

Substance Use: Talking Alcohol, Vaping & Other Drugs With Yo...

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SPEAKERS

Michelle Horn, Bryn Askwith, Art Steinmann, Cindy Andrew

C Cindy Andrew 00:00

I don't think the world is short of opportunities to talk about substance use. You know whether it's something you saw in a movie, or walking down the street and your child says, what's that funny smell? You know, those are conversation starters. But I also think it's really important that parents remind ourselves that we don't need to be the expert in all of this. In fact, we can just get curious alongside our child, right? And you create this opportunity to learn together.

B Bryn Askwith 00:44

This is Where You Are, a podcast that helps families and their children promote their mental health and wellness. I'm Bryn Askwith.

M Michelle Horn 00:51

And I'm Michelle Horn. Many people use substances everyday without problems, from coffee in the morning to a glass of wine with dinner to Tylenol when we have a headache. Substances are a part of daily life. But all substance use carries some risk. So it's important to talk openly with your child about substance use from an early age to help them understand what substances are and their effects on people's lives. These honest conversations can help to build and maintain positive relationships, trust, and security. As a parent or caregiver, you can help your child develop the knowledge and skills they need to make informed decisions about substance use, and help prepare them for situations that they will encounter as they grow.

B Bryn Askwith 01:32

As a parent of two, one of which is about to head off to middle school, I know what it's like to spend a lot of time wondering about how to have these conversations with your child, and also

about the best way to guide them and keep them safe when it comes to substances like alcohol, vaping, smoking and other drugs. To help us navigate this important topic, today we're joined by Cindy Andrew and Art Steinmann, both parents and professionals with years of experience working in the field of youth substance use within BC schools and communities. Cindy and Art will offer strategies and resources that can help you support your child, normalizing conversations about substance use that can help avoid harms from alcohol and other drugs and keep you connecting with your kids. A quick note up front for listeners: this episode will not cover chronic and problematic substance use. That's a whole topic on its own, and will be part of a future episode on Where You Are. Let's get into that conversation.

M

Michelle Horn 02:35

On the show today, we have Cindy Andrew, a mother of two, a former teacher, and someone who has worked in the healthy schools area for close to 30 years. She is a senior associate on the team leading the ABCs of youth substance use, a project funded by the Ministry of Health in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, focused on supporting schools, and by extension parents and caregivers, in addressing substance use with youth. Welcome to the show, Cindy.

C

Cindy Andrew 03:01

Thanks, Michelle. It's great to be here. Thank you so much for the invitation.

M

Michelle Horn 03:05

So Cindy, can you start off by explaining some of the reasons why kids might use substances?

C

Cindy Andrew 03:10

Oh, starting with a nice easy one. Love it. You know, probably for a lot of the same reasons we adults use substances. Perhaps to cope at the end of a hectic, stress-filled day. Perhaps for fun and social engagement. Curious. Wanting to try—I tried a white port on the weekend, how about that? So you know, just curious about something and wanted to give it a go. So a lot of the same reasons that we adults do, in fact.

M

Michelle Horn 03:40

And Cindy, just a follow up question for you. Why is it that teens in particular are prone to experimenting with substances?

C

Cindy Andrew 03:47

There was actually a great quote I heard. Evolution wouldn't happen without adolescence. Part of human development to want to push boundaries, to want to explore new ways of thinking or doing things, to perhaps not follow in the path that a parent or caregiver would want them to,

etc. Right? There's a lot there in adolescent development years and you know, sometimes, and this is, I guess, my little infomercial for when people go, oh, gosh, teens! I think actually teens are pretty phenomenal human beings. And we can learn as much from them as they can learn from us.

M Michelle Horn 04:21

It's certainly a unique time in kind of brain development as well for adolescents, right?

C Cindy Andrew 04:26

I heard somebody say they're not, their brains aren't quite ready for primetime yet. You know, if all of us could take a moment and remind ourselves just what's going on in that brain and the development of that prefrontal cortex that's still in, in essence, you know, a work in progress. Sometimes we might go ugh, I can't believe, it's like, they don't have a brain. How do theyâ€™right? They're not thinking things through and, you know, there's a part of me that's like, well, you know, they probably have just a bit. Revisiting what the teenage brain looks like in all of its amazingness.

M Michelle Horn 04:54

Yeah, such a unique time. And I'm so glad that you're both here to join us today to talk about how to have these conversations about substance use with, you know, children and youth in this stage of development where their brains are still growing and they're still developing.

A Art Steinmann 05:07

Oh, thanks very much, Bryn. Happy to be here.

B Bryn Askwith 05:07

Also joining us today is Art Steinmann, senior associate of youth substance use health promotion, with Bunyaad Public Affairs Inc. Art brings over 40 years of experience in substance use policy, education, program development, advocacy, and health promotion work, including co-founding and co-developing SACY, the Supporting and Connecting Youth program for the Vancouver school board. A parent as well, Art brings many years of lived experience to the conversation. Thanks for joining us on Where You Are.

B Bryn Askwith 05:09

Art, we know through some of the work that yourself and Cindy are doing together with others where you connect with youth and families about preventing and delaying and reducing substance-related harms, you've come up even with an acronym for some of this work: the ABCs. Can you tell us a bit more about that work and about the acronym?

A

Art Steinmann 05:56

We were looking for kind of a foundation to rest a lot of the work on and we got talking about protective factors. So these are things that help keep kids strong and safe and healthy. There's three that kind of stand out—ABCs. An A for autonomy, B for belonging, and C for competence. There are other protective factors, for sure. And of course, kids have risk factors they need to manage. But these three protective factors are really really foundational. A youth who feels some sense of agency and being their own person and having some autonomy is going to do better in a lot of situations. The connected, the belonging and connectedness is hugely important. There's reams of research on that now, that a youth who feels connected, ideally at family, home, and school, they're again, at lower risk for a host of issues. And competence refers to capability, the ability to act, and for youth to be able to look back and see accomplishment, see things that they've achieved, is a huge boost. And all of these really diminish the pull that substances offer.

M

Michelle Horn 06:54

And just breaking those down a little bit more, those ABCs. Because I love how these can be a foundation, right? For children and youth to kind of diminish those risks of substance use. But it's not what parents might automatically think of when they're thinking about how you can reduce the risk of problematic substance use. So what would that look like as a parent to promote and foster your child's autonomy or belonging or competency? If you could give a few examples.

A

Art Steinmann 07:31

Well, autonomy, what comes to mind is not solving things for the kids, not doing things for them. It needs to be age appropriate. But there are things you can do from early childhood, right through the teen years, where you back off and allow the youth to have as much power and say and influence so that they can begin to develop that autonomy. The connectedness, you know, that's an important one. I think sometimes as parents, we don't always take into account adolescent development. And so we think that we're going to have the same kind of connection, as we did with an 8-year-old with a 17-year-old. And it's not. There's a huge connection. And teenagers absolutely need guidance and support from adults. They need it probably more than ever, and they want it. But it has to be delivered in a different way. Practically speaking, listening, the only agenda you should come with is, the agenda is to hear your kid. And then with competence, again, it's, you know, allowing them to have little tasks, allowing them to take on chores and responsibilities, can be helpful. But again, with some autonomy, let them do it their own way as much as you can. And allow them to have some achievements. And then you can celebrate those—be appropriate, just a brief, that's really helpful when you put the shoes under the under the rack. Thank you for doing that. So there's things like that that are just very pragmatic and simple that can make a big difference.

M

Michelle Horn 08:58

Yeah, I heard you, Art, a little while ago, give an analogy when it came to the belonging,

connectedness piece about a dog and a cat. And it stuck with me. I'm wondering if you could tell us about that analogy for our listeners.

A

Art Steinmann 09:10

Yeah, sure. I'd love to. Do we have time for me to read for a minute or two and tell you the whole story or is that...

M

Michelle Horn 09:18

Sure. Let's do it.

A

Art Steinmann 09:20

As I think about my, my children's high school experiences, I realize that young children are more like dogs, while teenagers behave more like cats. Dogs are so eager, so loyal and affectionate. It's so easy to be a dog owner. You feed them, train them, you boss them around, they put their heads on your knee and gaze at you as if you were the most beautiful painting. They bound indoors with enthusiasm when you call. Then around 12 or 13, your adoring little puppy turns into a big old cat. When you call her she looks amazed, wondering who died and made you king. Instead of following you around, she disappears. You won't see her again until she gets hungry. And when you reach out to ruffle her head in that old affectionate gesture, she twists away, gives you a blank stare, as if trying to remember where she has seen before. And you, not realizing that your dog is now a cat, think something must be terribly wrong with it. He seems so antisocial, so distant, sort of depressed. She doesn't want to go on family outings anymore. And since you're the one that raised her, taught her to fetch and stay on command, you assume that you have done something wrong. Flooded with guilt and fear, you redouble your efforts to make your pet behave. Only now, you're dealing with a cat. And everything that worked before now produces the opposite effect. Call your cat and it runs away. Tell it to sit and it jumps on the counter. So instead of continuing to act like a dog owner, you can learn to behave like a cat owner. Put a dish of food near the door and wait. Let the cat come to you. Most of all, remember: a cat needs your help and affection. But you need to sit still. She will come, seeking that warm, comforting lap she has not entirely forgotten. And one day, before you know it, your grown up child will walk into the kitchen, give you a big hug and say, you've been on your feet all day. Let me get those dishes for you. And then you realize your cat is a dog again.

M

Michelle Horn 11:24

I love that story so much. And that analogy. I think it's "I have an 8-year-old and I feel like I'm going to be remembering that as he gets into the preteen and the teen years and I see this transition from a dog to a cat. I was just curious about one other protective factor that I've heard about. And I know that some of the the parents in my circles talk about, around fostering competence in like, either something that your child is passionate about, or has a strength in, whether it be like sports or music or something like that, and what role that plays as your child develops.

A

Art Steinmann 11:56

Yeah, a couple of quick thoughts on that. I really liked what you said about your child's passion and interest. That's paramount. And they may have passion and interests that you particularly may or may not want or wish that they had. Allow them to pursue the things that get them excited because it has a different effect on them. Very different from doing some sport that you've entered them in because you used to play it or you think they should play it or whatever. That can create all kinds of benefits, you know, group involvement, learning social skills, learning some mastery over certain areas. Also, these are ways to change how we feel. And we all need to change how we feel sometimes. We as adults do that regularly. And kids need that too. And we need to help guide them towards healthy and safe ways to do that. So having a bath or going for a walk or calling a friend or listening to music or doing your passion. If you love drawing or painting or playing guitar or whatever it is, those things can be very, very satisfying. And all of that provides alternatives to substance use.

M

Michelle Horn 13:02

Thank you, so important. And I guess I'll let my my 8-year-old continue his passion with Nerf gun battles. Even if I don't love it. [laughter]

M

Michelle Horn 13:19

You're listening to Where You Are. I'm Michelle Horn. You can find all the resources in today's episode on our podcast page, keltymentalhealth.ca/podcast. Are you looking to learn more about substance use, including how to talk with your child about substances? Head to our new website section at keltymentalhealth.ca/substance-use. Stick around for the later half of this episode, where Cindy and Art offer tips on how you can help prepare your kids for situations where they might be offered substances.

M

Michelle Horn 13:55

So just switching gears slightly. I'm sure for many parents listening, they might be wondering how to, you know, start conversations and communication about substance use. So I know I'm starting to think about this as some questions have popped up recently from my kids and I haven't been as prepared as I would have liked to be with my responses. So Cindy, what are the main things we should be communicating to our kids about substance use at different ages?

C

Cindy Andrew 14:21

So, you know, I don't think the world is short of opportunities to talk about substance use. You know, whether it's something you saw on a movie or walking down the street and your child says, what's that funny smell? Which we might all recognize perhaps as cannabis. You know, those are those are conversation starters. Even you know, you might have a family party and

there's a celebration and maybe you know, Aunt Joanne had a little too much wine. And maybe that provides an opportunity for some conversation after the fact. If your child sort of speaks up and notices something, you can have a conversation about how to manage one's intake. But also I think it's really important that parents, myself included, you know, remind ourselves that we don't need to be the expert in all of this. In fact, we can just get curious alongside our child. So let's use vaping as another example, where, you know, that's, that is a concern for an awful lot of people, both whether they're, you know, teachers or principals in the school environment, or parents seeing their child experimenting with vaping, or maybe just, you know, wondering if their child's curious about it, is to open that up with, gee, I've really noticed, you know, that there does seem to be more talk about vaping. Or I've noticed more kids on this, you know, on the backfield outside of the school vaping. What do you think about that? What do you know about it? Because honestly, I don't know much, right? And you, you create this, this opportunity to learn together. Which does a couple of things. One, it acknowledges that parents don't all have the answers. Far from it. And that also, our kids have a lot of wisdom. And you know, given the opportunity would be happy to share that and to explore that. So those opportunities when things happen, because we all make mistakes, or we all try things, and you go oh, yeah, it was probably not that smart, are really good learning opportunities. So Art, do you have anything you want to add to that one?

A

Art Steinmann 16:16

Well, I love what you're saying, Cindy. And I'd just point out that when we take this position of listening, of being open and being positive, of giving the benefit of doubt, but also having expectations that we've clearly communicated, hopefully, and that's important to do, and then, when there are incidents that occur that they cross over agreed upon, you know, expectations, to ask them how they feel about it. What are you thinking and feeling? And they may say, oh, that's great, I love it. I'm gonna do it again tomorrow. But they may not. And then you can, of course, express how you feel about it, and why you feel that way. And that's where it is helpful to have a little bit of information. Not a 20 minute drug lecture. But just a couple of quick, really quick statements about how the adolescent years are a period of higher risk for problems with substance use, if you engage in regular frequent substance use. Adult safe standards don't really apply to 12, 13, 14, 15-year-olds. As you get further along, they'll start to apply more. What you're trying to do is to help the young person reflect. Then you're, then you're creating, again, those strong protective factors, which is very different than if you take a parenting style that is more authoritarian, where you say, we told you not to do that. And you did that. And that's not acceptable. And you must not. What you're training up is someone who will comply, or at least comply on the surface. And they may drive the behavior underground. So they, they may continue the behavior, but you'll know less about it until it does erupt. And then you're into it. So preferable is that you're walking alongside with an adult brain, alongside the youngster's brain, and providing some salient input and guidance and support so that they can process and they can learn and think yeah, do I really want to smoke weed every day of my life or not? That's the kind of approach, is that high compassion, high caring, but also spelling out expectations and also giving lots and lots of room for the young person to think through things for themselves.

B

Bryn Askwith 18:28

I have a little one who's not so little anymore, I guess, about to head off to middle school next year. And I know in my parenting circles, we recognize these kids are going to have to, as

you've mentioned, make decisions about substances many times over as they grow. And I've heard the question come up a few times about, how as parents can we really equip our kids to deal with situations where they might be exposed to or offered a type of substance? Be it drugs, alcohol, vaping, cigarettes. And I'm wondering, you know, if there's any tips that you might have about how you can deal or prepare them for those situations or those encounters,

A

Art Steinmann 19:03

First thing that I would probably point out is, more important than anything you say is what you do. And so your model, and your example speaks volumes. So if they see you enjoy a glass of wine over the course of a meal, maybe a second glass on occasion, but over a period of time. You're teaching them how you use alcohol. Now, we've talked about adolescents and risk taking and low impulse control and high sensation seeking and all that, so they may want the buzz and they may want to guzzle down three or four beer in a setting, but they may only do that once or twice and find that's enough, and some won't do it at all. So every kid is different. And we need to be explicit. We need to teach our children oh man, I really got a headache. I think I might be dehydrated. I'm gonna lay down for a little bit. Or I'm feeling stressed. I think I'll have a hot bath and call a friend. So there's things that you can do that don't involve substances that might get at the root issue. In that kind of environment, then you're creating a culture that they're being socialized into, where substances are there. They have their place. There's a role for them. But you respect them, you respect that there's risk involved. You respect the power of them. And obviously, if there's interest from the young person to explore things like refusal skills, how to say no and save face. It's about saving face. When the kids are out with their friends down at the river and someone's passing around booze or a joint or whatever, they don't want to look stupid. So how do you do that? Well, depending on the age, and I would say not for 12, and 13, and 14-year-olds, but as you get older kids can have one beer and make it last a very long time. As long as you have something in your hand, people kind of leave you alone. But there's a few thoughts. You can also teach your kids about thinking in advance before they even go somewhere. They can imagine what's going to happen there. And do they want to be in that setting or not. They can recruit an ally. They can they can grab a friend and say, Bob and I are gonna go over and play video games at my house instead hanging out here. There's a number of strategies. You can look it up. Refusal skills, google it and learn more strategies that we can teach our kids, so that they have some options, and they're not caught flat footed.

B

Bryn Askwith 21:24

I know we're getting close to time together. And Michelle and I just had a couple more questions we wanted to get in. One of which is, what messages do you have for parents and caregivers who are concerned about their child's substance use?

C

Cindy Andrew 21:37

As parents, we're not alone. Right? Like I think, if a parent has some worries, there is some support available. There's support even in the school, right, to go and talk with a school counselor and have a conversation. Because what they might see within the school context is different than what you might see and here on the home front. And you know, there are other,

and certainly Kelty Centre does a wonderful job of helping connect parents and caregivers and other adults who care about kids to the resources that are available. Nobody needs to struggle through those tougher situations on their own by any stretch of the imagination.

A

Art Steinmann 22:14

And it's important to remember that with substance use and substance dependence and addiction, there's a lot of shame. There's a lot of stigma. There's a lot of blame still. Now that's slowly shifting, but people can feel very isolated and very alone. And it's important that anyone listening to this know that actually you're not alone. And there is help available. And there is hope for anyone. And that's where, we talked a lot about communication and connection. And whatever transpires with your young person, keep a connection. Whatever that looks like. No matter how remote it is, how infrequent it is. Because they feel that. They know it's there. They know if you're with them or not, they know if you've got their back or not. And they may not call upon it, they may not want anything to do with you for periods of time. But that can change. And, but they need to know that you haven't written them off, that you haven't pulled your love away. So don't, don't ever take it to that step. Most parents don't. You can't anyways, even if you wanted to. You love them. And that doesn't end. But it's important that the kids know that that's there for them.

M

Michelle Horn 23:25

Thank you so much. I know that just even speaking as, putting my parent hat on. I've learned a lot from this conversation and feel much more equipped to be communicating with my children as they grow up and go into the teen years and a bit more calm and cool and collected about it. And I know, you know, our listeners really benefited from this conversation as well. There is just a wealth of knowledge there. So I think that brings us to the end of the conversation. Before we end, I just wanted to ask both of you if you had any final words of wisdom that you wanted to leave with our listeners at the end of the conversation?

A

Art Steinmann 23:57

Well, I think you know, the old adage around anxiety, 90% of what we worry about never happens. And so there's a fear out there around these big powerful drugs, they're gonna come and take over your kid's life. It's a balance. I don't, I mean, I've worked with many, many, many parents who have kids in desperate situations because of substance use. So yes, it can happen. But in most cases, it doesn't. And even in the cases where kids do start on that trajectory, there are things we can do to interrupt that. So my final word is try not to let your fears and anxieties overtake. Think about the things we've been saying about connection, warmth, caring, compassion, respect, dignity, and listening. And you'll find that many many areas of your kid's life will go better. Including around substances.

C

Cindy Andrew 24:51

Really well said, Art. And yeah, just that listening, the being curious together, and most importantly, keeping connected go a long way to helping our children flourish. Not just avoid problematic substance use, right? Can be scary. But how, it sure is fun and exhilarating. And

problematic substance use, right? Can be scary. But boy, it sure is fun and exhilarating. And watching your young person grow up from a child into a young adult is full of all sorts of promise as well. So I think, you know, enjoy. Enjoy your child. And I acknowledge there are those moments when maybe you enjoy it a bit less, but you're helping them grow up. So hang in there and enjoy the ride.

M Michelle Horn 25:29

Wonderful notes to end on. Thank you so much, Art and Cindy.

A Art Steinmann 25:33

You're welcome. Thank you for the opportunity.

C Cindy Andrew 25:34

My pleasure. Thanks for again, inviting us.

B Bryn Askwith 25:45

Big thanks to you Michelle for co-hosting this episode. And thanks as well to our listeners. This episode of Where You Are is brought to you by BC Children's Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre. Our show is produced and edited by Emily Morantz, with audio engineering by Sam Seguin. Audio production by JAR Audio. If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a rating on Apple Podcasts or wherever you might be listening now.

M Michelle Horn 26:09

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