



Effective Programming

There are effective universal school-based programs that reduce youths' risk of problematic substance use by supporting positive youth development.

If you Google “substance use prevention in schools” over 70,000,000 results will appear. In the current era of information overload, it is not always clear which prevention strategies are current, credible or effective.

Research shows that traditional school-based substance use prevention programs focus primarily on increasing students' awareness of potential social and health consequences of substance use and are largely ineffective in isolation. Clearly it is important to have open, honest conversations about substance use in schools and provide balanced information to youth; however, knowledge-focused initiatives don't account for the numerous factors that contribute to problematic substance use. Conversely, school-based programs that focus on enhancing positive youth development and overall health and well-being offer a more holistic approach to preventing problematic substance use.

Positive youth development programs reflect the view that youth are individuals with inherent strengths and infinite potential, as opposed to individuals with problems that need to be solved. Positive youth development programs prioritize developing youths' social and emotional skills, including those related to self-awareness, communication, self-regulation and conflict resolution. In turn, these skills support them in establishing caring relationships and ensure that they have positive experiences and resources that promote well-being. Such a focus encourages healthy development among youth and provides a major protective influence against problematic substance use, as well as poor mental health, bullying and violence.

There are evidence-based positive youth development programs that align well with curricula expectations versus adding on to school staffs' existing responsibilities. Common elements of effective positive youth development programs include 1) Addressing topics such as healthy relationships, peer pressure, decision making, self-awareness and empathy; 2) An interactive format; 3) Engaging and relevant material; and 4) Opportunities for personal reflection and peer-to-peer sharing.

The *Fourth R* (Relationships) and the *Fourth R Healthy Relationships Plus* programs were developed for Canadian school systems and are based on the contention that relationship skills can be taught the same way as other academic or athletic skills (see www.youthrelationships.org). Research on the *Fourth R* has shown promising results in promoting social-emotional skills and reducing violence and related risk behaviours. There are different *Fourth R* curricula to match different grade levels and education systems. The *Fourth R* team has also developed specific programming for LGBTQ2 youth and Indigenous youth because these populations have unique protective factors that can be bolstered by emphasizing identity and connectedness, but are also at higher risk of negative outcomes like problematic substance use.

Schools are an equitable and feasible setting to implement universal positive youth development programming, particularly since these programs do not target specific groups or problem behaviours. All youth can benefit from developing a toolbox of skills and supports that help protect them against negative outcomes, such as problematic substance use, and this can be achieved using effective school-based programs that support students' positive youth development.

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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