



March 2007

If You Have Concerns About Your Child or Youth

The BC Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) provides a wide range of direct clinical services and targeted community supports for children and youth at-risk or dealing with mental health problems, and for their families.

For more information, please contact your local MCFD office (listed in the Blue or Government Pages of the phone book) or visit: www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/mental_health/help.htm

To learn more about BC's *Child & Youth Mental Health Plan*, please visit: www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/mental_health

Preventing Substance Use Disorders in Children and Youth

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A RESEARCH SUMMARY FROM THE
Children's Health Policy Centre

Our Research Reviews

The Children's Health Policy Centre in the Faculty of Health Sciences at Simon Fraser University prepared this report at the request of the British Columbia (BC) Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD). Our goal was to summarize the best currently available research evidence in order to inform policy and practice for preventing substance use disorders in children and youth. This report is one in a series of reports prepared in support of MCFD's *Child and Youth Mental Health Plan for BC*. Our reports summarize the best currently available research evidence on the prevention and treatment of a wide variety of children's mental health problems and are intended as a resource for policy-makers, practitioners, families and community members. The complete series of reports is available on our website at www.childhealthpolicy.sfu.ca including the companion to this report, *Treating Concurrent Substance Use and Mental Disorders in Children and Youth*.

Understanding Substance Use Disorders in Children and Youth

Substance use disorders (SUDs) are conditions involving a maladaptive pattern of substance use leading to adverse consequences. Many youth experiment with using substances such as alcohol and cannabis. The younger individuals are when they first use substances, the more likely they are to progress from experimental use to abuse or dependence. Children and youth diagnosed with substance abuse will often decrease or discontinue use in late adolescence or early adulthood, whereas those with dependence and other risk factors are more likely to continue having one or more SUDs. Both prevention and treatment are important elements for a public policy response to concurrent disorders in children and youth.

Since the individual and social costs associated with SUDs are significant, preventing such problems in the early years should be a priority. Prevention may be achieved through programs aimed at enhancing protective factors or mitigating risk factors to reduce the number of children and youth who experience substance use problems.

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Review Results

It is crucial that children and youth with established substance use and mental disorders get the care they need. But research shows this is not always the case. Large studies in Canada and elsewhere have demonstrated that only about one in four young people with mental health problems (or 25%) currently receive specialized treatment services.

To reduce the overall number of children and youth who suffer from substance use and mental disorders, we must both treat children with existing problems and implement effective programs to prevent problems from occurring.

Our research summarized findings from relevant systematic reviews published between 1994 and 2005 on preventing SUDs in children and youth aged 0–18 years. In total, 39 reviews were retrieved. Of these, five reviews met our inclusion criteria. All five reviews included at least one prevention program effective in significantly reducing substance use in children and youth.

Effective Prevention

A diverse range of programs was found to significantly reduce substance use. Effective programs included social influence, skills promotion and family-based interventions delivered in school and community settings. Additional factors beyond program content were found to make an impact on outcomes. Interactive programs with well-trained facilitators and the use of booster sessions were also associated with reduced substance use. Interventions that were exclusively knowledge focused were not found to be effective in reducing substance use. Additionally, none of the prevention programs targeted at preschoolers were effective.



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- The estimated prevalence rate for substance abuse is 0.8% meaning that at any given time, approximately 7500 children and youth in BC may be affected.
- SUDs in children and youth are associated with many detrimental consequences including risky sexual behaviour, increased risk for suicide, accidental deaths and diseases such as the human immunodeficiency virus and hepatitis.
- There are a variety of programs effective for preventing substance use among children and youth.

*Preventing Substance
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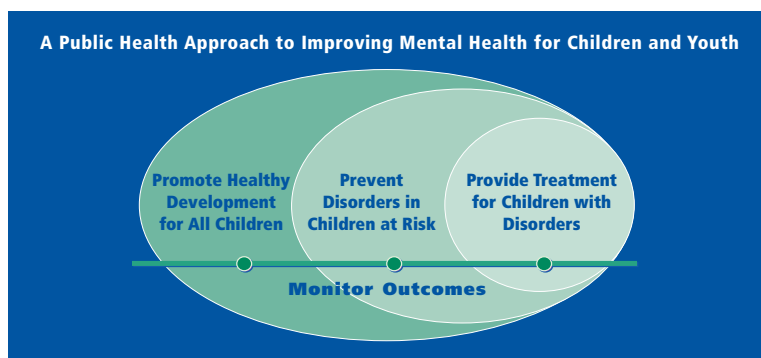
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About Us

We are a research group in the Faculty of Health Sciences at Simon Fraser University. Our work focuses on integrating research and policy to improve children's social and emotional wellbeing, or children's mental health. We promote a public health strategy for children's health. Our work complements the mission of the Faculty of Health Sciences to integrate research and policy for population and public health locally, nationally and globally.

Recommendations from the Research

- Prevention is the best harm reduction measure to address the long-term negative outcomes associated with SUDs. Effective programs exist to significantly reduce alcohol and other substance use including social influence, skills promotion and family-based interventions. Overall, given the positive benefits, continued investments in well-researched prevention programs are warranted.
- Prevention programs that were exclusively knowledge focused and that targeted preschoolers were not found to be effective. Interventions proven ineffective should be discouraged.



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