



Promoting Well-Being

Promoting students' resilience can reduce their risk of problematic substance use (PSU; the use of any psychoactive substance in a manner, situation, amount, or frequency that is harmful to an individual, their friends/family or to society.)

What the RESEARCH says:

Due to the recent changes in cannabis legislation and larger conversations about substance use policy and issues, school administrators may be concerned about students using substances and may not know the best way to support them.

Adolescence is a time of exciting changes and transformations for youth, and most adolescents emerge as healthy and responsible adults. Adolescence is marked by a number of biological, social, emotional, and physical changes that make some youth particularly vulnerable to health problems, such as problematic substance use.ⁱ

Many adolescents use psychoactive substances (for varied reasons, and in different forms, manners, and frequencies).ⁱⁱ Administrators may feel that the legalization of cannabis will further normalize substance use; thus leading to higher rates of use. Traditional substance use initiatives focus on health education (e.g., risks of use); however, the evidence suggests these programs are not strongly supported by evidence on their own.ⁱⁱⁱ Encouraging well-being can complement other more traditional approaches to preventing problematic substance use (e.g., drug awareness campaigns, promotional materials, and assemblies health education programming). An approach to encouraging well-being can also complement progressive discipline measures to ensure an approach to addressing substance use at school in a manner that aims to reduce the need for punitive measures.

Administrators can work to effectively minimize their students' risk of PSU by promoting well-being (i.e. judging life positively and feeling good)^{iv} and positive youth development (PYD). PYD is an intentional, prosocial approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people's strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths.^v



For more information and additional resources, please visit:

<https://www.csmh.uwo.ca/research/cannabis-education.html>



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Promoting positive youth development (PYD) builds resilience and protects against the negative consequences associated with problematic substance use.

Instead of focusing on reducing unhealthy behaviours such as smoking or excessive drinking, PYD follows a strength-based approach to encourage healthy behaviours.^{vi} Picture a balance scale – the goal of this approach is to encourage positive experiences and coping skills on one side to counterbalance any negative experiences on the other side (recognizing that there will invariably be some level of these negative experiences in youths’ lives).^{vii} In other words, protective factors promote overall health and well-being and counterbalance risk factors that can lead to problematic substance use.

Seven key protective factors are critical to healthy youth development and are linked to lower rates of substance use.^{viii} These are:

- A stable and caring relationship with a supportive parent or other adult. This is the key factor for a child to develop resilience.^v
- A sense of belonging, connectedness, and social support.^{vi}
- Self-efficacy, strong communication and decision-making skills.^{vi}
- Engaging in prosocial behaviours such as helping, sharing, donating, and volunteering.^{vi}
- Adequate sleep, healthy diet, and physical exercise.^{vii}
- School engagement and a sense of school connectedness.^{vi}
- A sense of faith, hope, and cultural identity.^{vi,viii}

Supporting youth to respond to challenges with confidence is important for healthy development.

Experiencing stress during adolescence is not always harmful in the long term or cause any major social or physical detriment to the youth.^v Supporting youth to have positive experiences allows them to develop the coping skills necessary to overcome the challenges they will inevitably face.



What can I do to promote Positive Youth Development?

Provide opportunities for youth to engage in prosocial behaviour and acknowledge acts of kindness

Opportunities for prosocial behavior promotes well-being and is linked to less substance use among teens.^{vi} Principals can promote, fund, and participate in opportunities to take students out into the community to volunteer or encourage them to do so independently. Principals can also acknowledge when students help each other; these small things add up, and it is good to reinforce them. Participating in youth-based activities such as peer-mentoring, tutoring, or coaching, supports student autonomy and provides youth opportunities to make a real difference. School administrators are uniquely positioned to work with school staff, system supports, and community agencies to find and encourage these opportunities and sustain them within their school community.

Provide opportunities for skill-building

Create opportunities for students to learn a variety of skills.^v For example, physical exercise can help regulate mood and is an established protective factor for substance use in adolescence.^{xi} Emotional skills, such as self-efficacy, and social skills, such as conflict resolution, support PYD.^{xii} Administrators can prioritize physical education programming through course allocations and scheduling, and can encourage skill-building among students by supporting teachers in learning to integrate activities into the curriculum or facilitate a social-emotional learning or positive youth development program in the classroom. [Visit the CASEL website for a list of sample teaching activities to support core competencies of social emotional learning.](#) Additionally, administrators can work with staff to create, promote, and sustain extra-curricular opportunities such as intramural sports and school-wide events that promote healthy physical activity during non-instructional time within the school day.

Encourage students' sense of hope

Hope involves having a sense of purpose and internal motivation, and has been found to be positively associated with life satisfaction and academic achievement and negatively associated with depression, which is linked to substance use.^{vii} Administrators can develop purposeful approaches to staff professional learning around reframing responses, building resilience, and gaining strategies to promote confidence and growth mindset within all students. *All* school staff can learn how to interact with students on a daily basis in a variety of capacities in a way that is supportive, and that helps students feel empowered and capable of succeeding, even in the context of academic and social challenges. A school community that surrounds students with this kind of messaging only exists when the Principal sees giving students a sense of hope as a priority for the school community at large, and takes steps to realize that need.

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