



Talking About Substance Use at Home

Key takeaways from Addictions Prevention Literacy webinar #3 – How to Talk About Substance Use at Home from School Mental Health Ontario

The following information is drawn from the webinar offered by Ashleigh Hyland, CAPSA Program Manager. Supplementary information has been added, including answers to additional questions submitted by Ontario parents and caregivers.

How we talk about substance use matters

The way that we talk about substance use can mean all the difference for a young person's well-being. When we speak about substance use with knowledge and compassion, young people feel supported and are more likely to reach out for help. In contrast, when we talk about substance use in ways that shame and blame, young people may feel unsafe to talk openly and may not reach out for help when needed.

Stigma gets in the way

Stigma is best understood as a set of false beliefs about a group of people with at least one attribute in common ([CAPSA, 2020](#)).

CAPSA is a national organization dedicated to reducing stigma and advancing health equity through education, research and action. To learn more visit <https://capsa.ca/>

Stigma often occurs in the form of stereotyping, labelling and discrimination (e.g., only 'bad' or 'dangerous' people use drugs) and is often the greatest barrier to talking about substance use and getting help when needed.

Young people often experience self-stigma related to substance use. This means that they may internalize some of the negative and false messages that we hear about substance use. Self-stigma can result in:

- shame about use
- fear of being judged by others
- avoiding asking for help

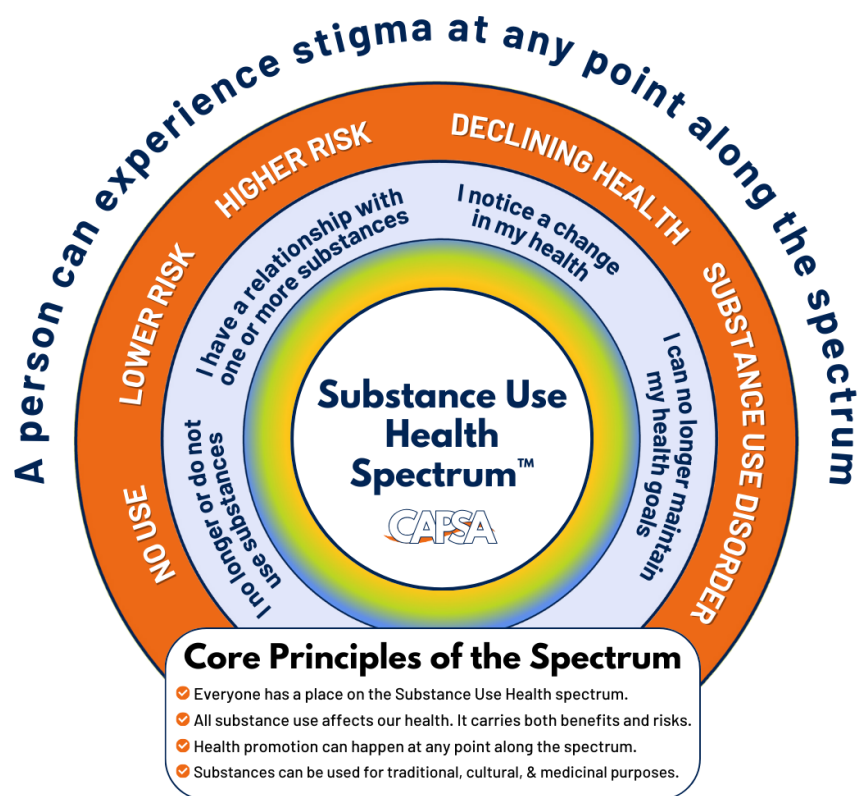
Self-stigma can impact parents and caregivers too. Sometimes parents and caregivers avoid disclosing their child's substance use with school, health professionals or family because of the fear of being blamed or judged for their child's use of substances.



What is substance use health?

Substance use health is “a term to support the full range of positive and negative impacts associated with the use of substances” (CAPSA, 2022). CAPSA’s Substance Use Health Spectrum (see image below) outlines a person’s relationship with substances, ranging from no use to substance use disorder. It shows that everyone is on the spectrum, regardless of the amount of substance use or its purpose, and that we can help to improve health outcomes regardless of where someone is at.

Understanding that substance use has benefits (can bring relief from pain, can be used ceremonially), but also carries risks (can have negative and serious impacts on physical health) can help you to have non-judgemental and supportive conversations with your child.



Source: CAPSA

How to talk with your child

Young people often enter conversations about substance use expecting judgement or shame. Focus your conversation on trust and support, rather than fear and consequences.

- Check your own beliefs. What messages did you grow up with? How might these beliefs impact conversations with your child?
- Try to understand your child’s ‘why’ for using substances. Seeking to understand the reasons for use does not mean you have to share the same perspectives.
- Reflect on your own relationship with substances and model healthy coping skills.
- Use open-ended statements (e.g., ‘what do you think of...’ instead of ‘you’re not doing drugs, right?’)



- Focus on trust and support, rather than fear and consequences. If your child is using substances, talk with them about prioritizing health and safety. This might include talking about not using drugs alone, or letting them know they can always call you for a ride, even if they have been drinking.
- Be present and actively listen—don't lecture.

Your questions, answered

QUESTION	ANSWER
How early can I start talking to my child about substance use?	<p>Research shows that earlier is best. There are age-appropriate ways to talk with a child about substance use. Younger children can understand health and sickness, and that we do things to take care of our health. Talking with them about medication safety can build the foundation for safe use of substances. For example, you might say “we use medicine when feeling sick, but it is not safe to use any medicine without me (or another trusted adult) present”.</p> <p>You can also build on your child's curiosity. If they see someone smoking and ask about it, use the moment to share simple, non-judgmental information. You might say “smoking can hurt our lungs and make it hard to breathe. Some people use tobacco when they are feeling stressed because they find it helps them to manage those feelings.”</p>
How can I talk to my child about someone in the family who has a substance use disorder?	<p>The amount of detail you provide will vary by age and stage of development. Children, even those who are very young, often understand what being sick means. Sharing that your family member is sick right now and that they are seeing doctors and getting help to feel better can be appropriate for younger children. You could explain that you may not be seeing them as much right now while they are trying to get better.</p> <p>If your child is older, you may be able to share more about how substance use disorder impacts the family members' decision-making or other areas of their life.</p> <p>When talking with your child about anyone using substances, be mindful of the language you are using and avoid judgement and labels.</p>
My child has made new friends who use cannabis and alcohol. How can I talk to my child about making informed choices that support their health and wellbeing?	<p>You can support your child to develop friendships with people who respect their decisions, even if the friends do not make the same decisions. Having friends who use substances does not mean your child will also use them.</p> <p>Having a conversation with your child about how they would hold their decisions around substance use in different situations. You can support them in exploring what they would do if they were around substances.</p> <p>Lastly, do your best to be mindful of any judgments or fear you are bringing into your conversations with your child. Remember that you want to create a safe space for your child to talk with you about substance use.</p>



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
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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