



## Why harm reduction? Key messages for schools

*The concept of harm reduction is often misunderstood. Harm reduction is an umbrella term for programs, policies and practices that aim to reduce the negative consequences associated with behaviors that are typically considered high risk, like substance use and some sexual practices. It is also a way of being or an approach to providing care and support that is based in respect, compassion and inclusion.*

*The key messages below can help service providers and schools address misunderstandings and increase awareness about the benefits of a harm reduction approach to youth substance use.*

### **Harm reduction and prevention are both important ingredients of a comprehensive school health approach to preventing substance-related harms.**

Upstream prevention approaches often do not have anything to do with substance use - instead they focus on addressing root causes of substance use harm by enhancing protective factors (social connectedness, autonomy, skill development ...and more). Harm reduction aims to reduce potential social and health harms related to substance use. Both are important in a comprehensive school approach.

### **Harm reduction is an evidence-based approach.**

Many studies show that harm reduction approaches do not encourage youth to experiment with substances. Harm reduction approaches present the real risks of using substances while also providing information on how to reduce risks if using substances.

### **Many youth respond better to harm reduction approaches.**

Recent research from [UBC](#) shows that youth perceive harm reduction drug education as more helpful and practical than approaches focused on non-use.

### **Some commonly used approaches to substance use in schools create unintended harm.**

Many schools have implemented approaches such as zero tolerance policies and abstinence-only education programs that have limited effectiveness and can perpetuate stigma, contribute to isolation, shame and reluctance to talk openly about substance use or seek help.

### **Harm reduction meets students where they are at.**

People vary in their experiences with substance use, their needs and readiness to change. Risks and harms posed by substance use also vary. A harm reduction approach provides options that are relevant to a person's unique wants, needs, and experiences.

### **A harm reduction approach creates the safety and freedom to ask questions about substances and get accurate information.**

It is natural for youth to have questions about substance use. Open dialogue is unlikely to happen in schools where there is discomfort with discussing substance use or fear of



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Interior Health

punishment. This can result in youth seeking out other sources of information that may not be credible.

**Substance use harm is complicated – it is about much more than individual choices.**

Preventing substance use related harm is about more than just making “good or bad” choices. Substance use harms are influenced by social factors including the privileges one has and/or the constraints and barriers they face in life. Sometimes systemic factors like racism, stigma and criminalization create more harm than the drug itself. Youth who are particularly vulnerable to experiencing substance related harms are often dealing with other challenges like racism, poverty, learning disabilities, trauma and more. Harm reduction directs attention beyond individual “choices” and towards the broader factors that create or exacerbate substance-related harms

Source: [Blueprint for Action: Preventing substance-related harms among youth through a Comprehensive School Health approach - Canada.ca](https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/mental-health/mental-health-and-addiction/blueprint-for-action-preventing-substance-related-harms-among-youth-through-a-comprehensive-school-health-approach.html)

### Sexual Health and Harm Reduction | Population Health

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Developed: August 12, 2022

**We recognize and acknowledge that we are collectively gathered on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the seven Interior Region First Nations, where we live, learn, collaborate, and work together. This region is also home to 15 Chartered Métis Communities. It is with humility that we continue to strengthen our relationships with First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples across the Interior.**