

# How to talk to Youth about Substance Use



## Focus on engagement and rapport building:

- Avoid opening discussions by diving into the details of a young person's substance use
- Begin with lighter, non-threatening topics. Levity and asking about their day is a good start.
- Be genuine and authentic. Youth can sense when you are not being authentic.
- Check in throughout the session to make sure you are understanding the youth

## Be Hopeful:

- Celebrate their abilities and strengths, as well as recognize their personal goals
- Convey that change is possible and support their self-efficacy



## Avoid Stigma and Blame:

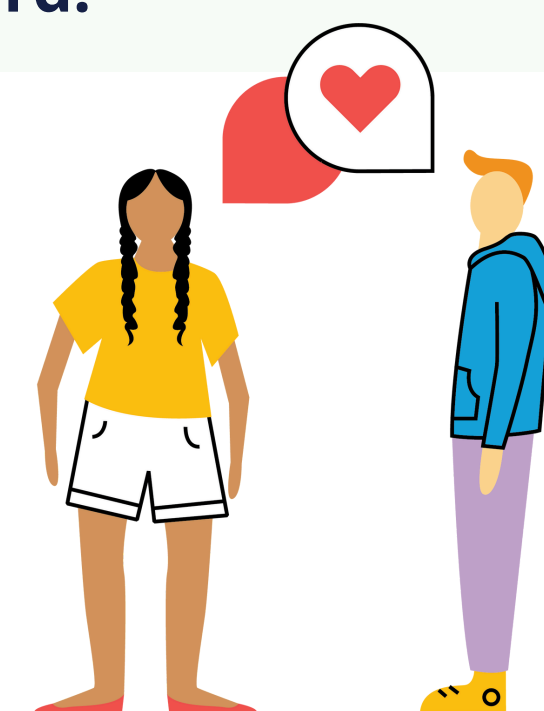
- Validate what makes sense about their use (e.g. self-medication, peer pressure, etc.) rather than substance use being indicative of failure or deviance

## Considerations around how to talk to youth about substance use:

- **Consider your own biases about substance use**, such as youth are simply acting out/choosing to use and therefore can easily change behavior.
- **Be mindful of language**, use language that is validating and aligns with words that youth use in session to describe their experience. Person-first language is important.
- **Consider their stage of development and cognitive functioning** to inform language, information shared, treatment goals/interventions.
- **Create a safe environment** by using culturally safe and appropriate, trauma-informed, and gender-informed approaches.
- **Collaborate**. Work with youth to make their own informed choices by listening to them, asking open-ended questions, and inquiring about their goals. When the time is right, you can share the information you know based on our expertise and training.

## Examples of questions to ask youth that explore both the benefits and drawbacks of substance use or non-use to help them reflect and articulate their personal goals moving forward:

- Do any of your friends drink, smoke or use drugs? If so, how do you feel about this?
- Have you tried to have any periods without using substances? How did it go?
- When was the last time you used (got drunk/stoned or high)? Could you remember everything?
- Have you ever thought about changing or reducing your substance use? Or a specific substance?
- In the last three months, what is the longest time you have gone without any alcohol or drug use?
- What happens if you don't use? Do you notice any physical or emotional changes?



To learn more about self-reflection, preparing for the conversation with youth, and understanding substance use health, check out the [Substance Use Conversations with Youth: Tips for Adult Allies](#) from Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction.