

Rethinking Conversation Around Youth Substance Use

A Discussion Guide

The Students Commission of Canada & the Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health

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The Students
Commission
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Youth Engagement*



La commission
des étudiants
*Le centre d'excellence pour
l'engagement des jeunes*



Pan-Canadian
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Governments Working Across the Health and Education Sectors

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Youth represent a population with a diversity of experiences related to substance use. Some may have had little to no exposure to substance-use issues whereas others may have high involvement or contact with the world of substance use. It can be challenging to identify what information should be shared to specific audiences and how to communicate that information while staying away from unwanted outcomes.

The Students Commission of Canada worked in partnership with the Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health to develop a series of products based on the current evidence on the prevention and reduction of substance-related harms among young Canadians. We reviewed current evidence on the topic and created products adapted to different target audiences: youth grades 6-8, youth grades 9-12, and adult allies.

This Discussion Guide is a tool complementing the youth-targeted video and aims to support conversation about substance use with youth. The videos are designed to convey key ideas within a concise and engaging format; therefore, they cannot provide a full description of related concepts and issues. Furthermore, audience members may have questions about the content. Although these videos can be used as stand-alone tools, they are no replacement for the information, support, and safe space that adult allies may be able to provide youth. This guide aims to empower adult allies with practical follow-up questions and exercises that engage a whole group in a dialogue. The videos and this guide were developed in collaboration with young people.

We recommend that all adult allies watch the River Parable video beforehand in order to understand the guiding principles behind these questions and exercises. [Review River Parable video.](#)

Think Ahead Video – Youth from grades 6 to 8

Purpose of the video

Considering the varied experiences regarding substance use in this age group and the fact that middle school is often a critical period for the first exposure to substances, the purpose of this video is to discuss one's boundaries and the important of thinking ahead of time about them.

Direction

[Start by watching the video](#) as a group. Then, use the following themes and probes to engage in a meaningful conversation. Feel free to spend more or less time and even skip some themes if you feel like it does not apply to your group, or they are not in a place to discuss it. **Please read this guide in advance and make any adjustment needed to meet the needs and the experiences of your specific group as some of the examples or exercises provided might feel more relevant for older youth.**

General Follow-up Questions

When the video ends, a simple first step is to ask youth what the video was about. Ask probing questions to help them reflect.

- What was this video about? What do you understand?
 - Can you name examples of substances?
 - Why should you think ahead of time about what you do or don't want to do?
 - Why should you think about it now?

If necessary, take the time to explain some of the words or concepts that might not be well understood by all the youth.

- **Substance:** Something you can put in your body which may affect the way your body and/or brain functions. For example: alcohol, cannabis, tobacco, prescription drugs, opioids, etc.
 - If necessary, it may be beneficial to distinguish between prescription drugs that have been prescribed by a healthcare professional and prescription drugs that are being misused, because they have been prescribed to another person or because they were meant to be used in a different way.
- **Health:** Feeling good in your body and in your brain. Substances can have negative effects on your health in different ways. For example, they can damage the inside of your body, they can make you more likely to get in accidents, they can make it harder for you to care for yourself or others, etc.
- **Thinking ahead of time:** When you make a decision hours, days, or months before you need to. For example, you may already know what you're going to do tonight when you get home from school. Maybe those plans are flexible and could be changed. Maybe there are parts of those plans that you need to follow through with no matter what, like eating a meal or brushing your teeth before bed.

Boundaries

It will be important to lead a full discussion about boundaries. Below are some questions and examples that you can use to support the discussion.

- Do you know what a boundary is?
 - **Potential example of a boundary:** Each of us is in charge of taking care of our own bodies. To do this, we need boundaries. Boundaries help us decide what we do or don't put in our bodies.
 - We may think of a boundary as a fence. Fences help us keep some things out. Maybe we also have a gate in the fence to let some things in. We may also call them our limits.
- Can you name some boundaries? Potential examples include:
 - I am allergic to peanuts, so I will never accept eating peanuts.

- I don't really like raisins. I might eat a few depending on the situation, but I'd rather eat something else if I have the chance.
 - I like it when my friends hug me, but I don't want a stranger hugging me.
 - I like being called by my name. I also like being called by my nickname. If someone calls me something mean, that is not acceptable to me.
 - Sometimes, we view boundaries as "negative" or "boring" things that might keep us from interacting with our friends. If youth in your group seem to hold this opinion, it may help to present boundaries as things that can help keep us alive, healthy, well, and safe, while allowing us to participate in activities.
 - Another crucial aspect of boundaries is that they belong to us, and we shouldn't need to justify them. For instance, while the example of the peanut allergy presented earlier can be helpful in showing how vital boundaries can be, youth should know that they don't need such an extreme reason to set a boundary.
- Below is an analogy that might help youth reflect on and set boundaries/limits.
 - It may be helpful to build on the idea of the fence presented earlier. How can we build a fence?
 - **Potential responses:** we want to build the fence in advance to try and keep animals or objects from coming in our backyard. Maybe you're following a plan with instructions, or maybe you're building from your imagination. Maybe you're asking for help from friends or adults, or maybe you're building the fence on your own. In the same way, you could discuss substance use with your friends to see what they think. You could ask an adult that you trust or do some research online. There's no wrong way to build a fence or to establish your boundaries. But building your fence early means you're prepared to keep out what you want to keep out, or let in what you want to let in.
- What elements are important when thinking about our boundaries?
 - *If you feel like youth appreciate the image of the fence, continue here. If that is the case, the question could be: What elements are important when building a fence?*
 - *Potential responses (fence): Your fence may have various heights. It may have a door. We may see through it or, on the contrary, it may be opaque. It may not be the same fence all around your backyard. You might adapt it as time passes.*
 - **If no image or metaphor is needed - Potential responses (substances):** When it comes to substances like alcohol, cannabis, tobacco, or other drugs, you might have very strict boundaries, or some boundaries that are more flexible. There might be some conditions under which you are willing to try something, but not in other circumstances. For example, you might want to try drinking alcohol when you are with friends X and Y at home, but not at a party. Your boundaries may not be the same for all substances. Finally, you might change and adapt your boundaries with time and experiences. They do not have to be the same forever; you don't have to "commit" to them.

- Important talking points here include the questions youth may be asking themselves when reflecting on their boundaries: **IF I decide to try a substance...**
 - **What** substances am I willing to try or not?
 - **Who** would I like to be with when I try a substance?
 - **When** would I like this to happen? (e.g., only on the weekends, only after I turn 16, only in the daytime...)
 - **Where** would I like to be?
 - **How** will I try those substances? (Some substances can be used in different ways, and those ways do not all have equal effects. For example, just because someone would be comfortable trying cannabis in one form does not mean that they have to try cannabis in all its forms.)

What if Youth Answered “No!” at the End of the Video?

The video ends with the question: “Next time someone offers you a substance, what are you going to say?” When this guide was tested, the young people automatically responded “NO!” at the end of the video. Although in some ways, this may seem like a desirable response (i.e., abstinence being the best way to prevent any harm), the purpose of the video is to acknowledge that some youth may want to and will try substances. Therefore, it is important to create a dialogue with youth rather than finishing the conversation after a simple negative response. How do you navigate that automatic no? Start by asking why.

- Why is “no” your answer? Is this something that you have thought of, researched, or set your boundaries on? Are you saying no because it is what you are supposed to say to adults? Is it what you think your friends would say? What do you think influenced you to respond “no”? Where did we learn to say no? What are your motivations behind the no response?
 - *You can even try the exercise of the Five-Whys:* asking “why” after a response five times. This may allow exploring preconceived ideas about substances and behaviours and will help adult allies to identify what topic need to be addressed. It will also help you to discover where that response is coming from and whether it reflects what they really think.
 - Q Why are you saying no to drinking alcohol? R - Because alcohol makes you do things you regret.
 - Q - Why does it make you do things you regret? R - Because when you drink too much, alcohol may cause you to have a blurry mind.
 - Q - Why would one drink so much that they have a blurry mind? Etc.
- Why might somebody say yes (agree to try or use a substance)? Even if YOU didn’t say yes, why would some other people say yes?
 - Through these questions, you can expand on perspective and motivational factors as they come.

Welcome the responses with empathy and non-judgment. It is possible that youth will feel uncomfortable to speak their mind because adults usually want them to say no and they might

be afraid of getting in trouble. Having to share in a group might also prevent someone from sharing. This can be mitigated through some anonymous activities.

Boundaries - Activities

- Turning on somewhat loud **music** and allowing small group conversations with people they trust and/or with the adult ally.
- **Writing a letter** to yourself.
- **Identifying two people** in one's life to whom they may go if they want to discuss or have questions.
- **The Snowball Activity:** On a piece of paper, everyone writes anonymous answers to a question (e.g., *What is something that worries you about substances? What is an assumption you have/heard about people using substances? The very first thing that comes to your mind/how do you feel about watching this video?*). Then, they crumple up the piece of paper and throw it in a corner of the room. At this point, there are two options:
 - i) Ask everyone to take a piece of paper that is not their own and comment on what is written in the first round (e.g., response on first round: *"I am scared to be left out because I don't want to drink,"* the second person could write something like *"You should be with people that respect you for what you want to do, I am sure your true friends will respect your choice"*). Then, they crumple it up again, throw it back out, and choose another piece of paper. Finally, everyone reads the responses on the papers out loud.
 - ii) After participants respond to the first question and toss the crumpled responses in a corner of the room, you pick up the pieces of paper one by one, read what is on the pieces of paper, and discuss with the whole group.

How to Face Peer Pressure?

When discussing this guide with youth, one topic that was often mentioned was peer pressure. How does one face peer pressure? How can we affirm our boundaries without jeopardizing friendship? It may be helpful to practice some role-playing to help youth become more comfortable applying their boundaries.

First, it is important to insist on the fact that one should NOT have to justify their decision. Youth should not have a list of arguments or have to explain themselves; they can simply not want to use a substance. When someone says "No, thank you," the response should always be "okay cool." However, life doesn't always work out that way and peer pressure can be very hard to navigate, especially as a young person. Directly saying "no" might not feel comfortable or might not work. Explore with your group the synonyms and various ways to decline an offer to use substances.

- What are some synonyms to "No, thank you"? What are some alternatives to using substances that one might suggest?
 - **Potential responses:** No thanks. Not today. Maybe another time. I'd rather do something else (redirecting the activity).

- One might find strategies to **redirect the attention** (e.g., having a red cup filled with water or juice or an empty can to “look like” they are drinking alcohol, so people stop insisting or commenting).

Remind youth that it is not because they saw it on social media or believe that everyone is doing it that you have to do it; they can have fun without using substances. Sometimes, only a minority of people engage in substance use, but they are “louder” or “bolder”, making it appear like everyone is doing it. You can also include engaging activities.

Peer Pressure - Activities

- **Arts-based activities** like creating a poster with the “no synonyms,” brainstorming on Miro or Jamboard for virtual options.
 - Individually or as a group, start with a large piece of paper. Write “No” in the middle. Around this, write or draw different ways to say “no.” This poster could be showcased on classroom walls, serving as a useful reminder.
 - Miro and Jamboard offer alternate ways of doing this activity virtually and potentially anonymously.
- **Role-play:** Have youth act out a situation and practice the “Okay, that’s cool” response. Here, you can even merge the Boundaries and the Facing peer-pressure conversations.
 - Option 1: Role play. Present the group (large groups or smaller subgroups) with a scenario. The group must brainstorm ways to navigate this situation while respecting their boundaries. These examples might only be relevant for older audiences.
 - Scenario A: You came to a party with your older sibling, Sam. Sam was supposed to be driving you back home tonight, but you’ve seen him with several drinks already, and he is acting louder than usual. You’re wondering how Sam and you will get home safe tonight.
 - Scenario B: You are at a concert with your friends. A stranger offers you a pill and says it will make you feel happy and relaxed. One of your friends takes one. Another one of your friends, who has been consuming cannabis all night, takes one as well. Both of them are telling you that you should definitely try one pill.
 - Option 2: Question mingle. Half the group gets assigned questions (e.g., *Would you like a cigarette? Can I mix you a drink? Do you want to come to a party later?*) while the other half of the group gets assigned answers (e.g., *No thanks, Maybe if our other friend is also there, Some other time, etc.*). Play music as youth walk around the room. When the music stops, youth must create pairs with one person with a question and one person with an answer. The person with the question asks their question, and the person with the answer reads the answer they were assigned. Whatever the answer, the person who asked the question must reply with “Okay, cool.” Afterwards, you may debrief with the group how it felt to be in either position.

- **Myth buster activity.** It can be helpful to present youth with some myths and facts to challenge any preconceived ideas about how many youth around them use substances. Here are some potential true or false statements, although it may be even more impactful to ask young people in your group to come up with their own myth busters through research.
 - True or false? 18% of youth in grades 7-12 have used cannabis in the past 12 months.
 - This statement is true. The data has been collected through the Canadian Student Tobacco, Alcohol and Drugs Survey, 2018-2019. This is the percentage of youth who self-reported using cannabis of all forms in the year before they responded to the survey.¹
 - True or false? 29% of students from grades 10-12 have used e-cigarettes in the past 30 days.
 - This is true. This statistic is a combination of youth who use nicotine and non-nicotine vaping products in the last 30 days. This statistic shows an upward trend in how many youth are using a variety of vaping products in Canada.²
 - True or false? Rates of cigarette use are at a 10-year high.
 - This is false. Current cigarette use is at an all-time low, with three percent of youth grades 7-12 using. Cigarette use has been consistently trending downward for over 25 years, according to the Canadian Student Tobacco, Alcohol and Drugs Survey.³

From Peer Pressure to Peer Support

Finally, you can discuss how one may be a good peer ally when it comes to substance use. People should treat others like they want to be treated themselves. Unity is strength: bringing people together to face peer pressure may make it easier. So, how can one support their peers? What should a bystander do?

If your group has more knowledge and experience with substance use, you can [show them the Eight Cups of Coffee video](#), which aims to demonstrate how peers may engage in respectful conversation regarding substance youth between themselves and gives active communication strategies.

The Eight Cups of Coffee video exemplifies the peer support technique OARS:

- Open-ended questions: Asking open-ended questions will prompt your friend to tell you more about their situation if they feel comfortable.
- Affirming: Telling your friend that their feelings are valid helps them feel seen and heard.

¹ Government of Canada. [Summary of results for the Canadian Student Tobacco, Alcohol and Drugs Survey 2018-19.](#)

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

- Reflecting: Rephrasing what your friend is sharing with you shows your friend that you are listening to what they are saying.
- Summarizing: Making a summary of what your friend has been telling you helps your friend clarify their thoughts and come to a solution of their own.

You can also discuss the adult allies and the resources that are available to youth. The Students Commission of Canada and the Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health put together a list of resources available to youth in each province and territory that can be found on both websites.

Resources:

[The Students Commission of Canada](#)

[Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health](#)