



Evidence-Informed Education and Messaging

What does research tell us about effective approaches to substance use education and messaging?

Research consistently demonstrates that evidence-informed substance use education is more effective than abstinence- or information-only approaches, including fear-based and “Just Say No” programs. Abstinence-only programs have been widely implemented but consistently produce negligible effects, with no sustained impact on student substance use behaviours. Studies show that youth who receive such programming are equally or more likely to use substances compared to those who do not, while also lacking the knowledge to make safer choices when use does occur.

In contrast, research-based programs and practices can achieve meaningful reductions in substance use. Effective approaches share several features: they provide accurate information; are grounded in protective factors such as school belonging and supportive relationships; teach practical decision-making and social-emotional skills; use interactive rather than passive teaching methods; and embrace harm minimization principles that recognize that substance use occurs along a spectrum – from no use through to substance use disorder. These approaches work because they acknowledge developmental realities, build competencies rather than relying on information delivery alone, reduce stigma to increase help-seeking, and address root causes of substance use-related harms, such as trauma and mental health challenges.

The content and approach of effective education must also be developmentally appropriate. At the early and middle childhood stage (Kindergarten- Grade 5), research suggests that introducing detailed substance use information or social pressure resistance training may be ineffective and associated with harms rather than benefits. At this stage, research supports building foundational social-emotional competencies and protective relationships. In early and middle adolescence (Grades 6-9), effective programming introduces accurate normative information, decision-making skills, and critical thinking about influences. In late adolescence (Grade 10-12), harm minimization literacy and transition planning become appropriate, equipping students with practice knowledge for navigating substance-related decisions in the transition to adulthood. Across all stages, punitive and exclusionary response to substance use, such as suspension, expulsion, or law enforcement involvement, are counterproductive, potentially severing the protective connections that reduce substance use risk and contributing to trajectories of increased harm.

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