



Promoting Well-Being

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

Adolescence is marked by a number of biological, social, emotional and physical changes that can increase youths' vulnerability to problematic substance use and other negative social and health challenges. School communities are well-positioned to help mitigate these vulnerabilities through efforts to enhance students' well-being.

We know that a high degree of well-being and resilience can enable youth to transform stressful events and adversity into opportunities to learn and thrive. This response buffers the negative impacts of stress and adversity on youths' health and development. It is the collective role of families, schools, communities and governments to provide youth with the resources, skills and opportunities needed to support their overall well-being, which in turn can help to prevent problematic substance use. Healthy, nurturing environments allow youth to build resilience by developing and maintaining supportive relationships and learning and practicing important social and emotional skills.

Picture a balance scale. Protective factors such as healthy relationships, healthy coping skills, self-esteem and school and community connectedness, promote overall health and well-being and counterbalance risk factors that can lead to problematic substance use (e.g., experiences of trauma, stigmatization or discrimination). Having a supportive, caring relationship with an adult (e.g., a parent, teacher or coach) is of the utmost importance. Such relationships can encourage youth to engage in open, honest dialogues with these adults about substance use, giving adults the opportunity to provide information and guidance or facilitate access to resources or treatment if they are being sought by youth.

All members of the school community can play a role in reducing students' likelihood of problematic substance use by building positive and lasting relationships with youth and supporting their development. Such support includes being accessible, available, and encouraging and celebrating students' successes, no matter how big or small. Administrators can develop and promote professional learning for school staff around building resilience, social-emotional learning and utilizing strategies to promote confidence and hope among all students. Teachers can also provide support by listening to students without judgement, encouraging them to think about their feelings and reminding them that their efforts are appreciated. When all members of school communities cultivate a safe, welcoming and secure school environment, students are supported to develop positive relationships, discover their strengths and effectively tackle challenges and manage stress. Applying this upstream approach can help bolster well-being and, in turn, lower students' risk of problematic substance use, as well as poor mental health, violence, bullying and other negative outcomes.

For further information on this topic, check out our series, Preventing Problematic Substance Use Through Positive Youth Development, which can be found at <https://www.csmh.uwo.ca/research/positive-youth-development.html>.



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