Promoting Well-Being

Promoting students' well-being can reduce their risk of problematic substance use.

What the RESEARCH says:

School communities can play an important role in preventing problematic substance use by enhancing students' well-being and resilience.

Cannabis legalization and regulation and the increased public attention to substance use issues have sparked discussions on the role of school communities in addressing problematic substance use among youth. Schools are well-positioned to help prevent problematic substance use among students through efforts to enhance well-being.

Individuals' overall well-being reflects numerous factors, including how one perceives their relationships, one's sense of purpose, life satisfaction, optimism, self-esteem and competence and engagement and interest in daily activities. Resilience (i.e., the ability to transform stressful events or adversity into opportunities to learn and thrive) is another factor that is closely related and can contribute to well-being. Attention to youths' well-being and resilience may be particularly important, given the numerous, often challenging, physical, social and emotional changes that take place during this life stage.

Recent Canadian school-based research identified that a high degree of overall well-being among youth is protective against substance use, including among individuals with mental health problems [1]. This adds to a growing body of research suggesting that universal school-based efforts (i.e., intended for all students) to enhance well-being and resilience among youth should be a part of a comprehensive approach to preventing problematic substance use [2,3,4,5].

Efforts to enhance students' well-being can complement other efforts more explicitly designed to prevent problematic substance use (e.g., substance use-related health education, awareness campaigns, and assemblies). These more traditional knowledge-based approaches are limited in their ability to address students' risk of problematic substance use in isolation [4,6], and even can produce unintended negative consequences (i.e., in the case of abstinence-only approaches and fear appeals) [7]. This research underscores the need to also apply more holistic approaches to prevention.

For more information and additional resources, please visit:
https://www.csmh.uwo.ca/research/positive-youth-development.html

Public Health Agency of Canada

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Enhancing youths' well-being involves increasing protective factors that can buffer risk of problematic substance use.

Supporting well-being requires enhancing protective factors (described below) that positively contribute to students' development while minimizing risk factors (e.g., social isolation, experiences of trauma and violence and unhealthy relationships) that can interfere with healthy development and lead to negative outcomes like problematic substance use.

Picture a balance scale. Building and strengthening protective factors and positive experiences on one side of the scale can effectively counterbalance risk factors and negative experiences on the other, ultimately increasing youths' overall well-being.

While there are numerous protective factors that positively contribute to students' overall health and well-being, there are seven key protective factors that school communities can bolster that are linked to lower rates of problematic substance use among youth [8]. These protective factors are:

- Self-efficacy, strong communication and decision-making skills [9];

- A sense of hope, faith and cultural identity [8,9];

- Adequate sleep, healthy diet and physical exercise [10];

- A sense of belonging, connectedness, and social support [9];

- Stable and caring relationships with supportive adults (e.g., parents/caregivers, teachers, mentors and coaches, etc.) [11];

- Opportunities for and engagement in positive behaviours such as helping, sharing, donating and volunteering [9]; and

- School engagement and a sense of school connectedness [9].

Enhancing these protective factors through school communities can directly help to foster well-being and prevent problematic substance use among students.

Strategies school communities can adopt to promote students' well-being

Provide opportunities for youth to engage in positive behaviours and acknowledge acts of kindness

By providing diverse and accessible opportunities for youth to engage in positive behaviours (e.g., volunteering, helping, sharing and donating), school communities can enhance students' well-being and resilience and decrease their risk of problematic substance use [9]. Youth- and peer-oriented activities (e.g., peer-mentoring, tutoring and coaching) support students' autonomy and represent opportunities to make a real difference in their communities.

Administrators can fund, facilitate and promote opportunities for students to engage in positive behaviours both within the school and in the greater community. They can also use their leadership role to serve as champions for these activities and behaviours.

Teachers can encourage students to volunteer in the community and acknowledge when students help each other and share in the classroom. Teachers can also lead by example by demonstrating these positive behaviours themselves.

All members of school communities can acknowledge students' positive behaviours; these small things add up, and it is good to reinforce them. All school community members can also model and reinforce positive behaviours beyond the classroom walls (e.g., on the bus, in the hallways and on the schoolyard).
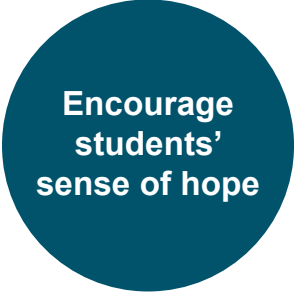
Provide opportunities for skill-building

Create opportunities for students to develop a variety of skills. For example, physical skills honed through exercise and recreation can help regulate mood, build self-esteem and increase feelings of happiness and life satisfaction [12]. Likewise, social skills, such as conflict resolution, and emotional skills, such as self-efficacy and self-awareness, are important individual-level resources for enhancing resilience.

Administrators can champion social-emotional learning and support teachers in incorporating social and emotional skill-building in classroom activities. Administrators can prioritize physical education programming through course allocations and scheduling. 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.

Teachers can integrate opportunities for skill-building into classroom activities in ways that are aligned with curricula expectations. Educators can support or facilitate social-emotional learning or positive youth development programs in the classroom. Visit the CASEL website for a list of sample teaching activities to support core competencies of social-emotional learning.

All members of school communities can learn about social and emotional competencies so that they can reinforce them for students.

Encourage students' sense of hope

Hope involves having a sense of purpose and internal motivation. Hope is positively associated with life satisfaction and academic achievement and negatively associated with depression and problematic substance use [10]. Hope can be nurtured through supportive relationships and positively contributes to well-being and resilience, thereby better enabling youth to manage, learn from and thrive in the face of stressful events and adversity.

Administrators can promote staff professional development around developing strategies to promote confidence and hope and build resilience among all students.

Teachers can ask students questions about their goals for the future and encourage planning and goal-directed behaviours in the classroom. For example, teachers may encourage students to use a day planner, set daily goals and keep track of and celebrate their achievements.

All members of school communities can instill hope and confidence among students through their daily interactions (e.g., by acknowledging their strengths and successes, big and small), helping them to feel empowered and capable of succeeding, even in the context of academic and social challenges.

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