

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:

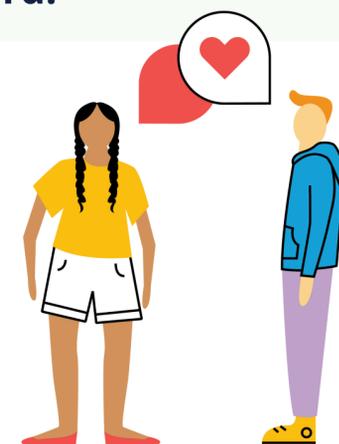
- Validate what makes sense about their use (e.g. self-medication, peer pressure, etc.) rather than substance use being indicative of failure or deviance

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.