

# Harm Reduction & Youth Substance Use



**Harm Reduction** is an evidence-based, public health approach that applies to several health domains such as safe operation of vehicles, safer sexual health practices, injury prevention, infectious disease control, and substance use.<sup>1,2</sup> In the context of substance use, **harm reduction aims to decrease the negative health, social, and economic consequences of substance use-related harms**; this approach recognizes that the spectrum of harm reduction also includes abstinence-based goals.<sup>2</sup>

A harm reduction approach is particularly relevant for youth, as it acknowledges the realities of adolescence, which often involves a period defined by rapid neurodevelopment, curiosity, risk-taking, experimentation with substances, skepticism of authority, and other behaviours that can carry risks.<sup>3,4</sup>



To learn more about Substance Use and Harm Reduction read [the Substance Use Practice Brief on Harm Reduction with Youth through Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario](#).



## Examples of substance use related harm reduction practices, programs, and services:



### Education and Support Services

- Substance use and safer use education
- Counselling and peer support



### Overdose Prevention

- Overdose prevention (e.g., naloxone)
- Needle and syringe exchange programs
- Substance checking services



### Supervised and Regulated Use

- Supervised consumption sites
- Virtual supervision for substance users



### Medical Interventions

- Opioid Agonist Therapy (e.g., buprenorphine)
- Community and hospital-based withdrawal management services

## Summary of Evidence

- Rising mental health challenges and the growing threat of a toxic drug supply underscore the urgent need for integrated, youth-focused harm reduction and mental health support.<sup>4,5,6</sup>
- Many harm reduction programs and interventions have been studied, developed and funded in the context of adults with less focus on the youth population.<sup>7</sup>
- Studies have showcased the significant effects of harm reduction education and interventions in reducing substance use and harm in youth.<sup>8</sup>



## Practice-based Harm Reduction considerations when working with youth

Learn about more practice-based considerations with examples by reading the full practice brief using the QR code

- Use a **patient-centred approach** that acknowledges the perceived benefits of substance use and provides harm reduction strategies that align with the individual's goals.<sup>9</sup>
- Recognize that **not all adolescents who use substances have a substance use disorder** and treatment may not always be indicated.<sup>9</sup>
- Consider **cultural, social, and geographical differences** in how youth use substances and develop harm reduction strategies to ensure programming is relevant.<sup>5</sup>
- Utilize **intentional, person-first, and community-informed language** to reduce stigma, build rapport, and balance power dynamics.<sup>10</sup>
- Clearly explain the **potential risks** of substance use and how to reduce those risks, while also promoting open communication.<sup>9</sup>
- Be **knowledgeable about harm reduction supplies and practices, as well as local laws** about providing harm reduction supplies to youth.<sup>9</sup>

## References

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