



# Youth and Family/Caregiver Engagement

*Why is meaningful engagement of youth and family/caregivers important in developing substance use supports?*

Evidence consistently demonstrates that meaningfully engaging youth and their families/caregivers in the development of substance use supports improves the relevance, acceptability, and effectiveness of those supports. Youth engagement approaches, such as co-design (where young people help shape programs and policies), participatory research (where youth contribute to studying issues that affect them), and peer-led models (where trained peers deliver support), lead to programming that better reflects young people's lived experiences, cultural contexts, and developmental needs, resulting in stronger engagement and more responsive services. Similarly, family and caregiver involvement across the continuum of care is associated with improved service uptake, sustained participation, and alignment of supports with youths' social and relational environments.

In school settings, youth and family/caregiver engagement can take many forms. Youth engagement may include student advisory input on school substance use policies, peer mentorship programs, youth representation on school wellness committees, or student-led awareness initiatives. Family and caregiver engagement can extend beyond involvement in individual support planning to include participation in shaping schoolwide prevention approaches, access to resources and information that build families' capacity to have supportive conversations at home, and culturally responsive communication that honours diverse family structures and values. For students receiving targeted or individualized supports, collaborative planning that centres the student's voice alongside their family/caregivers' knowledge can produce more relevant and sustainable outcomes.

Collectively, youth- and family/caregiver-partnered approaches move schools from adult-directed responses toward collaborative, strengths-based approaches that promote empowerment, reduce stigma, and enhance the overall quality of substance use supports for young people.



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