

About the Executive Summary

This executive summary provides the highlights of the most recent issue of the *Children's Mental Health Research Quarterly*, available for free at childhealthpolicy.ca. The *Quarterly* presents the best available research evidence on a variety of children's mental health topics. The BC Ministry of Children and Family Development funds the *Quarterly*.

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About the Children's Health Policy Centre

We are an interdisciplinary research group in the Faculty of Health Sciences at Simon Fraser University. We focus on improving social and emotional well-being for all children, and on the public policies needed to reach these goals. To learn more about our work, please see childhealthpolicy.ca.



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Preventing youth substance misuse: Programs that work in schools

While many adolescents experiment with substances like alcohol and cannabis, much can still be done to protect youth from substance misuse. In particular, caregivers can help teens safely navigate their adolescent years by building strong family relationships, encouraging meaningful participation in family decisions, and expressing healthy attitudes about substance use. As well, school-based prevention programs can reach large numbers of young people to help them avoid substance misuse.

To identify effective universal school-based prevention programs, we used systematic review methods to identify recent randomized controlled trials (RCTs). Two programs showed success: *Unplugged* (two RCTs, from Europe) and *Project PATHS* (one RCT, from Hong Kong). *Unplugged* provided youth with information on the effects of substances and taught them skills such as being assertive and resisting peer pressure. Teachers delivered this program in 12 group sessions over one school year or less. *Project PATHS* focused on positive adolescent development by teaching problem-solving and building family relationships. Teachers and other professionals delivered this program in 60 or 120 group sessions over three school years. The program also included a targeted component, offering a wide variety of interventions — from parenting to mental health promotion — to students with greater psychosocial needs.

Implications for practice and policy

- **Deliver programs in schools.** Compelling evidence shows that substance misuse prevention programs can be successfully delivered universally in schools. For example, teachers in eight countries effectively delivered *Unplugged* after taking a 2½-day training course. Notably, this program reduced use of both alcohol and cannabis — the substances Canadian youth use most frequently.
- **Tailor programs to the local context.** Good evidence supports the effectiveness of *Unplugged* for European youth. This program could be implemented in Canada — with local adaptation, pilot testing and full-scale evaluation prior to widespread delivery.
- **Consider health promotion programs.** Although *Project PATHS* was designed to promote healthy development, it also reduced substance use for Hong Kong youth. Still, many of this program's lessons were specific to Hong Kong. If this or a similar health promotion program were being considered for implementation in BC schools, it too should be adapted, piloted and evaluated prior to widespread delivery — to reflect local needs.
- **Implement higher-level policies to reduce youth substance use.** Specific public policies have been linked to mitigating substance use. These policies include banning advertising, increasing prices and reducing availability. A comprehensive approach will need to involve these strategies as well as effective prevention programs. (Please see the full *Quarterly* issue for more information.)

Substance misuse comes with great costs for individuals and for society, including compromised mental and physical health, loss of productivity, reduced quality of life, increased justice and health care costs, and even premature disability and death. The most effective and humane way to avert these costs is to prevent substance misuse from occurring by intervening early with young people, using effective universal prevention programs such as those showcased here. 🖐️