

Tips for Providing Substance Use and Sexual Health Education in Schools

Whether you are Interior Health staff, a community agency worker or a teacher, planning education for students about sensitive health topics like substance use and sexual health can feel daunting. The following tips can help you navigate these requests and encourage an evidence-based approach.

1

Use resources that align with BC Curriculum.

The BC curriculum is designed to build core competencies that all students need in order to engage in deep, lifelong learning. Using curricular aligned resources* helps to build young people's substance use and sexual health literacy while aligning with the school's educational needs.



**Check out the recommended resource list at the end of this document.*

2

Discuss the content of the session(s) in advance

If you are an external presenter always discuss the needs of the class with school personnel. Make sure the classroom teacher is aware of what you will be doing. Inquire about whether the school has policies for education sessions that involve sensitive topics like sexual health and substance use. Some schools may need to obtain consent for students to attend the session(s) or provide the opportunity for opting out of the session.



3

Pay attention to developmental stage/age appropriateness

The needs of students in middle school may be very different than the needs of secondary school students. For more information review [BC's Adolescent Health Survey](#) for age-related and geographical information on substance use and sexual activity.



4

Review videos, handouts and brochures before using them.

There are some pretty great materials out there that contain information about how to reduce the risks: however, they are not appropriate for all audiences and settings. Avoid using resources in schools that use adult language or graphic images as they are likely to be controversial. When in doubt, check with the classroom teacher or administration.



5

One size does not fit all – Ensure messaging reflects the range and diversity of experiences in the classroom.

Education that does not take into account the range and diversity of experience with substance use and sexual activity among the students in the class can be ineffective. Strive to find a balance between educating about the benefits of abstinence and delaying involvement while also providing information on harm reduction and staying safe. Avoid giving the impression that “everyone is doing it” or “people who are doing it are bad”.



6

Create a supportive environment

Be aware that there may be students in the class who find these topics challenging due to their own (or a loved one’s) experiences with substance use or sexual trauma. Acknowledge that the sessions may be difficult for some. Work with students to set ground rules to create safety, allow students the opportunity to choose whether or not to participate and make sure information is available on where students can go for help and support.



7

Use a non-stigmatizing approach

A non-stigmatizing approach creates a safe environment for students to dialogue honestly and openly about substance use and sexual health issues. Some commonly used terms originate from a place of stigma – become familiar with [stigmatizing language and inclusive, respectful alternatives](#). Stigma sometimes shows up non-verbally in our tone of voice and body language. Aim to be neutral and respectful of student autonomy and their right to make their own decisions based on accurate information.



8

Build student capacity and confidence.

Help improve student’s knowledge, skills and ability to navigate a world that includes substance use and sex. Build the confidence and ability of youth to consider their options. Instead of isolated facts, statistics or scare tactics, look for ways to get to deeper, more relevant learning. Try lecturing less and discussing more. Avoid giving the “drug or sex talk”; instead use activities that involve dialogue, discussion and reflection.



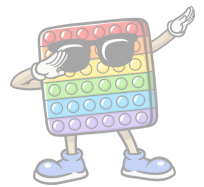
9

Build teacher capacity and confidence.

Schools often reach out to external sources because they are not comfortable teaching about topics like substance use and sexual activity. However, evidence shows that teacher-facilitated substance use education is more effective than isolated sessions with external presenters. Teachers know their students well and can help set the stage for meaningful inquiry and productive learning. They are also accessible if students want to talk after the sessions.



Talk to schools and districts about how you can support teachers to be more comfortable delivering content on substance use and sexual health. Offer to connect teachers with classroom resources and opportunities for training.



10

Take advantage of teachable moments

We live in a society where people engage in sexual activity and substance use. Messages are everywhere - in the media, on the news, in music and more. Use these everyday examples to generate conversation. Ask students to critically evaluate the information and messages they see.

11

Get permission before providing or leaving behind resources or supplies for students.

If you plan to distribute or leave behind any supplies (pamphlets, condoms, naloxone kits, swag etc.) make sure there is permission from the teacher or school administration. If you do not have permission, inform students of where they can go in the community for these resources.



12

One shot wonders aren't that wonderful

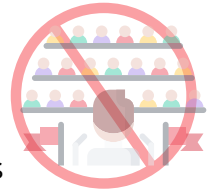
Bringing in a guest speaker whether that is a public health nurse, community agency, celebrity, person in recovery, or police officer does not have lasting impact or contribute to building student and teacher capacity. However, it does show there is interest in doing something. Use these requests as opportunities for relationship building and discussing further work that can be done including comprehensive, evidence-based approaches to educating students, reviewing school policy and practices and addressing stigma.



13

More is not merrier – avoid large assemblies.

It might seem like having a speaker talk to a large assembly of students is an efficient use of time but this is one of the least effective ways to deliver education to students. This format almost always guarantees the delivery will be lecture based which limits interaction and dialogue to only the most confident and extroverted students. Be cautious about guest speakers who specialize in large audience lectures; they often hold the audiences attention with content that is dramatic and based on scare-tactics.



14

Just say no to scare tactics, dramatic stories, graphic images and criminalization.

Sensationalized presentations with dramatic images of impoverished people using substances on the street, car crashes, gang violence, body parts impacted by disease; presentations by police officers sharing “war stories” and insider knowledge about the criminal drug world, and even stories from people with lived experience about their own personal trauma and experiences, can do more harm than good. These approaches may seem engaging but they often shut down dialogue, limit important interaction and may contain stigmatizing messages.



Don't forget to check out the recommended resources on the last page!
They are really good :)



Got questions, ideas, concerns suggestions... reach out to the [IH Youth Harm Reduction Team!](#)

We are here to help :)

Sources and more information:

[Delivering Substance Use Education – ABCs of Substance Use](#)

[PHN Role in Youth Reproductive and Sexual Health Education in Schools \(IH access only\)](#)

[Blueprint for Action: Preventing substance-related harms among youth through a Comprehensive School Health Approach.](#)

Recommended Resources

Grade	Topic	Program
Various	Tobacco and Vaping	Vaping Toolkit for Schools (IH)
Various	Sexual Health	Sexual Health Resources for Teachers and PHNs (IH)
Various	Sexual Health	TeachingSexualHealth.ca
K to Grade 5	Substance Use - Prevention	ABCs of Substance Use Recommended Resources K to Gr 5
Grades 5-10	Tobacco and Vaping	BC Lung Vaping Health Education Toolkit
Grade 6-8	Substance Use - Prevention (Cannabis, Tobacco and Vaping)	ABCs of Substance Use Recommended Resources Gr 6 to 8
Grade 9-12	Substance Use – Prevention and Harm Reduction (Multiple Substances)	ABCs of Substance Use Recommended Resources Gr 9-12
Grades 9-12	Substance Use – Harm Reduction (Multiple Substances)	Safety First: Real Drug Education for Teens - BC version (IH) - 15 lessons on various substance use topics
Grades 9-12	Substance Use – Harm Reduction (Multiple substances)	Safer Partying Workbook (IH) Safer Partying PPT (IH)
Grades 9-12	Substance Use – Harm Reduction (Multiple substances)	Youth Harm Reduction Toolkit Education Resources