world around them, including substances and substance use. It was written with admiration and respect.


Acknowledgements

Thank you to the following people for putting time and energy into reviewing, revising and strengthening this resource, as each contributed valued expertise and perspectives: Douglas Hardie, Jessica Henderson, Elyse Kornhauser, Niki Pankratz, Stephanie McCune, Rebekah Kirk, Del-Rae Young, Alicia Parayno.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Territory Acknowledgement and Acknowledgement of Contributors	2
Purpose	4
Substances Used by Youth	
• Alcohol	5
• Nicotine	6
• Cannabis	7
• Other substances - beyond alcohol, nicotine, cannabis	8
Why Youth Use Substances	9
The Spectrum of Substance Use	10
What Harm Do Youth Report Experiencing	11
British Columbia's Unregulated Drug Poisoning/Overdose Crisis	12
Talking to Youth About Substances	13
• Preliminary Considerations	14
• Start Early	14
• Be Prepared	14
• Set the Stage	15
• Role Model	15
• Focus on Listening	15
• Be Present and Be Available	15
• Seek Support	16
• Closing Considerations	17
Supportive Resources	
• Counselling (Treatment & Recovery)	18
• Parent and Caregiver Resources	18
• Health Promotion Resources	19

PURPOSE

Many parents and caring adults share common concerns about adolescents using substances. Often, there are a variety of concerns, including fear of youth experiencing harm, developing a problematic relationship with substances, or substance use not aligning with family or social values. These concerns are both common and normal, and are a reflection of care and love. 

This resource was created in recognition of caregivers' concerns, offering relevant facts on adolescent substance use and providing practical strategies to support you as parents and caring adults in talking to youth about substance use and substances of concern.

Additional Intentions:

- Look at substance use as a spectrum
- Encourage ways to be a supportive guide for youth
- Provide current guidance and supporting resources for parents and caring adults

According to youth, it is important to ground our conversations in facts and evidence.

This resource is grounded in data from the 2023 McCreary Adolescent Health Survey.

- Surveyed approximately 38,500 youth throughout BC
- Youth in grades 7-12
- Conducted every five years
- Realities shared by youth
- Helps identify trends in youth health

This resource will compare data from 2023 with historical trends.



Youth surveyed reported what substances they are using, frequency, reasons behind use, harms they experience, and how often they experience these harms.

ALCOHOL

Alcohol remains the most widely used substance among youth.

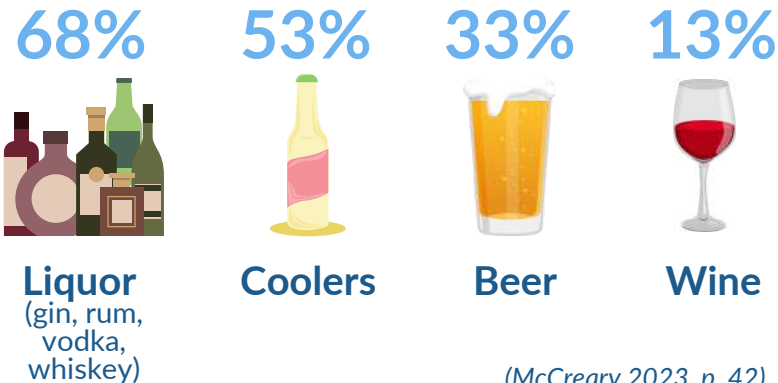
Most youth in BC between grades 7-12 have not tried alcohol. Among youth who have tried alcohol:

10% Had 2 or more drinks on at least 1 day in past week

13% Had 5 or more drinks within a couple of hours on at least 1 day in past month (considered binge drinking)

In 2023, more youth reported experimenting with alcohol at an earlier age.

What types of alcohol youth are consuming



(McCreary 2023, p. 42)

(More than one response was permitted)

Knowing youth are consuming drinks with higher concentrations of alcohol (ie. liquor and coolers) may warrant consideration for discussion with youth. These conversations can help them understand and prevent risks, like alcohol poisoning and reduce other harms related to intoxication.



Low risk drinking guidelines:

- Youth should not consume any alcohol
- For those who do, they should not:
 - consume more than 1-2 drinks on any occasion
 - drink alcohol more than once per week

(CCSA 2023)

Positive trend

The number of youth who have tried alcohol “beyond just a couple of sips” is declining.

38% in 2023
VS
54% in 2018

(McCreary 2023, p. 41,
McCreary 2018, p. 49)

NICOTINE

Nicotine is a powerfully addictive substance and the second most widely used substance by youth in BC. Youth may consume nicotine through the use of vapour and tobacco products as well as emerging nicotine products such as nicotine pouches.

1/4 BC youth surveyed had ever vaped
15% Of those youth report vaping daily

Concern

Evidence shows that vaping may lead to tobacco smoking among young people and this was shown to be true for BC youth who had vaped and smoked being “over three times as likely to have vaped first than they were to have smoked first.”

(McCreary, 2023, p. 40)

“Nicotine use by youth is particularly concerning as “youth are especially vulnerable to its negative effects, which include harming the part of the brain that controls mood, learning, and attention. Even using small amounts of nicotine may increase the risk of developing a dependence in the future, since youth can become dependent at lower levels of exposure than adults.”

(Health Canada, August 2024)

Nicotine Pouches:

- Tobacco-free pouches placed in the upper or lower lip.
- Nicotine is absorbed quickly into the bloodstream.
- Approved nicotine pouches are meant for Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT).

Unregulated, unapproved nicotine pouches are flooding the market in Canada. These products are designed and marketed in ways that appeal to youth.

Positive trend:

There is a steady decline in youth who smoke cigarettes in BC.

26% in 2008

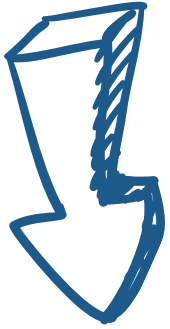
VS

15% in 2023

(McCreary 2023, p. 40)



CANNABIS



After alcohol and nicotine, cannabis was the third most widely used substance among youth in BC. Like alcohol and nicotine, cannabis use among youth continues to decline.

Among youth who had ever used cannabis

2/3 Had consumed in the past month, most commonly 1-2 days

15% Approx. who had ever used cannabis consumed it 20 days or more

Method of Consumption

73%



Smoking

34%



Vaping

23%



Edibles

(McCreary 2023, p. 43)

Positive trend

The percentage of youth who have ever tried cannabis is lower than in previous years.

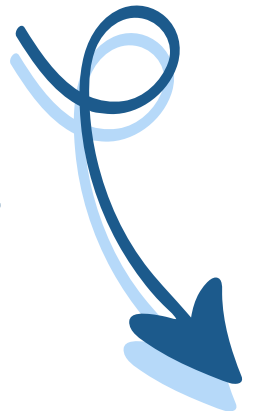
30% in 2008

VS

25% in 2018

VS

20% in 2023



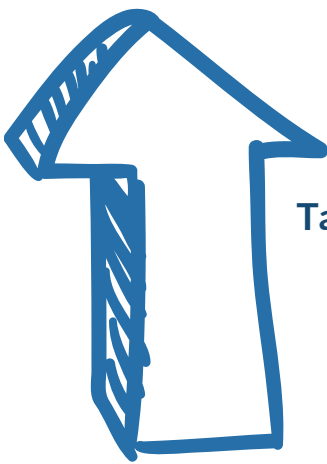
(McCreary 2023, p. 43)

OTHER SUBSTANCES

The percentage of youth using substances other than alcohol, nicotine and cannabis are considerably lower, and youth generally reported declining use of these substances.



Increase in trends



Mushrooms
6% in 2023
5% in 2018

Taking more of their own prescription than prescribed

6% in 2023
5% in 2018

(McCreary 2023, p. 44)

"I would like to learn more about how to avoid drugs."
 Grade 9 Student

Positive trend

Fewer youth report using:



3% in 2018
2% in 2023



In general, use of other substances remains low.

1% in 2023

Amphetamines
Dissociatives
 (Ketamine, GHB)
Opioids
 (Fentanyl, Heroin)

"We should be taught how to use naloxone on other people and ourselves."
 Grade 11 Student

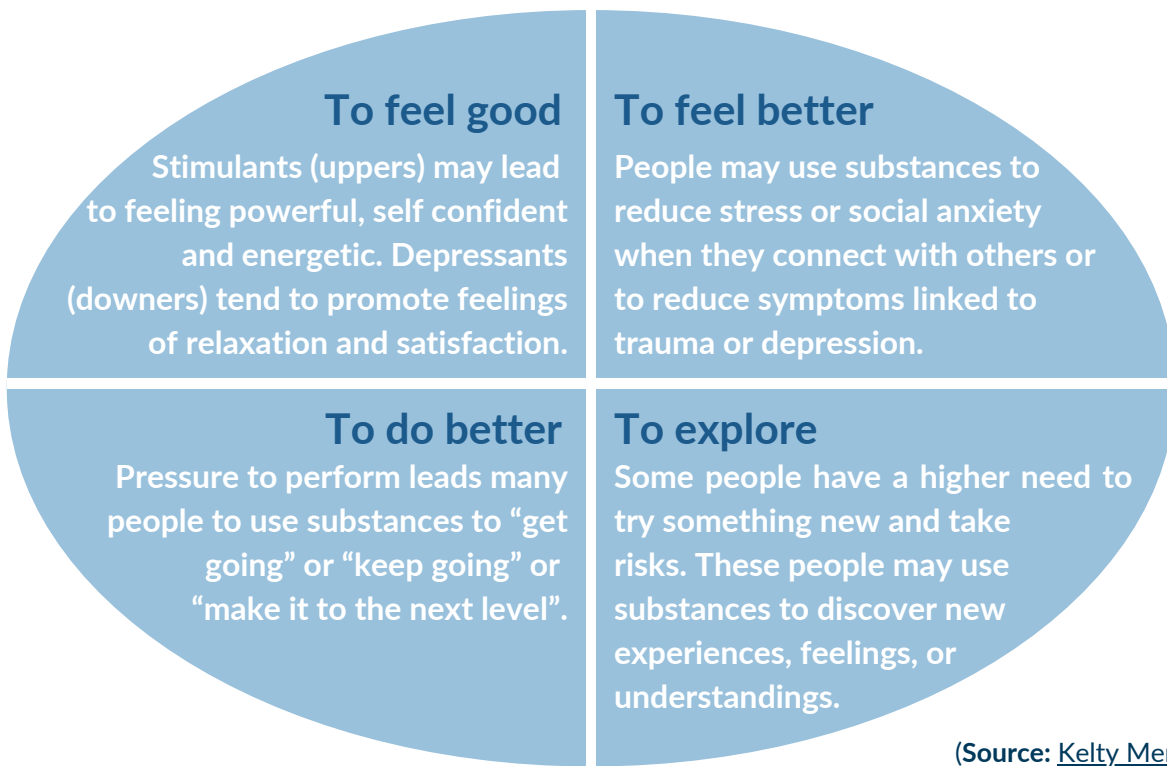
Substances Youth Have Ever Used	
Mushrooms	6%
More of their own prescription than prescribed	6%
Prescription pills without a doctor's consent (other than benzodiazepines)	4%
Hallucinogens (other than mushrooms)	2%
Inhalants	2%
Benzodiazepines without a doctor's consent (eg., Xanax, Valium, Ativan)	2%
Cocaine	2%
Ecstasy/MDMA	2%
Heroin, fentanyl, or other opioids	1%
Amphetamines	1%
Crystal Meth	1%
Ketamine, GHB	1%

(McCreary 2023, p. 44)

WHY YOUTH USE SUBSTANCES

When asked, youth report using substances for many of the same reasons adults use substances: **for their desired benefits.**

Youth are seeking to feel good, to feel better, to do better and to explore new experiences, considering what types of future choices may or may not fit for them.



(Source: [Kelty Mental Health](#))

Youth use substances because







(McCreary 2023, p. 44)

THE SPECTRUM OF SUBSTANCE USE

Some parents and caring adults experience fear that any teen substance use signals a harmful pattern, dependence or addiction.

This fear may arise from:

-  **Unexpected use:** Learning their teen tried substances earlier than expected.
-  **Substance concerns:** Worrying about specific substances and their risks.
-  **Personal history:** Family or loved one's experiences with problematic or harmful substance use.
-  **Media influence:** Exposure to stories highlighting addiction, crime and harm.

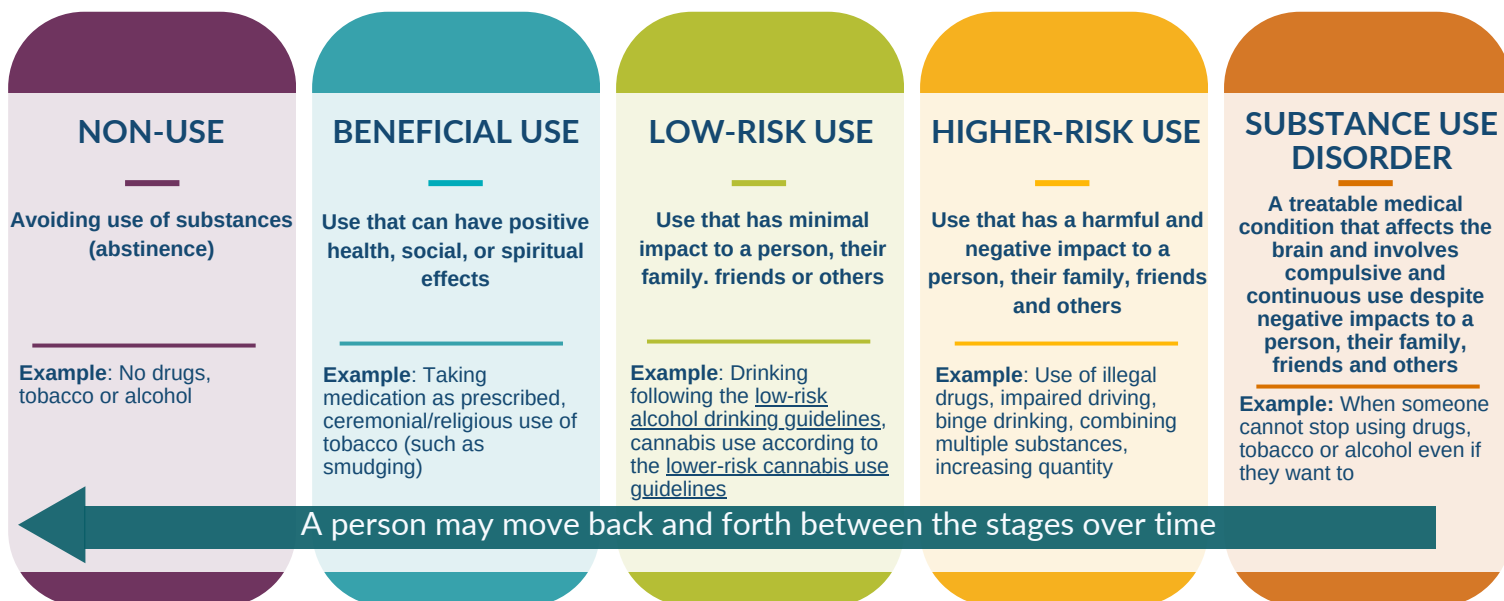
In reality, substance use varies widely among individuals, families, and communities.

Understanding substance use as a spectrum helps us understand both its potential benefits and risks for ourselves and the youth we care about.



Evidence supports that only a small portion of people experience a substance use disorder, and other health and social factors often play a role.

The image below shows consideration of different phases associated with substance use. It can help when thinking about someone's use of substances. This includes youth's main intentions to have fun, try something new, socialize with peers, reduce stress, feel better, evade boredom, treat physical pain, and focus better.



(Source: [Government of Canada](#))

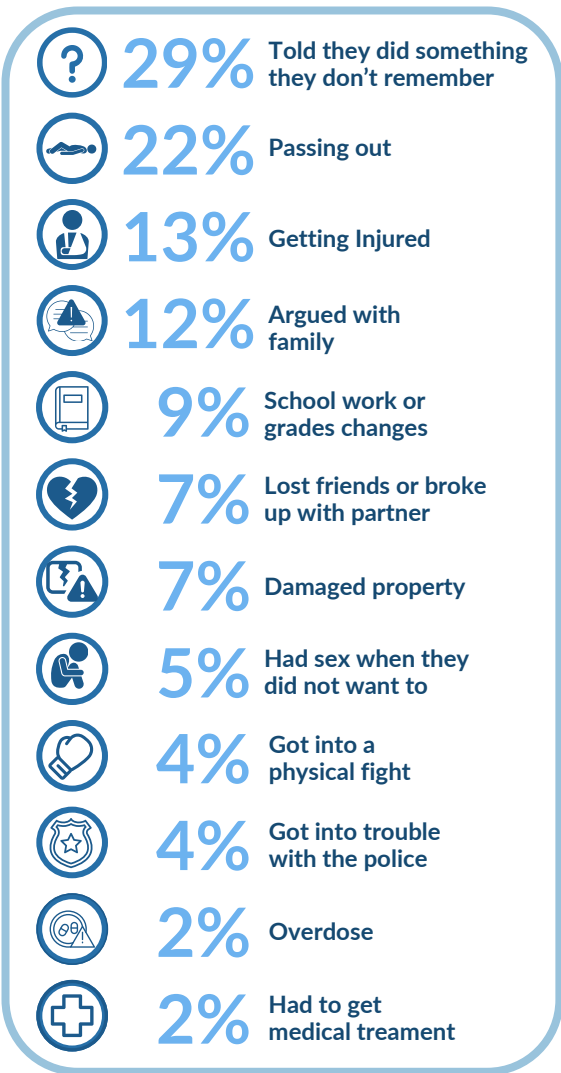
WHAT HARMS DO YOUTH REPORT EXPERIENCING



While it is important to be aware of the intended benefits behind the use of substances, it is just as important to be familiar with the harms youth may experience.

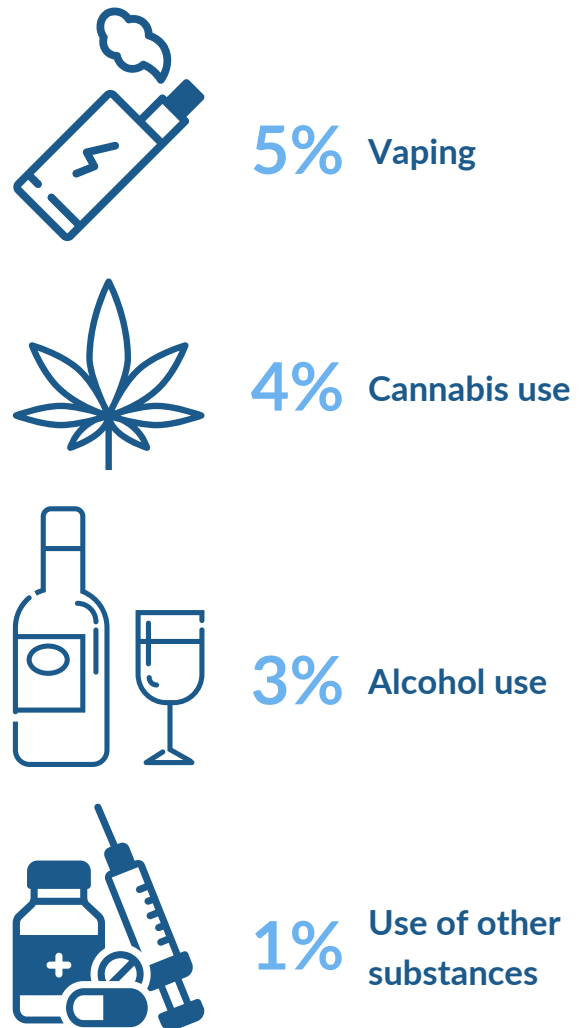


More than half of youth who reported using substances in the past 12 months did not report experiencing any harms. Among those who did, the most common harms were:



(McCreary 2023, p. 45)

Youth surveyed in 2023 were also asked whether, in the past 12 months, they had been told they needed help due to concerns about their substance use. Youth reported:



(McCreary 2023, p. 46)

BC'S UNREGULATED DRUG POISONING/OVERDOSE CRISIS

In April 2016, a **public health emergency** was declared due to increasing drug overdose deaths.

- By Dr. Perry Kendall
Provincial Health Officer at the time

More than **190** youth throughout BC have tragically died from an overdose, also referred to as drug poisoning, since **2016**

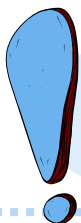
Unregulated drugs have become more toxic, more dangerous, and mixed with harmful substances in recent years.

83% of youth drug poisoning deaths involved synthetic opioid **fentanyl/fentanyl analogues**.

The **#1** cause of **preventable** deaths for youth between **10-19 years old** is drug poisonings.

In fact, drug poisonings are the leading cause of **preventable** death for people between **10-59 years old**.

More than **16,000** people have died.



“The overdose and toxic drug crisis continues to be the most pressing public health issue of our time.” (CCSA 2025)



Many young people have lost **parents, siblings, family members, and friends** to drug poisonings. This is a difficult and painful adverse childhood experience that can affect their **health and well-being** in the present and the future.



TALKING TO YOUTH ABOUT SUBSTANCES

Research shows that parents, caregivers, and other caring adults play an important role in talking to kids and teens about substances. By sharing facts and different perspectives they can help youth think about how and if substances fit into their current or future lives.



Where Youth Learn About Substances

Children and youth often have some awareness of what substances are, and what substances are considered acceptable to social norms and values through:



- Family and friends
- Social media (ads, TV, movies, music, influencers)
- Personal experiences

Your Role as a Caring Adult

- Be a **trusted resource** for youth
- Model **healthy and responsible relationships** with substances
- Share **factual information** to help youth understand risks and choices
- Align discussions with **family and social values**



How to Start a Conversation

- **Know your values**
What do you believe about substance use?
- **Be open and non-judgmental**
Create a safe space for discussion
- **Use reliable information**
Share facts, not fear
- **Encourage questions**
Let youth express their thoughts and concerns

Why These Conversations Matter



- Help youth make informed decisions
- Strengthen safety and connection
- Encourage a healthier adolescence and adulthood

Next Steps



The following section will provide **evidence-based** strategies to help you feel prepared, confident, and informed when talking to youth about substance use.

TALKING TO YOUTH ABOUT SUBSTANCES

Preliminary Considerations

Take a moment to imagine the future, where you have successfully shared the knowledge and skills you want a young person to have about substances and substance use. You have also helped them understand the values that matter most.

- **What knowledge and skills would the youth have about different substances and substance use?**
- **What values would they base their decisions on related to their use, or not, of different substances?**
- **What would their relationship with substances look and feel like?**

Start Early

- **Talk early and often**
Start discussions about substances when your child is young
- **Ask questions**
 - What do you notice about how people act in movies or social situations where alcohol, cannabis, or nicotine are used?
 - How do you feel about what you see?
- **Listen to their perspective**
Understand their thoughts and experiences.
- **Share your views**
Explain your knowledge, beliefs, and preferences about substance use.
- **Correct misunderstandings**
Help them separate facts from myths.
- **Discuss values**
Talk about what you consider acceptable or not acceptable based on your family values and social norms.



Be Prepared

These conversations can be challenging, as our own experiences or fears associated with certain substances can make conversations with children/youth emotionally difficult. Evidence suggests it is important to:

- **Stay calm**
- **Stay curious**
- **Be clear in your expectations**
- **Be prepared with facts on different substances being discussed**
- **Think ahead**

Think about what you want to understand from your child/youth and what you want them to understand from you.

This can help you organize and prioritize your expectations and facts to inform your perspectives.



TALKING TO YOUTH ABOUT SUBSTANCES

Set the stage

Look for opportunities to talk with your child/youth about substance use and other important health topics. Creating open, safe, and supportive conversations helps build trust and encourages them to share their thoughts and perspectives on substances, health, and choices people make.

You may choose to:

- **Connect their views to your family or social values**
- **Share your expectations and hopes for them**
- **Remind them you are always there for support**

In your own way, and as best you can, you want to set the stage for meaningful and supportive conversations throughout adolescence and into adulthood.

Role Model

Children and youth look to their parents and other caring adults' to understand what is acceptable or not.

It is important for us to reflect on our own relationships with substances and how our behaviour influences their ideas about what is normal, healthy, and acceptable.



We have both an opportunity and a responsibility to be positive role models on this issue, as well as others.



Focus on Listening

- **Show you care**
Listening carefully signals that you value their thoughts and feelings.
- **Be curious**
Ask questions that encourage your youth to share what they know, what they don't know, and any concerns or stress they might have and even their curiosity and interest in substances.
- **Understand their perspective**
Knowing what they think allows you to build on their knowledge and clear up any misunderstandings.
- **Keep the conversation open**
Good listening helps keep the dialogue ongoing and makes it easier to revisit the topic later.

Be Present and Available

Pay attention to your youth, notice changes in their behavior, friends, interests and moods. From a compassionate place, acknowledge what you notice and let them know you are always there to listen and support. If your instinct is that something is off:

- **Create time to connect**
- **Make their favorite dinner**
- **Play their favourite song while driving**
- **Anything to let them know you see them, value them and are a safe space**



If they ask to talk, even if it is not about this topic, make yourself available and demonstrate their importance by making time and space for them. These are meaningful gestures of love and mattering.

SUPPORT FOR PARENTS AND FAMILIES

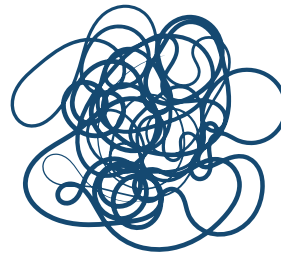
Seek Support

Every family's journey with substance use is different. Helping children/youth build a healthy and safe relationship with substance use can be challenging at times.

Why support is important:

- Parents and caring adults also need support to process emotions and experiences
- Getting support can help families stay connected and communicate better
- Seeking help when needed can provide useful tools for navigating the complexities of youth substance use

Conversations about substance use may bring up strong emotions and sometimes lead to conflict. This is understandable as adults want to protect children and youth; however, anxiety, fear, and other powerful emotional responses from adults can disrupt the connection and relationship with youth.



High emotional responses can undermine safety and support needed to help them navigate through challenging situations.

When emotions run high it's important to focus on:

- **Staying connected** with your child, even when conversations are difficult
- **Communicating openly and calmly**, so your child/youth feels safe to share
- **Balancing boundaries and support**, to create a safe space for learning and growth.

CLOSING CONSIDERATIONS

Parent and caregivers have always shown incredible strength and resourcefulness in how they support their children/youth. The same is true for coaches, teachers, and other caring adults. These relationships serve as significant protective factors by playing a key role in helping young people feel safe and supported. Strong connections with trusted adults can make a difference.



In BC, youth report better health and well-being when they have:

Supportive adults in their family, school, or community

Access to the services and resources they need

(McCreary 2023)



By continuing to show up, listen, and offer guidance, we help build resilience in children and youth in our lives.

SUPPORTIVE RESOURCES

Counselling (Recovery & Treatment)

- Island Health – [Discovery Youth & Family Substance Use Services](#)



- Island Health – Mental Health and Substance Use Service Link
1-888-494-3888

- British Columbia – Alcohol and Drug Information and Referral Service
1-800-663-1441

- The Foundry BC – Virtual Counselling Services **1-833-308-6379**
Can be accessed through web app - www.foundrybc.ca.virtual



- First Nations Health Authority – [Mental Health and Wellness Resources](#)



Parent & Caregiver Resources

- BC Ministry of Education and Child Care – [Language Matters](#)



- Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre – [Substance Use & Youth](#)



- Royal Canadian Mounted Police – [Drug Awareness for Parents](#)



- Government of British Columbia – [Talking to Youth](#)



- ABC's of Youth Substance Use – [Preparing Parents and Caregivers for Substance Use Conversations](#)



SUPPORTIVE RESOURCES

Health Promotion Resources

- Island Health- [2024 Chief Medical Health Officer Report](#)



- McCreary Adolescent Health Survey – [Reports](#)



- CCSA – [Canada’s Guidance on Drinking and Health for Youth](#)



- CAMH – [Lower-Risk Cannabis Guidelines for Youth](#)



- BC Lung Foundation – [Tobacco, Vaping and Cannabis](#)



- Government of BC - [Respond to an Overdose](#)



- Substance Drug Checking – [Drug Checking on Vancouver Island](#)



- National Overdose Response Service NORS – 1-888-688-6677