



## Executive Summary

SPRING 2018 Vol. 12, No. 2

# Treating substance misuse in young people


At any given time, an estimated 2.4% of Canadian youth use alcohol or drugs at a level that qualifies for a substance use disorder diagnosis, with alcohol and cannabis problems being the most common. Understanding what puts young people at risk can help prevent these disorders, or prevent them from getting worse. Prevention strategies include addressing avoidable early adversities, such as family socio-economic disadvantage and child maltreatment.

Youth who develop substance use disorders need to receive effective treatments. Our [Summer 2010 issue](#) identified three effective treatment categories: Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Ecological Family Therapies, and Motivational Interventions. In this current issue, we conducted a new systematic review to build on these findings. The following seven community-based treatments showed evidence of success: Adolescent Cannabis Check-Up, Case Management, CBT, Community Reinforcement, Ecologically Based Family Therapy, Motivational Interviewing and Multidimensional Family Therapy. Of these, CBT, Multidimensional Family Therapy and Motivational Interventions had particularly strong evidence of effectiveness, with positive outcomes from multiple RCTs.

## Implications for practice and policy

- **Choose the treatment that fits the youth.** Among the many effective treatments, practitioners should choose one that most suits the young person. Multidimensional Family Therapy may be a particularly good fit where parents are willing to engage. Alternatively, where youth want individual treatment or where parents cannot engage, CBT is a good option. And for youth who want briefer approaches, Motivational Interventions may be best. Young people should always have a voice in these choices.
- **Break down treatment barriers.** Many teens who struggle with substance use have other mental health challenges as well. So when a young person wants help with substance use, practitioners should be prepared to address these other challenges. Providing treatments in one venue is far better than making youth meet with different practitioners at different locations. Waitlists create a further barrier and should be avoided.
- **Give practitioners the tools to help.** Practitioners need the appropriate education and experience to provide youth with effective treatments. CBT is a good place to start. Many practitioners already have considerable experience with CBT. For those who do not, short courses are readily available. In contrast, training in other therapies can be far more costly. Policy-makers can help by supporting publicly funded mental health teams to acquire the training they need to serve children well.
- **Help all youth in need early on.** All young people struggling with substance misuse need access to effective treatments. The effective treatments identified in this review could be provided in Canada, preferably with concomitant evaluations. Providing community-based programs early can also prevent the need for more costly and disruptive residential care, while alleviating the personal and public health burdens caused by substance misuse.

Substance use disorders take a tremendous toll on young people. These disorders also typically become entrenched if effective interventions are not provided early in life. Consequently, adolescence is the best time to intervene to avert far more serious problems later on. Youth substance misuse is a problem we can address. Effective efforts to do so in turn can reduce much needless distress and avoidable harm associated with substance misuse in adulthood.

Please see our [full issue](#) to learn more about helping young people with substance use disorders. 



**Children's  
Mental Health  
Research Quarterly**

**About the Executive Summary**  
Here are the highlights from the most recent issue of the *Children's Mental Health Research Quarterly*, available for free at [childhealthpolicy.ca](http://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.

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