

GETTING CANDID: FRAMING THE CONVERSATION
AROUND YOUTH SUBSTANCE USE PREVENTION

A Message Guide for Providers

Revised February 2023

NATIONAL
COUNCIL
*for Mental
Wellbeing*



Getting Grounded

Effective communication with youth requires understanding their attitudes and beliefs.

35%

of youth say they feel “stressed.”^{ix}

50%

of youth say they feel like they don’t have a lot to contribute.^{xxii}

60%

of youth say family matters most to them (far more than anything else, including friends).^{ix}

29%

of youth are at least somewhat concerned about substance use in their own lives.^{lbid}

INSIGHTS INTO THE LIVES AND MINDSETS OF YOUTH^x



To cope with how they are feeling, they are most likely to turn to the arts, including music, drawing and painting, reading and writing, followed by talking to friends and family or watching TV/playing video games.



Although over half of youth report receiving some education about substance use in school, only one-third say they are aware of existing programs in their community to help them stay away from — or stop using — alcohol and drugs.



While they believe illicit drugs pose a great risk of harm, fewer believe prescription drugs pose a great risk, and far fewer believe alcohol or marijuana pose a great risk.



The most trusted messengers on the topic of substance use include (in order) individuals with lived experience, providers, friends or peers, and parents/caregivers.

Engagement with youth and providers identified areas of alignment and disconnection between what providers think and what youth actually want, offering insights into how providers might more effectively communicate with youth.

AREAS OF ALIGNMENT^{xi}

- Best way to engage youth? **In-person.**
- Effective way to communicate with them? **Texting.**
- Why do youth **turn to substance use**? To cope with family problems, problems with friends, or problems at school, or because their friends or other people are doing it.
- Why should youth **not use** substances? To avoid “messing up” their future.

AREAS OF DISCONNECT^{xii}

- What **matters to youth**? Youth say family, but providers say friends, fitting in and appearance.
- Why **should they not use substances**? Youth identify the risk of addiction, impact on health and potential for a shortened lifespan. Providers identify the potential for interference with sports, music, hobbies or other activities.
- Why do youth **use substances**? Youth identify enjoyment or “they think it’s fun,” and providers are far more likely to say that substances give youth something to do when they are bored or lonely.



Partner with Parents/ Caregivers

Providers and parents/caregivers can be powerful partners in the fight to prevent youth substance use. Parents/caregivers are seen as the most comfortable group for youth to talk to, but they do not always have the information they need to talk to their children. Conversely, health care providers are experts who are trusted among youth for accurate information about substance use. By providing parents/caregivers with accurate information about substance use, providers can deliver the expert insights families need to talk with their children and help them avoid using drugs and alcohol.

Help parents/caregivers by sharing your expert insights! Consider providing them with resources such as written materials, videos or podcast recordings they can use at home to read, watch or listen to with their children.

Approach the Conversation Informally

Conversations about substance use can be uncomfortable. Keeping the conversation informal can decrease awkwardness and tension.^{xiv} Talk about what matters to the youth to open the conversation instead of following a script. Make it clear you are there to answer questions and have a dialogue rather than jumping right to predetermined talking points.

Do More Listening Than Talking

Youth prefer to be *listened to* rather than *talked at*. Demonstrate genuine listening by maintaining eye contact, leaning forward, repeating back to the youth what was heard, and avoiding interrupting while they are speaking. Asking permission before sharing information levels the playing field and moves away from a dynamic of authority. Give youth ample time to respond to questions and listen attentively to the answer. Avoid making assumptions about what you are hearing.

Be Transparent and Trustworthy

Transparency is important not just in building trust but also in protecting [confidentiality](#).^{xv} Remind youth about your legal and professional obligations to treat their information confidentially. Prove yourself worthy of trust by respecting boundaries and creating a space for emotional safety.^{xvi} Youth reported that they are more likely to trust someone who establishes mutual respect by treating them as someone who has valuable experiences and contributions to make, and by normalizing the conversation and not being judgmental.

Pay Attention to Body Language

Body language goes a long way to create a safe space. Reduce power dynamics by getting on the same physical level as the youth to eliminate intimidation (e.g., on a video chat make sure you are not looking down toward your camera but straight at it) and eliminate physical barriers between you (e.g., a desk or computer). Demonstrate openness and receptivity by sitting in an L-shape rather than across from one another and leaning toward the youth while conversing.



A New Message Framework

The National Council, in collaboration with Metropolitan Group and CDC, developed a range of potential messages about youth substance use that were tested among youth. Two ways of “framing” the conversation — a focus on the future and the risk of addiction — were found to resonate most. Three others — relationships, activities and self-affirmation — were identified as only slightly less motivating.

MIDDLE SCHOOL YOUTH

HIGH SCHOOL YOUTH

THE FUTURE

Don't let drug and alcohol use change or control your plans for the future.

RISK OF ADDICTION

Drugs and alcohol change parts of your brain that impact how you think and act. The more you use them, the harder it can be to stop even if you want to.

RELATIONSHIPS*

There are people in your life who matter to you and care about you. And you try hard not to let them down.

There are people in your life who matter to you and care about you. And you try hard to make them proud.

ACTIVITIES

Participating in sports, music, hobbies or other activities can help you build friendships, stay in shape, get into college and receive scholarships, and have fun.

SELF-AFFIRMATION

You respect yourself and want to make decisions that are best for you. Trust yourself and your choice not to use drugs or alcohol.

**Note the difference in how middle and high school youth respond to the relationship messaging. While middle school youth care very much about not disappointing the people in their lives, high school youth respond better to the idea of making the people they care about proud.*

Any one of these frames can be used in communicating with youth, although the first two (the future and risk of addiction) are recommended when communicating broadly with youth (e.g., via social media or advertising) since they resonate across the widest range of middle and high school aged youth. Guidance for identifying more focused messaging when communicating directly with youth can be found in [Gathering Insights](#).

IN COMMUNICATING ABOUT SUBSTANCE USE, THE FRAMING THAT WORKS MOST EFFECTIVELY IS A FOCUS ON THEIR FUTURE ...

- “Have goals or plans for the future they don’t want to mess up” was identified by youth as one of the top reasons why people their age choose **NOT** to use drugs or alcohol.^{xxiii}
- **64%** said potential negative impact on plans for the future was a convincing reason to stop using drugs or alcohol.^{xxiii}
- **85%** of middle schoolers and **82%** of high schoolers “strongly agree” that they should not “let drug and alcohol use change or control” their plans for the future.^{xxiv}

... OR ABOUT THE RISK OF ADDICTION.

- **76%** of middle schoolers and **78%** of high schoolers “strongly agree” that drug and alcohol use can change parts of their brain that impact how they think and act, and the more they use them the harder it can be to stop even if they want to.^{xxiv}
- **67%** said not wanting their life to be controlled by addiction was among the most convincing reasons to stop using drugs or alcohol.^{xxiv}
- **77%** identify the risk of addiction as a convincing message they might hear from a health care provider or trusted adult.^{xxiv}

Framing the conversation implies starting any form of communication in a way that ties the subject of substance use to what matters to youth, increasing their receptivity to the conversation and setting the stage for an authentic interaction.

During a conversation, it's not uncommon to identify more than one frame. For example, while the youth might care very much about the **activities** in which they are engaged, they might also be wary of the **risk of addiction**. By making note of the frames to which youth respond, you can weave them throughout the conversation, returning to them periodically and using them to shape the conversation or even connecting the two. An example of how this can be done is included in the [Suggest Action](#) section.



TIPS FOR FRAMING

Providers and other youth-serving organizations can communicate with youth in a variety of ways. Framing should consider the method of communication.

- For **broader and less direct communication** (e.g., social media, text messaging or even engaging with youth in a group setting), consider framing the content about substance use in terms of **the future** or **risk of addiction** since they are effective most broadly across the youth population. This can also apply in instances where providers have **limited time to engage** with youth, although it is recommended to gather insights for framing when possible.
- If generating a series of broad communications (e.g., multiple posts to build awareness and education) **consider focusing on one frame at a time**, with each wave in the series framing the issue differently to target various audiences with different values (e.g., risk of addiction, self-affirmation).

AN EXAMPLE OF HOW FRAMING THE COMMUNICATION MIGHT PLAY OUT WITH YOUTH:

PROVIDER: “You’ve talked about how important it is for you to be on the soccer team. In what ways is your physical health important to playing soccer?”

YOUTH RESPONDS.

PROVIDER: “What impact do you think substance use could have on your physical health?”

YOUTH RESPONDS.

PROVIDER: “And what might that mean for you in terms of playing soccer?”

YOUTH RESPONDS.

Language and Framing Considerations

Although adoption of the full communication pathway outlined in this guide is recommended, the table below serves as a quick reference on considerations for language and framing when communicating with youth about substance use.^{viii} Message recommendations are based on conversations with a representative sample of youth surveyed in 2021 and 2022.

TRY THIS ...	INSTEAD OF THIS ...	BECAUSE ...
You respect yourself and want to make decisions that are best for you.	It's your life and you get to decide what's best for you.	The "want" frame is stronger than the "get to" frame. Affirming self-respect is also strong.
Don't let drug and alcohol use change or control your plans for the future.	It might not seem like a big deal today, but using drugs and alcohol can lead to problems at school, in relationships and even addiction.	The future-looking orientation works better among youth.
Participating in sports, music, hobbies or other activities can help you build friendships, stay in shape, get into college, receive scholarships and have fun.	Participating in sports, music, hobbies or other activities can help you build friendships, stay in shape and have fun.	Adding in an aspiration to statements, like college and scholarships, makes this statement stronger.
Using drugs and alcohol changes parts of your brain that impact how you think and act. The more you use them, the harder it can be to stop even if you want to.	The younger you are when you start using drugs and alcohol, the more likely you are to become addicted.	The impact on the brain and how it is hard to stop appears stronger than connecting substance use to age and addiction.
Drugs and alcohol are not just illegal for people your age, they're expensive. And they cost money you could be saving or spending on other things you want, need or enjoy.	Drugs and alcohol are not just unhealthy, they're expensive. And they cost money you could be saving or spending on other things you want, need or enjoy.	Saying drug and alcohol use is illegal is stronger than saying it is unhealthy.



MAKE THE CASE

Having framed the conversation to reflect what youth care about, the next step is to share compelling reasons to avoid substance use. This table highlights statements considered most convincing by youth.^{xvii} Note that some of these statements are specific to one particular substance, while others are more generally relevant.

IMPACT CATEGORY	MOST CONVINCING REASONS NOT TO USE SUBSTANCES
General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Not only is purchasing drugs and alcohol illegal for people your age, it also takes away money that you could be saving or spending on other things you want, need or enjoy. ■ People in recovery from addiction often say one of the things they regret most about their addiction was the trust they lost from people who care about them. They fear some broken relationships will never heal, and others will take a long time to repair. ■ People in recovery from addiction say substance use can change your priorities and fog your judgment in ways that can lead to problems at school or work. Don't let substance use take away your opportunities.
Physical health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Drug and alcohol use can change parts of your brain that impact how you think and act. ■ The younger you are when you start using drugs or alcohol, the more likely you are to become addicted. The more you use them the harder it can be to stop even if you want to. ■ Being healthy means something different to everyone. Don't let drug and alcohol use get in the way of being as healthy as you want to be. ■ Use of prescription pain medicine without a doctor's prescription, or differently than how a doctor directed, can be addictive and dangerous. More than 30 people die from overdoses involving prescription pain medications every day.
Mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Life can be really hard. Sometimes people think that using drugs will make the problems go away, but it only adds another problem to the pile. ■ Using drugs and alcohol may seem like a quick and easy way to relieve stress, but there are healthy ways to take care of yourself.

AN EXAMPLE OF HOW MAKING THE CASE MIGHT PLAY OUT WITH YOUTH:

PROVIDER: "It sounds like you really take your health seriously and want to stay in your best shape for soccer. Let's talk about how substance use could impact that. For example, marijuana can affect your ability to do things that require concentration or coordination, like exercising or playing soccer."

Check out the fact sheets on different substances within the [online toolkit](#) to learn more about the effects of using substances.



SUGGEST ACTION

Ideally, any communication with youth should end with the suggestion of a next step or action youth can take. The following actions were identified by youth as those they would most likely take:

ACTIONS YOUTH ARE LIKELY TO TAKE	TIPS FOR PROVIDERS IN SUGGESTING THESE ACTIONS
Explore new ways of dealing with stress, like music, reading, art, getting outdoors, talking with friends you trust or just being by yourself.*	Tie the suggested action to opportunities in the community or at the youth's school (e.g., music program, nearby forest or park, art classes).
Make your own personal commitment or pledge to avoid alcohol, tobacco/nicotine, marijuana and other drugs.*	Consider an actual or virtual pledge form that youth can sign. Encourage youth to share their pledge with a close friend or family member.
Talk to your friends and encourage them not to use alcohol, tobacco/nicotine, marijuana and other drugs.*	Suggest ways youth might be able to broach the conversation with their friends.
Educate yourself about alcohol, tobacco/nicotine, marijuana and other drugs by visiting a website or information on social media.	Refer the youth to your website or another resource. For sample communication resources you can use directly with youth, check out the fact sheets on different substances within the online toolkit .
Find someone you can talk to if you feel tempted or pressured to use alcohol, tobacco/nicotine, marijuana and other drugs.	Brainstorm with the youth about the adults they trust (e.g., teacher or counselor, minister, coach).



***Note that these suggested actions resonate particularly well with middle school youth.**

Suggested actions can be deployed both in direct communication with youth, as well as through broad, indirect communications. For example, a social media post with a link to your website encouraging youth to check out resources or request support, or a text message with an invitation to participate in an organized event or activity.

Example Prevention Messages



FRAME THE COMMUNICATION



MAKE THE CASE



SUGGEST ACTION

THE FUTURE

Don't let drug and alcohol use change or control your plans for the future.

People in recovery from addiction say substance use can change your priorities and fog your judgement in ways that can lead to problems at school or work. Don't let substance use take away your opportunities.

Educate yourself about alcohol, tobacco/nicotine, marijuana and other drugs by visiting a website or social media for information.

RISK OF ADDICTION

Drug and alcohol use changes parts of your brain that impact how you think and act. The more you use them, the harder it can be to stop even if you want to.

The younger you are when you start using drugs and alcohol, the more likely you are to become addicted. Drug and alcohol use can change parts of your brain that impact how you think and act. The more you use them the harder it can be to stop even if you want to.

Find someone you can talk to if you feel tempted or pressured to use drugs or alcohol.

RELATIONSHIPS

(for middle school) There are people in your life who matter to you. And you try hard not to let them down.

(for high school) There are people in your life who matter to you. And you try hard to make them proud.

People in recovery from addiction often say one of the things they regret most about their addiction was the trust they lost from people who care about them. They fear some broken relationships will never heal, and others will take a long time to repair.

Talk to your friends and encourage them not to use drugs and alcohol.

ACTIVITIES

Participating in sports, music, hobbies or other activities can help you build friendships, stay in shape, get into college, receive scholarships and have fun.

People in recovery from addiction say substance use can change your priorities and fog your judgment in ways that can lead to problems at school or work. Don't let substance use take away your opportunities.

Explore alternative ways of dealing with stress, like music, reading, art, getting outdoors, talking with friends you trust or just being by yourself.

SELF-AFFIRMATION

You respect yourself and want to make decisions that are best for you. Trust yourself and your choice not to use drugs or alcohol.

Drug and alcohol use can change parts of your brain that impact how you think and act.

Make your own personal commitment or pledge to avoid alcohol and drugs.

SAMPLE OUTLINE OF A CONVERSATION SHOWING THE APPLICATION OF THE RELATIONSHIPS MESSAGE PATHWAY

Ask questions to elicit information about what matters to the youth:

“What matters most to you in your life?”

“Why does that matter to you?”

Frame the conversation:

“It sounds like you’re very close to your parents/caregivers and you try hard not to let them down.”

“How do you think they would react if you got involved with drugs or alcohol?”

“How would that make you feel?”

Make the case:

“Let’s talk about what drugs and alcohol might do to you and why it’s a good idea to avoid them ...”

Suggest action:

“What would it be like if you made a pledge to yourself not to get involved with drugs and alcohol?”

How do you think your parents/caregivers would feel about you making that decision?”

NOTE: Check out the [social media tips and tricks guide](#) in the online toolkit for more specifics of how to post this so that it sparks the interest and engagement of young people.



METHODOLOGY

The methods used to develop this messaging guide included:

- A literature review of published research and other campaigns and communication initiatives focused on youth substance use.
- Ten key informant discussions (December 2020–January 2021) with 22 individuals with expertise in youth substance use prevention to include researchers and program directors/managers, youth-serving providers and high school students.
- Four rounds of online assessments.*
 - The first round (January–February 2021) informed the development of the message framework and included one online assessment with youth participants ages 13–18 (n=600) with a sample weighted by demographic factors to reflect the actual proportion of youth in the country and one online assessment completed by providers (n=761) of services to youth.
 - The second round (May 2021) tested the messaging with youth to identify preferred messaging themes and language (n=681).
 - The third (May–June 2022) examined any changes that might have occurred in the previous year as the pandemic wound down. The assessment reached 830 young people ages 13–18 nationwide, including oversamples of 100 Black youth and 100 Latinx youth.
 - The fourth round (September 2022) tested new substance-specific messaging with youth and examined messengers of such messaging in terms of trust and comfort level (n=898 including oversamples of 100 Black youth and 101 Latinx youth).
- Four rounds of virtual discussion groups with both youth and providers.
 - Round 1 (March–April 2021): Youth (two groups with 19 participants each); Providers (three groups with 20 participants each).
 - Round 2 (June 2021): Youth (two groups with 15 participants each).
 - The third (July 2022) engaged two groups of youth participants (n=TK) total) between the ages of 13–18 nationwide to test responses to substance-specific messaging and delivery methods for such messaging.

- The fourth (October 2022) engaged two groups of youth participants (n=22 total) between the ages of 13–18 nationwide to examine messengers in terms of trust and comfort level.

As noted above, while the first rounds of assessments and discussion groups were formative in nature, the round wave was designed to explore messaging, preferred ways of engaging with youth and calls to action. In determining what messaging performed strongest, we compared input from both sources to find commonalities, identify any divergent perspectives, or to clarify distinctions between message performance where input from one source or the other was hard to detect.

We are grateful to the more than 2,000 providers of youth services and youth themselves whose insights have informed the content of this guide through their participation in our advisory group, a virtual discussion group or interview, or one of three online assessments.

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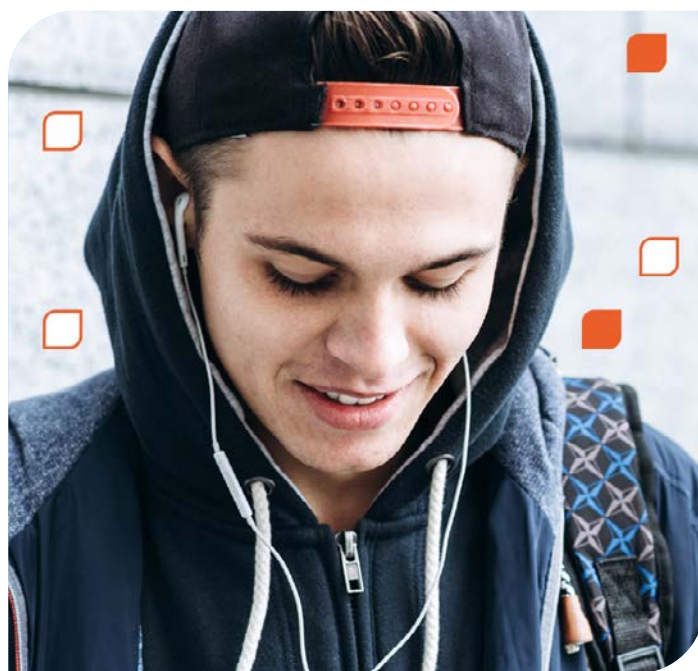
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- * unpublished internal document

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