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# Talking About Substance Use with Youth and Families

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# Talking About Substance Use with Youth and Families

## Objective

To develop specific strategies for conversing, assessing, and intervening with youth and families who may be using substances.

# Discussing Substance Use: What Do We Want to Accomplish?

- Establish a welcoming approach to discussing a difficult issue
- Always maintain an empathic, non-confrontative, partnership
- Reinforce strengths used to make decisions about substance use
- Integrate understanding of substance use into person/family's life

# Discussing Substance Use: What Do We Want to Accomplish?

- Understand substance use in the person/family's environment
- Open up discussion of a wide range of substances
  - Nicotine, caffeine, ETOH, MJ, OTC meds, prescriptions, IV use
- Safely discover what works and what might be causing problems

# Discussing Substance Use: What Do We Want to Accomplish?

- Safely discover any more severe symptoms:
  - Loss of control, bingeing, blackouts, withdrawal, IV use
- Identify stage of change for each substance; applaud all positive effort
- Identify any stage-matched next steps
- Provide a round of applause

# Starting Places

- Not every youth or family is using substances, but everyone is making choices about substances
- For youth or families seeking help with serious MH issues, co-occurring substance use challenges are an expectation.
- The level of substance use in youth with SED that might be concerning is very low

# Talking About Substance Use with Youth and Families

## How to Begin

### **Scenario 1: No indication of a substance use issue or problem**

“Now that I understand your most hopeful goals and what you most want help with, I would like to understand how your life has been going in the past few weeks/months.”

*Then at some point you may ask one of the following:*

- “Tell me where substance use fits into your life: tobacco, coffee, alcohol, MJ, other drugs.... *OR*
- “Many people in your situation find substance use helpful. Is that true for you, and, if so, how? If not, why not?

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## How to Begin

### Scenario 1 (continued)

- If the person says they don't use, say, "Wow, that's pretty amazing. Tell me in detail how you manage to do that. You probably know other people who use, or have opportunities to use...."
- If the person says they use any substance, say, "So how does that specific substance work for you? What do you like or not about it? How do you figure out the right amount to use for yourself?

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## How to Begin

### **Scenario 1: No indication of a substance use issue or problem (Families)**

Similar to the above, but ask:

“Given the situation in your family/with your child, how do you decide the best way to handle substance use in your family?  
Every family has to figure this out for itself, so how do you do it?  
What message do you want your children to get, and how do you convey that?”

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## How to Begin

### **Scenario 2: Someone ELSE has identified substance use as an issue for the youth/family.**

It is best to wait to see if the client brings it up first, but if not, you can introduce the topic.

*“X (e.g., mother, teacher, child welfare) has shared that they think substance use is an issue for you. I am really interested in your point of view. Tell me where substance use fits into your life and into helping you achieve your goals. Tell me why someone might think you have a problem. Do you agree? If you don’t agree, what do you think could happen to ease their mind?”*

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# Common Questions (and Answers)

**Q: What do YOU recommend?**

**A (for youth):**

*“Well, in general, if you’re really asking, I recommend that kids don’t use substances at all, especially kids who are struggling like you are.*

*But it’s not my job to tell you what to do, so much as to help you figure out the best set of choices for yourself.”*

# Common Questions (and Answers)

**Q: What do YOU recommend? (continued)**

**A (for family):** *“You know, there is no right answer. Every family has to make up its own mind about the best way to handle substance use, and other things, particularly when you have difficulties like your family. The one thing I know is that kids are often much more sensitive to what they see around them than grownups usually realize, so you have to take that into account. What do you think is best?”*



# Talking About Substance Use with Youth and Families

## Understanding Context

Often, a great way to get kids to talk about substance use is to ask about their peers.

See the CRAFFT tool.

# Getting the Story

It is always better to help youth or family members describe their use by asking for examples, than to just go down the list of screening questions.

Example: *“So when was the last time you had any alcohol? Tell me what happened, just so I have a picture. OR When was the last time you got drunk (if you ever did)? Tell me about it.”*

# Assessing for Problems

Most youth and family members who use are not addicted. However, they may be aware of some problems associated with use.

Example: *“So tell me what works best for you about using this substance in this or that situation. Is there any downside to using that you’ve been aware of? If not, what stops you from using more? If you were high more often, how would that affect your life, your family, your goals?”*

## Assessing for Problems (*continued*)

Example: *“How does your family feel about your use? Do they know? Would they care? Would it make them unhappy? If so, is that something you want (for them to feel unhappy with what you are doing)?”*

Another approach: *“Do you feel that you are using just the right amount of substance X? If yes, how do you manage that? If not, do you think you should use more, or less? Do you have a plan to change?”*

# Assessing for More Severe Issues

Ask directly (if appropriate) about severe intoxication, loss of control of use (can't stop using when you want to, keep bingeing, blackouts).

Then ask, *“How do you feel about that? Are you worried? If so, what do you think you want to do? If not, why not, and what would make you worried?”*

## Common Question

**Common question:** “What if I told you I just want to get high all the time?”

**Answer:** I would say, “That makes me pretty sad. What is it about your life that leaves you feeling that you can’t feel good any other way? Do you have any hope that can change?”

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# Assessing for Stage of Change

For each substance used, ask directly:

*“Are you happy with your use as it is? Are you considering changing (not stopping, but changing)? What are you doing to try to change? What progress have you made?”*

Make a big deal about any small steps of progress.

Ask if they want help with what they are trying to do.

If they say no, offer to be a cheering squad just the same.

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# Screening Tools: NM-ASSIST, CRAFFT

Screening tools like these can be helpful as “Training wheels” as you develop more comfort in asking these types of questions in the flow of conversation.



# Questions and Discussion