



Noticing Signs: Substance Use + Technology Overuse in Youth

Key Takeaways from Addictions Prevention Literacy Webinar #2 – Recognizing Signs of Substance Use and Behavioural Addictions from School Mental Health Ontario

The following information is drawn from the webinar offered by Dr. Toula Kourgiantakis, Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at Université Laval. Supplementary information has been added, including answers to additional questions submitted by Ontario parents and caregivers.

If your child's substance or technology use becomes problematic, you may notice impacts on:

- physical or mental health
- relationships with friends or family
- school or daily life

Common signs

Here are some signs your child may be struggling with substance use or technology overuse:

COMMON SIGNS	
Changes in use	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• using substances more often• experimenting with new substances• engaging in binge use (e.g., excessive consumption in a short period of time, like 5 or more drinks of alcohol on one occasion, or prolonged watching of streamed content)• new patterns of use (e.g., needing to use cannabis nightly to fall asleep, or staying up all night gaming or scrolling)
Mood + behaviour shifts	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• increased irritability• difficulty managing emotions• decreased motivation• low mood
Physical health changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• change in sleep patterns• poor appetite, weight loss or gain• often tired / low energy



COMMON SIGNS

School + social challenges

- school avoidance
- declining grades
- withdrawing from family or friends

Your questions, answered

QUESTION

ANSWER

My child checks their cellphone repeatedly and I'm concerned. How can I begin a conversation with them about it?

Checking a cell phone constantly is a common behaviour in youth (and adults). Consider the impact that this frequent checking is having on your child's daily life.

- Are they more anxious? (impacting their mental health)
- Sleeping less? (impacting their physical health)
- Pulling away from others? (impacting their social relationships)

Before talking with them, it can be helpful to be clear about your biggest concern. For example, is it that the repeated checking is causing them to withdraw from the family and not communicate? Or is it that you notice they are on their phone until late in the night and not getting adequate sleep? Approaching your child with one specific concern you have can be more effective and less overwhelming than telling them they are on their phone too much.

Once you have identified what you are most concerned about, think about when and how you can share this with them in a way that will open up a conversation.

➔ [Learn more](#) about talking to your child about tech overuse.

What are some of the reasons my child might be using substances?

- to feel good – using a substance can give your child feelings of pleasure and enjoyment
- to feel better – using substances to cope with stress, anxiety or other mental health concerns
- to experiment – wanting to know what it feels like to use substances and what the experience is like
- because others are doing it – wanting to feel more connected with peers and/or a sense of belonging

Understanding your child's "why" can help guide your response and support.

➔ Learn directly from youth in this [Canadian Center on Substance Use and Addictions report](#).



Looking for support for a child or young person who is facing challenges related to substance use?

SUPPORT	
YOUTH-VAST Program (CAMH)	Support for youth (12–21) facing substance use, vaping or technology overuse concerns Visit: https://www.wehearyou.ca/
ConnexOntario	24/7 helpline with free support + info on mental health + addictions services Visit: connexontario.ca
Media Smarts	Online resources to help parents and caregivers navigate technology use Visit: https://mediasmarts.ca/resources-for-parents
Indigenous mental health and addictions services in Ontario	Visit: https://www.ontario.ca/page/mental-health-and-addiction-services-indigenous-individuals-and-families
CMHA Ontario	Learn more about addiction services for children and youth in Ontario Visit: https://ontario.cmha.ca/documents/finding-and-navigating-addiction-services-for-children-and-youth/

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