

“Knowledge in Action”

Title: FROM DRUGS TO SPORTS: WHAT RECREATIONAL PROFESSIONALS CAN DO TO PREVENT SUBSTANCE ABUSE AMONG YOUTH

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Drug and alcohol use among youth is on the rise. Among youth (grades 7-9 and Levels I to III) in Newfoundland and Labrador: 52% report having consumed alcohol and 28% have been drunk; 30% have smoked cannabis; 7% have used Ecstasy; 5% cocaine; and 2% of youth report having used methamphetamine within the past year. Ecstasy use is significantly increasing among youth.[1] Early experimentation with alcohol and drugs is common. 13 is the average age for youth to first use drugs (including cannabis and hallucinogens) and on average, glue-sniffing begins at 12 years of age.[1, 2] Drug and alcohol use among youth is associated with many at-risk behaviours and outcomes including: injuring oneself; damaging and vandalizing property and items; unplanned sex; driving under the influence; increased gambling activities; family problems; negatively affecting school work and exams; depression and other mental health issues. [1, 3]:

The 2007 Newfoundland and Labrador Student Drug Use Survey report recommends that parents/guardians, schools, communities and governments educate and support youth to make healthy decisions related to substance use. Early intervention and prevention is key. Recreation professionals have a major role to play in the early prevention of drug use among youth. Sports and recreation participation among youth can both prevent and reduce substance use and abuse.[4, 5] Research has found that youth who participate in organized group activities are less likely to use drugs, alcohol and tobacco compared to their peers who do not participate in recreation activities.[6] Parks, recreation and sports programs and facilities can provide youth with feelings of well-being, satisfaction, self-worth, self-esteem, sense of competence and self-confidence.[5-7] Recreation and sports participation can help youth deal with stressful life events and provide them with social support.[7] Thus, participation reduces a youth's chance of substance use in the first place. We, as recreation professionals, provide HOPE to youth.[5]

Recommendations to create a drug-free environment for youth within recreation programs and facilities:

- Alcohol and drugs are often used by youth during leisure/free time. Thus, recreation and sports culture can itself facilitate substance use. Music, dance and drugs are central to many youth cultures in leisure (e.g., raves), and some research suggests that sports participation can facilitate alcohol use in particular (e.g., drinks “after the game”). Sometimes, through recreation we run the risk of sending the message that substance use is “socially tolerable.” Consider how your community’s recreation programs might be creating a drug and alcohol culture and take action.[7]
- Recreation facilities may be used by youth as a place to participate in alcohol and drug use. Therefore, recreation centres can facilitate at-risk behaviours. Youth wanting to participate can be discouraged from attending programs because the facilities are perceived as drug “hand-outs.” Set boundaries for youth at your facilities by stating clear expectations (i.e., drug-free zone), rules, and consequences.[7]
- Facilitate shared family leisure experiences. Youth, particularly males, may participate in at-risk behaviours in part because they think that their parents are not interested in their recreation activities.[7]
- Make sure your programs provide youth with social opportunities. Socialization is really important for youth. In fact, youth may use substances because they want to be accepted by their peers. Provide healthy social outlets for youth.[7]
- Create recreation and leisure programs that are interesting and accessible to youth. When youth are bored during their free time they are more likely to use drugs and alcohol.[8] Get youth involved in creating programs they are interested in. Constantly try new programs to judge their interest. Make sure youth know about your programs by advertising through websites, newsletters, posters, and promotion in schools.
- Plan recreation and leisure activities that provide a “natural high.” Research suggests that youth who use alcohol and drugs are more likely to be sensation seeker.
- Adopt an alcohol risk-management policy to reduce alcohol related problems at programs and events. [9]
- Educate your staff about youth alcohol and drug use. Hold regular workshops and discussions. Drug education and prevention must be a part of your organization’s orientation and staff training, staff development, and staff health and wellness activities. [10]

- Community support and involvement is key to preventing substance use and abuse. Form a committee in your community to focus on the health and well-being of young people – involve all stakeholders: schools, churches, community centres, non-profit organizations, and government agencies. Don't forget to include youth themselves. [10]

Resources and References:

National Anti-Drug Strategy: <http://www.nationalantidrugstrategy.gc.ca/index.html>

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4. Dunn, M.S. and M.Q. Wang, *Effects of physical activity of substance use among college students*. *American Journal of Health Studies*, 2003. **18**(2/3): p. 126-132.
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7. Shinew, K.J. and D.C. Parry, *Examining college students' participation in the leisure pursuits of drinking and illegal drug use*. *Journal of Leisure Reserach*, 2005. **37**(3): p. 364-386.
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9. Rylett, M., et al. *Municipal Alcohol Policies in Ontario: Facility Usage and Problem Reduction*. [cited; Available from: <http://www.lin.ca/resource-details/1041>.
10. Hinton Community Drug Action Committee. *The Role of Recreation and Sport in the Prevention and Treatment of Drug Abuse*. 2004 [cited; Available from: <http://www.lin.ca/Files/2983/arpa11.ppt>.