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Improving Youth Substance Use Health: Key Messages for Parents & Caregivers

We know that parents and caregivers want what’s best for their kids.

These tips focus on substances that are legally available to adults in Canada. Some young people also experiment with illegal drugs or use prescription or over-the-counter medications for non-recommended purposes. These situations can bring additional challenges and risks and may require specialized guidance or support beyond the scope of these key messages.

As a parent or caregiver, it’s good to be prepared. By the mid-teen years, many youth have tried alcohol, cannabis, or nicotine, and some begin experimenting even earlier. On average, youth used alcohol for the first time by age 13 and cannabis for the first time by age 14.

Your views on how to best support your child’s relationship with substances may evolve as you learn more, as research advances, and as culture and regulations continue to change. Substances (such as using the hookah, ceremonial tobacco, or drinking alcohol) may be used within family or community customs, rituals, ceremonies and traditions, or they may be avoided completely. Reflecting on the role of substances in your family life can be important when considering how to best support your child. Staying informed and keeping an open, ongoing dialogue with your child can help you respond confidently and compassionately as they grow.

The following key messages summarize practical, research-informed steps that parents and caregivers can take to prevent or reduce substance-related harms while promoting strong, positive family relationships.

<p>1. Build a warm and trusting relationship.</p> <p>Having a close, caring relationship helps protect your child from using substances. When children feel understood and supported rather than judged, they can build trust and honesty. They are less likely to try alcohol, cannabis, or other drugs and more likely to come to you with a problem.</p>	<p>Try this: Spend regular time together. Do activities you both enjoy and listen when your child talks. Ask them questions with curiosity.</p>
<p>2. Stay involved and know what’s going on in your child’s life.</p> <p>Having a close, caring relationship helps protect your child from using substances. When children feel understood and supported rather than judged, they can build trust and honesty. They are less likely to try alcohol, cannabis, or other drugs and more likely to come to you with a problem.</p>	<p>Try this: Ask about your child’s plans and friends, set clear expectations about check-ins and curfews, and adjust as your child gets older.</p>
<p>3. Be a good role model.</p> <p>Your actions and attitudes about alcohol and other substances strongly affect your child. Heavy use, frequent use, or treating substances as “no big deal” can lead to your child using substances earlier and maybe experiencing harm. Letting children handle or serve you substances like alcohol, cannabis and tobacco also makes them more likely to try it.</p>	<p>Try this: If you drink or use other substances, limit how much and how often, and discuss why you choose to limit it. Avoid presenting substances as stress-relief tools or rewards. Avoid having your child handle substances.</p>



4. Have clear rules and follow them with care and consistency.

Rules about substance use can help, but they work best when they are combined with a warm attitude and follow-through. Children respond well when they understand why a rule exists and when adults stay calm and consistent when applying a rule. It also helps when all caregivers give the same message.

Try this: Make rules (like setting a curfew time) together with your child and talk about the reasons. Have a “rule check-in” yearly or as needed to discuss how it’s going.

5. Start conversations early, before high school.

Some children begin trying substances between ages 10 and 14. Talking early helps delay use and keeps your child safer as they grow.

Try this: Talk early and often about substances, how they affect health, safety and goals, and how to handle peer and social pressure. Keep it factual, open, and age appropriate.

6. Build on your child’s strengths.

Keeping kids safe is not only about avoiding risks, it’s also about helping them grow in positive ways. Help your child build skills and connect to healthy, engaging activities.

Try this: Encourage activities like sports, arts, clubs, or volunteering. Help them find hobbies where they feel like they belong and can build their skills.

Key Sources

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