

Points to Ponder for Parents Talking With Your Child About Drugs and Gambling

Being informed about substance use and gambling is a critical first step in helping to prevent your child from developing problems with substance use or gambling. As a parent, you need to be informed, so you are prepared to discuss the facts with your child.

The substances youth are most likely to encounter in junior high school are tobacco, alcohol and cannabis. However, for the majority of young people this age, not using drugs is the norm. Youth are also unlikely to have problems with gambling. But it is still important to begin, and to continue, having conversations with your child about substance use and gambling, and the effect it could have on their lives.

Tobacco and Tobacco-Like Products

Nicotine, the drug in tobacco and some tobacco-like products like cigarettes, spit tobacco and electronic smoking products (also called 'vaping'), is highly addictive. Even though most youth in Alberta do not use these products, tobacco and tobacco-like product use among youth remains a significant health concern. Teens are more likely to use tobacco and tobacco-like products if significant role models in their lives use these products.

Youth are most likely to encounter tobacco, alcohol and cannabis in junior high school. But substances of use may also include all other drugs, including prescription medications, over-the-counter drugs and illegal drugs.

Alcohol

We don't always think of alcohol as a drug, but it is. Alcohol is a depressant drug that is present in beer, wine, spirits and liqueurs. It is legal for adults aged 18 and older in Alberta to drink; however, it is illegal for anyone under the age of 18. How alcohol affects you depends on things like how much and how fast you drink, your body size, whether you are male or a female, how much you have eaten, and how you are feeling. Teens are more vulnerable to harm from alcohol consumption because their brains are still developing and they typically have less experience with the drug.

Cannabis

Cannabis (commonly known as marijuana, pot, or weed) is a legally available drug in Canada. It is a mood-altering drug that is available in several forms: as marijuana (the dried flowering buds and leaves of the plant), as oils, waxes and resins (cannabis extracts), as food and beverages (edible cannabis) and as products that can be applied to external surfaces of the body (topical cannabis). The cannabis "high" comes from the chemical THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol).

People who use cannabis report feeling calm and relaxed. Cannabis can make a person slow to react, can interfere with learning and concentration, and can cause anxiety and panic attacks. Long-term effects may include lung damage (if smoked). Cannabis use can also impact brain development for people under 25, as up until that point, the brain is still developing.

Gambling

Many believe that adolescents do not gamble, but teenagers wager, dare and bet on card games, pool games, sporting events and personal skill competitions. Young people also gamble online and in videogames, using money, virtual coins or credits. For many adolescents, winning and losing these activities is secondary; they play for the enjoyment, the social interaction and the challenge. For some adolescents, gambling can be a lot like an addictive drug, which may become a problem.

More detailed information on tobacco, alcohol, other drugs and gambling is available from many reputable Canadian organizations. Here are a few you can visit:

- Alberta Health Services
- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)
- Health Canada

What Can You Do?

Communication is the key. You don't need to be an expert on substances and gambling to start a conversation with your child. With the information in this document, plus the material available from the organizations listed above, you are well equipped to start communicating.

Having a conversation about consequences

The following questions could be a good starting point for some communication with your child. They will help you to have an open and honest discussion with your child about important life areas that can be affected by substance use or gambling problems. You will have your own way of saying things, but the goal is to have your child consider what the potential consequences of substance use or gambling could be in each area. During the discussion, try to avoid telling your child what you think the consequences would be; give them time to think and let them come to their own conclusions.

1. Family: How could choosing to use substances or gamble affect your relationships with family members?
2. Legal: If you choose to use substances or gamble, what might the legal consequences be?

To scare or not to scare?

There is a difference between scary, "worst-case scenario" information and accurate and relevant information. By teaching your child about making thoughtful decisions and providing accurate, relevant information about the harm associated with substance use and gambling, you will be preparing them to make healthy choices.

3. Financial: How could choosing to use substances or gamble affect you financially?
4. Peers: How could choosing to use substances or gamble affect your relationships with your peers?
5. School: If you choose to use substances or gamble, what could happen at school?
6. Leisure: How could choosing to use substances or gamble affect the things you like to do for fun?

Health: How could choosing to use substances or gamble affect your

- physical health?
- emotional health?
- mental health?
- spiritual health?

Another way to have this conversation is to brainstorm with your child different important life areas, and write them down on separate slips of paper. Then, ask your child to put these life areas in order from most important to least important. Once this is done, give your child another slip of paper with the words "tobacco, alcohol, cannabis, other drugs and gambling" on it. Ask them where they would put this slip of paper in order of importance. You can then ask your teen what might happen in each life area if the substance use or gambling became more important.