



Substance Use Conversations with Youth: Tips for Adult Allies



A Communication Guide



Canadian Centre
on Substance Use
and Addiction

Evidence. Engagement. Impact.



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Youth Want to Talk

Caregivers, educators and other adult allies can influence young people's health and well-being. As a trusted adult in their lives, youth may come to you for information and guidance around substance use. These types of conversations can be difficult, and not everyone may be comfortable or feel ready to have them. It's okay to be unsure about how to navigate these conversations. You do not have to be an expert on substance use or have all the answers, but you can develop knowledge and skills to offer support.

Young people told us they want the adults in their lives to be better prepared and equipped to respond to youth substance use.³ They want a conversation; they want to share their own thoughts and opinions, and they are open to information when presented in an unbiased, non-judgmental way.

The purpose of this guide is to help adults feel more prepared, comfortable and confident addressing topics related to substance use and have conversations with young people that are safe, unbiased, informed and non-judgmental.

An **adult ally** is a trusted adult who supports, advocates for and works with young people.¹ They can be family members, coaches, volunteer leaders, counsellors or other trusted adults.

Substance use is the use of a psychoactive substance, such as alcohol, cannabis, opioids or other substances. Substance use varies from person to person and occurs along a spectrum.²

About This Guide

What This Guide Will Do

This guide will help you understand the youth perspective on what makes an effective ally. It will:

- Guide you through a self-assessment process to determine your potential biases and how to set these biases aside before talking with youth about substance use;
- Describe the values and principles for supportive communication, including practical ways to create a safe space for youth;
- Connect you with information and resources to boost your substance use knowledge.

What This Guide Will Not Do

This guide does not replace professional screening for, or treatment of, a substance use disorder.

¹ <https://smho-smso.ca/online-resources/supportive-resources-for-adult-allies>

² Substance Use Health - CAPSA

³ Wood, S. (2025). *How to Prevent and Reduce Substance Use Harms for Youth: What Youth Say Works*. Ottawa, Ont.: Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction



Part

1



Self Reflect

We all have our own experiences with substances and substance use; we have biases, attitudes and perceptions.

Before moving into a conversation about substance use with a young person, self assess to understand how your personal experiences, values and beliefs might influence the discussion. Note your thoughts for each question below.

1. Reflect to when you were younger and what you needed from the adult allies in your life.

Ask yourself:

- What was it like being [age of the youth you're talking to]?
- What were some of the stresses you were experiencing?
- What were your needs while experiencing these pressures?
- What was your relationship with substances or substance use?
- What types of questions did you have about alcohol, cannabis or other drugs?

2. Keeping these insights in mind, answer the following questions:

- What is your current opinion on different substances like alcohol, cannabis and other drugs?
 - Why do you think you feel this way?
 - What do you think contributed to your current opinion?
 - Do you feel you are properly informed about alcohol, cannabis and other drugs?
- How do you manage stress and anxiety in your personal life?
- Do you use substances such as alcohol, cannabis, tobacco or other drugs? If yes, why?
 - What type of relationship do you have with substances? Think about the substance use health spectrum.
 - Have you or anyone you know been negatively affected by substance use?
 - In your opinion, what does problematic substance use look like?
- Are you concerned about substance use by young people? Why or why not?
 - How do you feel about the youth in your life using substances like alcohol, cannabis or other drugs?
 - What are your biggest fears about the youth in your life using substances?
- Are you using language that could reveal potential biases about substance use? For example, stigmatizing terms such as “stoner,” “pothead,” “alcoholic,” “addict” or “druggie”?

How might your point of view affect what you say or how you react to someone who uses different substances?

Part

2



Prepare for the Conversation

After completing your self reflection, the following tips will help you engage in effective, non-biased and judgment-free conversations with young people.

Release Judgment

Now that you are aware of your judgments and biases about substance use, you can begin to pay attention to them and limit their influence on your conversations. Here are some strategies:

- Listen without evaluation (deciding whether something is good or bad).
- Identify common goals with the young person, exploring shared thoughts and feelings.
- Identify the similarities and differences between you and the youth.
- Be open to learning from the young person.

Establish Shared Values

Young people have shared the values they need from adult allies. These values form the foundation for meaningful conversations about substance use:

- **Support:** Be helpful and understanding, and stand by the youth in their decisions — even if you disagree.
- **Empathy:** Understand and relate to the youth's feelings by putting yourself in their shoes and believing what they say is their truth.
- **Respect:** Have respect for the self worth and value of the young person, including respecting their opinion, even if you disagree.
- **Sincerity:** Be honest and sincere. Youth will trust you if your thoughts, feelings and motives feel genuine.
- **Trust:** Be a person youth can trust and confide in. They want to feel safe and confident that the information they are sharing with you will stay private.
- **Empowerment:** Give youth the power and tools to feel confident and more in control of their lives and personal decision making.
- **Transparency:** Be clear about the goals of the conversation and don't have hidden agendas.
- **Practicality:** Focus on understanding the youth's perspective rather than attempting to change it. Ask clarifying questions to check your understanding.



Boost Your Knowledge

You do not have to be an expert on substance use or have all the answers, but knowing more can benefit you and the young people in your life.

What's even more important than knowing all the facts is knowing where to find fact- and evidence-based information. This will enable you to connect youth with information and evidence-based sources in a world of misinformation, which can help you support them in making more informed decisions about their own substance use health.

Take some time to explore resources on substances and substance use health to boost your knowledge. You'll find some suggestions in Part 3: Understand Substance Use Health to get you started.

Identify Goals

Do you have a goal for your conversations with young people about substance use? Youth told us that allies who come into a conversation with an agenda and preconceived opinions can appear insincere. Goals like deterring youth from using substances or trying to impart some specific information might get in your way from being open, listening and creating a safe space for the young person you're trying to support.

However, as your conversation gets started, it may be helpful to establish a *shared* goal with the young person. What do they want out of the conversation and how can you support that? They might want someone to listen, help explore their own perspectives and opinions, information and advice, or something else. Or, they might not really know, and that's okay too.

Creating space to determine whether the young person is looking for a specific type of support can get the conversation started on the right path.



Create a Safe Space

A safe space is one where young people feel accepted, valued and free from judgment. To establish this environment, keep these points in mind:

1. Think about language, tone and approach

- Use language that creates and encourages openness, understanding and a feeling of safety. Try saying things like: “How do you feel about this topic?” and “I would like to learn more about that.”
- Avoid using language that could be harmful, including stigmatizing words (such as “stoner,” “user” or “addict”) and expressions of disapproval. This can end conversation and stop youth from reaching out for help.
- Engage in a two-way dialogue, not an interview or lecture.
- Mirror the language and terminology used by the young person to ensure mutual understanding.

2. Be present and mindful

- Stay focused on the conversation and be aware of when your attention drifts.
- Monitor your own and the young person’s emotions and reactions.

3. Listen

- Let the youth speak without interruption, asking meaningful follow-up questions like, “Can you tell me more about that?”
- Practice silence, allowing space for youth to open up. If you feel an emotional reaction to something shared with you, take a deep breath and count to 10 before responding.
- Acknowledge emotions, thoughts, feelings and pressures when they are shared, such as by saying, “I can tell this is concerning to you.”

4. Provide supportive responses

- Respect the youth’s reality, even if you disagree with their perspective.
- Rather than offering advice, focus on understanding their point of view and encourage further discussion with open-ended questions.
- Rephrase their thoughts to demonstrate active listening, and focus on their feelings, e.g., “You feel [rephrase what they said]. I understand why this might be overwhelming for you.”
- Before offering feedback, consider:
 - Is the young person ready for it?
 - Can you speak calmly and encourage further conversation?
 - How can you ask questions that promote reflection rather than immediate solutions?

5. Be mindful of non-verbal communication

- Use positive body language, such as facing the speaker, making eye contact (if appropriate), and staying open and relaxed in your posture.
- Respect the youth’s personal space and allow them to choose a comfortable location for the conversation.



In summary, you can help create a safe space for youth by keeping the following tips in mind during your conversation:

- Be mindful of the agreed-upon goals for the conversation.
- Be aware of your own biases or values and how they might affect your perceptions.
- Prioritize understanding before seeking to be understood.
- Listen actively and avoid rehearsing responses instead of listening.
- Use open, clarifying questions to check your understanding and encourage dialogue.
- Avoid judgment; validate their feelings without expressing approval or disapproval.
- Give the youth space to speak, without needing to have the last word.

Help Youth Think Critically

As an ally, you are trying to help youth think critically about the information they are consuming about substance use.

Instead of telling them what they should know or not know, encourage them to explore the questions they might have. Use the conversation as an opportunity to encourage youth to think critically about their current beliefs and attitudes.

The following questions can help you guide the conversation in that direction. You can tailor these toward a specific substance being discussed or keep them general depending on the conversation.

- What do you think responsible [substance use] is? Why?
- What do you think risky [substance use] is?
- What is unhealthy use of [substance]?
- Why do you think people find using [substance] helpful or pleasurable?
- What do you think are the benefits of [substance use]?
- Could [substance use] be harmful? Why? How?
- When do you think [substance use] might become harmful for a person?
- Why might some people have a hard time cutting back or quitting their use of [a substance]?
- Why do you think you need to experiment with [substance] at this point?



Part

3



Understand Substance Use Health

Providing accurate information about substances and substance use in conversations with young people can help equip them with the knowledge to make their own informed decisions. Here are some resources that might help.

- [The Substance Use Health Spectrum](#) (CAPSA)
- [Understanding Substance Use: Educator's Guide](#) (CCSA)
 - [Understanding Substance Use: Educator's Guide](#) (PDF document)
 - [Understanding Substance Use Video Modules](#)
- [DECYDE \(Drug Education Centred on Youth Decision Empowerment\)](#)
 - [Knowledge Corner](#) with materials like Substance Snapshots and Support Resources
- [Canadian Substance Use Resource and Knowledge Exchange Centre \(SURE\)](#)
- [STOMP Program Teaching Tools and Resources](#) (Physical and Health Education Canada)
- [Know Alcohol](#) (Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research)
 - Online tool to calculate the impact of alcohol, test your knowledge about alcohol, and access resources
- [Knowing Your Limits with Alcohol: A Practical Guide to Assessing Your Drinking](#) (CCSA)
- [Cannabasics: A Primer for Health and Social Service Providers](#) (Canadian Public Health Association)
- [Get Sensible – Cannabis Education Booklets and Toolkit](#) (Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy)
- [Weed Out Misinformation](#)
- [Talking Pot with Youth: A Cannabis Communication Guide for Youth Allies](#) (CCSA)
- [Lower Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines for Youth, by Youth](#) (Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research)
 - [Poster and zine](#) available for youth
- [Knowing Your Limits with Cannabis: A Practical Guide to Assessing Your Cannabis Use](#) (CCSA)
- [Parents Like Us: The unofficial survival guide to parenting a young person with a substance use disorder](#)

