



#3

TALKING WITH YOUTH ABOUT SUBSTANCE USE





WHY?

When talking about substance use

MESSAGES MATTER...

and so does the approach to
communicating these messages.

The way in which a conversation is had with a young person is just as important as the content discussed. Whether talking with one person or a group of people, take steps to effectively engage youth in that conversation. It will increase the likelihood that your audience will participate and receive the intended message.



TIMING THE CONVERSATION

WHEN TO RAISE THE TOPIC OF SUBSTANCE USE

Most youth do not engage in regular substance use. For those who do, the earlier they initiate use the more likely they are to develop a substance use disorder later in life. **It's important that conversations that serve to raise awareness, educate youth about substance use, and set expectations about use start early yet are tailored to the age and needs of the child.**

Youth who are going to try substances are most likely to do so for the first time between the ages of 12-17.

Trusted adults are encouraged to begin talking with youth **before they are exposed** to nicotine, alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs. It is typically recommended to begin having direct conversations about these substances around the age of 12. In having these conversations, first explore what substances youth are aware of and engage in dialogue to promote critical thinking around those substances.

For children younger than 12, conversations are best focused on topics of health (e.g., exercise, sleep, vitamins) and safety (e.g., avoiding harmful chemicals in the home such as cleaning agents, only taking medicine prescribed for you, etc.).

WHAT TO TALK ABOUT

Explore and promote critical thinking about what they already know. Conversations should provide youth an opportunity to share what they know about different substances. It is not recommended to introduce new substances that the youth have not yet been exposed to. Be prepared to respond by offering to fill in gaps and correct knowledge, or to suggest you work together to educate yourselves.

Check in about peer pressure. Open the door to exploring how the youth might respond in a situation in which they were offered substances.

- Acknowledge that peer pressure is real and can leave someone feeling conflicted about what to do.
- Help youth develop a plan for how they will respond in those situations.
- One of the most effective interventions is to teach youth how to use assertive communication to refuse substances by planning how they would respond if they were offered a substance and then having them practice that response aloud.

Plan for high-risk situations. Create a plan for how to safely get out of risky situations. Develop a code word or signal that can be communicated when help is needed.

Acknowledge and talk about instances of substance use, then move on. Affirm the courage it took for them to share this with you and talk through what happened. Use open-ended questions to elicit their experiences and their motivations for using. Reflect on their choices and reactions to those choices. Help them plan for how they will respond the next time that situation comes up.

Connect youth to resources. Explore whether additional resources or support could be beneficial. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) [offers an online tool](#) to support people in finding treatment resources in their local communities.

Create opportunities for healthy peer activities and “natural” highs.

Youth between the ages of 12-18 are at increased risk for taking risks and making impulsive decisions. Help young people find safe to experience “natural” highs. Also guide them into healthy peer activities. For younger adolescents, create opportunities for them to connect with each other and demonstrate how to celebrate and have fun without using substances. Older adolescents can be supported by planning and hosting fun activities and events for their friends, like events at school or a themed party at home.

For caregivers: Be clear about your values and expectations. Setting clear expectations and family rules around substance use and decide on consequences together. Knowing that substance use is not approved by the family can be a protective factor against substance use.

HAVE FREQUENT, SMALL CONVERSATIONS

Youth are highly exposed to pro-substance use messaging through peers, mass media, and other sources. Their interest in considering use of a substance may also vary throughout adolescence. Strive for brief and frequent pro-health and wellness conversations throughout this developmental period.

Waiting to have the “one big conversation” is likely to be uncomfortable for all parties involved. Integrating the topic of substance use into everyday conversations early on can reduce later discomfort with this topic.

TIME THE CONVERSATION FOR SUCCESS

Be strategic in finding the right moments to bring up the topic of substance use. This includes:

- Allowing for open discussions during everyday activities (e.g., family walk, sports physical, class presentation)
- Being prepared for natural unplanned opportunities to dive into conversation (e.g., when youth reach out to you, at sporting or other community events, seeing youth at your workplace or home, etc.).
- Having conversations when both messenger and listener are engaged and focused.
- Avoiding conversations during moments of crisis or when emotions are high.





SETTING THE STAGE FOR CONVERSATION

When engaging young people in conversations about high-risk behaviors, such as substance use, it is recommended to take time to consider your approach and set the stage for the conversation. Youth are more likely to be receptive to conversations about substance use when your approach integrates these key characteristics of a messenger.

Youth have identified **respect**, **mutuality**, **authenticity**, and **trust** as some of the most highly valued characteristics in their relationship with adults.

Respect. Receiving respect helps young people feel safe which can help them to express themselves freely. Earn respect by treating young people the same way you would treat respected adults, colleagues, or other people you care about. Let them know you care and meet them where they are. Try complimenting and praising them for their good choices and decisions.

Mutuality. Young people are more likely to listen when they perceive you to be on their side. Mutuality is when two or more people in a relationship share similar feelings or actions among them. Achieve mutuality through demonstrating positive regard and genuine interest in others as a way of eliciting this same response from those you are connecting with. Engage in activities that can be done together that allow for opportunities to have conversations about substance use.

Authenticity. Authentic relationships lead to engagement. Show that you are authentic and sincere by being yourself, being honest, acting in ways that match your values, and being truly open to what young people think, feel, and have to say. When talking about substance use, be clear about why you don't want them to use substances – because you care and want them to be healthy and safe.

Trust. Youth are more likely to be honest and to disclose information when they perceive they have trust in the messenger. Build trust by doing what you say you will do, offering support when it is needed, showing kindness and acceptance, and sharing your feelings.



Other Ways to Increase Youth Engagement

Other characteristics that have been shown to increase youth engagement are described below:

Autonomy. When talking with youth about making healthy choices, triggering their sense of control or autonomy can help gain their respect and attention, and increase the chance of the message influencing their behavior. Explain to youth that they have the freedom of choice to listen (or not) to your message, and the full ability to make the decisions they believe are best for them.

Be Fully Present and Available. Demonstrate that you are truly, fully listening to what young people have to say. Keep your attention on the conversation and demonstrate an open and nonjudgmental attitude. Engage in behaviors that show you are fully attentive, such as consistent eye contact, leaning towards the speaker, and head nods. Also, communicate to youth that you are available to them, to talk further when they are ready to do so.

Credibility. Messenger credibility is important for conversations about substance use to be effective, especially when informing and educating youth on substances. Youth report caregivers, public safety professionals, healthcare professionals, and educators as some of the most credible sources of substance use-related information. Demonstrate credibility by citing sources of information, how your experiences inform your knowledge, and be honest about what you don't know.

Humility. Humility is considered a necessary ingredient for empowering conversations. You do not need to be knowledgeable about all substances to have these conversations. Acknowledge what you know, and what you don't know. Be open to learning alongside youth about the impact of substances on adolescents.

Relatability. Relating information to the personal interests, experiences, and prior knowledge of youth can help to increase attention, engagement, and desire to learn more. Try to personalize the content of your conversation to what you know about your audience and speak in language that is understandable at their age level.





A MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING APPROACH

Motivational interviewing (MI) is a collaborative, goal-oriented approach to conversations designed to strengthen motivation for and commitment to a goal. MI has shown to be highly effective at supporting health behavior change and, in particular, reducing substance use. While a full examination of MI as a therapeutic intervention extends beyond our purposes here, the core elements of MI can be helpful tools for engaging youth in conversations about substance use.



MI is based in 4 key principles:

1. Partnership
2. Acceptance
3. Evocation
4. Compassion

Partnership involves a collaborative discussion and shared decision-making. This requires acknowledging that while you may have very useful and valuable information to share, the person you are speaking to is the expert in their own life.

Acceptance refers to taking a non-judgmental approach to a conversation that acknowledges strengths and the inherent worth and potential within someone, expresses empathy, and respects a person's autonomy and freedom of choice.

Evocation is a process of engaging people in a respectful and curious way and empowering them by drawing information out of them and activating their own motivation and resources for taking action. When talking with youth, adults may be tempted to approach the conversation with the goal of educating, by providing what they are perceived to lack (e.g., knowledge, skills). In MI, the resources and motivation for behavior are presumed to reside within the individual and evocation is the process of drawing that out and building upon their existing resources.

Compassion is acting in the best interest of a person in a way that prioritizes and promotes their growth and wellbeing.

Active Listening

Several communication skills will support the process of having collaborative, MI-driven discussions with youth. The first, and perhaps most important skill, is to engage in **active listening**. Actively listening to what someone is saying in a nonjudgmental way is essential for truly comprehending a person's experience. It allows us to truly hear someone's perspective, concerns, and ambivalence while preparing us to guide the conversation more strategically. Show you are actively listening through your body language – maintain eye contact, give affirming nods, and make appropriate gestures.

The next set of skills are designed to move the conversation forward and this set of skills is commonly referred to as OARS, which stand for open-ended questions, affirmations, reflections, and summaries. how the majority of students think or behave.

Open-Ended Questions

- Draw out a person's experience and engage them in the conversation by requiring more than a simple yes/no or a head nod.
- Start with words such as, "How...", "What...", "Tell me about...", and "Describe..."
- "What substances are you aware of? What do you understand about how they impact the brain and the body?"

Affirmations

- A compliment or statement of appreciation and understanding used to highlight strengths, praise positive behaviors, and support a person as they describe difficult situations. Affirmations support and promote self-confidence.
- Examples include: "I appreciate your bringing this up with me even though you're worried about getting into trouble," "This is hard work you are doing," and "You're a very resourceful person."

Reflections

- Statements that offer your interpretation of what someone is saying. Reflections are used to express empathy, validate what someone is expressing, and show that you're present and paying attention.
- Examples include "It's been a really tough week and you're feeling stressed with what's going on," or "You can't imagine not hanging out with your friends and at the same time you're worried they're going to pressure you."

Summaries

- Longer reflective statements that highlight important parts of the conversation.
- Can be used to shift the direction of a conversation that has veered off course or gotten stuck.



USING SOCIAL NORMS MESSAGING IN CONVERSATION

Both youth and adults overwhelmingly overestimate the number of youth aged 12-18 who use substances (especially alcohol, nicotine, and marijuana). They believe that substance use is more common than it actually is (e.g., everyone drinks, most caregivers let their kids drink). The truth is that most youth make healthy choices and do not use substances.

When people think substance use is the norm, they are more likely to make choices that align with that misperception (i.e., acceptance or promotion of alcohol use). However, when youth are exposed to messages that explain positive, true norms that most youth make healthy choices and engage in prosocial activities, they are more likely to take part in those positive behaviors.



Help to correct misperceptions of youth substance use by building social norms messaging into everyday conversations.

HOW?

1 Get started by learning the true social norms in your community.

See The Social Norm Intervention guide for guidance on where to find local social norms data.

2 Determine what percentage of youth are not using substances.

Most norms on substance use are presented as a percent or proportion of youth who are using a substance (e.g., alcohol, nicotine, marijuana, all of the above). Once you have the percent of how many youth are using a substance (e.g., 15%), calculate the percent who are not using the substance (e.g., 85%). This number represents the true positive norm, or percent of youth who are making healthy choices and not using substances.

3 Communicate that norm and its source to correct misperceptions.

Be sure to communicate the credible source of that norm.

EX: How many kids your age would you guess vape nicotine or marijuana? You know, I was thinking somewhere between X-X%. Want to know the actual number? It's actually much lower. The school survey actually shows that 9 out of 10 kids in your grade choose not to vape or drink alcohol. In high school, it's about 75% who don't use any substances. That's much higher than we both thought.

4 Highlight solutions by giving positive examples.

Highlight solutions by giving examples of how youth are making the choice to not use any substances. This promotes the healthy choices most youth are making instead of using substances.

EX: This year's school survey also asked about what kids your age do instead of using substances. Any idea what the most popular weekend activities are?

5 Repeatedly reflect that norm in different ways.

Repeatedly reflect that norm in different ways through ongoing conversations to promote and reinforce attitudes and behaviors for healthy choices.

Be patient!

It takes time to shift perceptions about youth substance use, both in the minds of youth and in the minds of adults. Continue to share true, positive norms and have ongoing discussions and reflection about these norms over the course of adolescence.



FRAMING THE CONVERSATION

Framing is about the choices we make in what we say and how we say it. These choices – like what to emphasize, what to explain, and what to leave out – affect how people interpret the messages we convey.

There are many ways we could talk about substance use, but what we know from the framing science is that there are certain choices we can make as communicators that will better influence how youth audiences think and act. A survey from the [National Council for Mental Wellbeing](#) identified the following frames as especially relevant to youth when discussing the topic of substance use.

AGENCY

Agency refers to the feeling of being in control of one's choices and actions. Most people, and youth in particular, are sensitive to the need to feel as if they have the ability to make choices for themselves. By fostering this sense of agency and autonomy through conversations, young people are more likely to respect and believe in their abilities.

Sample phrases to use:

- The choice is entirely yours to make.
- What you choose to do is up to you.

Example:

I'm curious what you've heard about kids your age drinking or vaping.

- *Caregiver: While you are the only person who can make your choices, as your parent, I think it's important you know how our family feels about substance use. [describe family rules and expectations]. What do you think about that?*
- *Trusted adult: If it's OK with you, I would like to help support you in making a more informed choice when it comes to substance use. [Share relevant information about the impact of substances on the developing adolescent brain and body].*

Your safest bet would be to not use substances at all. Having said that, it's going to be completely your choice what you decide to do. At some point, you're likely to be in a situation where someone will offer you to take something. Have you thought through how you would respond? [encourage a discussion of ways in which they could refuse the offer. It is highly recommended that the youth role play the scenario with you and they may benefit from your offering to demonstrate a response.]

ASPIRATIONS/FUTURE GOALS

An aspiration is a hope or ambition for achieving a goal. An orientation towards aspirations and goals resonates with youth. Conversations that tap into young people's short-term, immediate goals for themselves are more relevant to them and therefore resonate better than attempting to link behavior today to far-off goals.

Sample phrases to use:

- What things are really important to you in your life right now?
- Why are these things important to you?



Example:

What do you think needs to happen to [achieve your goals/maintain how things are going for you]?

What might get in the way of your accomplishing these things that are important to you?

Have you thought about how drinking alcohol or using drugs would influence your path to achieving your goals? [explore how unhealthy behaviors such as substance use could impede progress toward goals and elicit the healthy behaviors that will increase their likelihood of reaching their goals].

RISK OF ADDICTION

There are clear, negative impacts of substance use on the adolescent brain and body. Yet young people are not typically motivated to change behavior based on concern with consequences they see as far off. Rather, youth are more highly motivated by an understanding of how substance use, and being addicted to substances, lead to immediate negative outcomes that interfere with their valued goals. Where appropriate, activate the risk of addiction frame to draw out connections between substance use and how that use propels them closer to health and wellbeing, or moves them farther away.

Sample phrases to use:

- The adolescent brain works really hard to grow faster and stronger and doesn't actually finish developing until the mid-20s. Using alcohol, nicotine, and other drugs can damage important parts of the brain and can actually make it work more slowly. This can look like thinking more slowly, having a harder time making decisions, concentrating, and remembering things, being more impulsive, and making it harder to control emotions.
- When teens drink, things can go wrong, like injuring yourself.

Example:

What are some not so good things that could happen when young people drink or do drugs?

Would it be OK for me to share a few of things we know about [alcohol/drug] use in young people? For people your age, there aren't any safe drinking limits and no amount of drugs is considered safe for use.

Even when you don't drink or use drugs to excess, your brain is still developing and working hard to grow faster and stronger and so it's very sensitive to the effects of all substances. Can you think of some of the ways this impact on the brain can show up in everyday life?

We also know that when people start to use substances in greater amounts or more often, they tend to have more negative consequences. Any ideas what some of those consequences might be?

In what ways can I support you in making healthy choices to protect yourself?

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Sample phrases to use:

- There are people in your life that you care about, and that care about you.
- You work hard to make those that care about you proud.

Example:

It's really important to you that you make your family proud. What are some of things you do that help you achieve that goal? What might get in the way of your progress?

I'm curious how those you care about would feel if you were to do things that were unsafe and unhealthy for you, like drinking alcohol or using drugs. What do you think they would be most concerned about? How might making those choices impact your relationship?

When you make healthy and safe choices for yourself, how do your loved ones respond?

It sounds like it would be very important to those you care about most that the choices you make be in your best interest.





DO NO HARM

Conversations about substance use, while not difficult, may also not be naturally intuitive. This means that taking time to prepare for conversations will increase the likelihood of the success of these discussions.

Adopt the strategies presented in [Substance Use Prevention Communications Toolkit](#) and **avoid strategies that do not work, or could be harmful!**

WHAT TO AVOID

1 **Blaming, shaming, and lecturing.**

Instead, take time to build rapport and genuinely engage with youth. Keep the conversation respectful and collaborative. Show you care and are concerned while demonstrating respect for youth autonomy to make their own choices.

2 **Fear-based messaging and scare tactics.**

Most norms on substance use are presented as a percent or proportion of youth who are using a substance (e.g., alcohol, nicotine, marijuana, all of the above). Once you have the percent of how many youth are using a substance (e.g., 15%), calculate the percent who are not using the substance (e.g., 85%). This number represents the true positive norm, or percent of youth who are making healthy choices and not using substances.

3 Stigmatizing language.

Avoid words like “user,” “addict,” and “junkie.” All of these words are stigmatizing and speak poorly about a person. They also position substance use as an individual or moral failing. Instead, use person-first language such as “person who uses substances” or “person who has an addiction.” By reducing negative stigma about people who use substances, youth may be more likely to share instances of substance use if it happens.

4 Assuming that information is enough to prevent substance use.

Educating youth on the impact of substances on the body and consequences of substance use is not an effective strategy on its own. Pair education with strategies for how to respond in high-risk situations and offer youth an opportunity to practice those strategies with you. You can also challenge misperceptions of youth substance use by sharing true positive social norms.

RESOURCES

Explore these resources to learn more :

- National Council for Mental Wellbeing: [Getting Candid: Framing the Conversation Around Youth Substance Use Prevention](#)
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: [Talk. They Hear You.](#)
- Drug Enforcement Agency and Discovery Education: [Operation Prevention & Operation Prevention Parent Toolkit](#)
- Drug Enforcement Agency: [Get Smart About Drugs](#)
- Partnership to End Addiction: [Parent Talk Kit](#)
- National Institute on Drug Abuse: [Words Matter: Preferred Language for Talking About Addiction](#)

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