

# CONSCIOUS SUBSTANCE USE

A Conversation Guide for Families



By Daphne Gordon

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# Welcome

Hi there! My name is Daphne Gordon and I am a Toronto-based journalist, author, nature lover, yogi, retired raver, and mom to a teenager.

Navigating the complexities of healthy conversations around substance use has taken me down a research deep dive, resulted in some meaningful insights, and sparked some cringeworthy conversations.

As I struggled to find my way, I couldn't find resources that aligned with my life experiences and parenting style. That's why I wrote this zine.

I hope this booklet serves as a companion on your journey—a conversation starter, a tool for reflection, and a source of support as both you and your child grow.

This zine can also help keep the caregiving adults in your child's life on the same page, making these conversations feel as aligned and natural as any other part of life.

Please note that this booklet is intended for informational purposes only and is not a substitute for professional advice, diagnosis, or treatment. The content within is designed to promote conscious decision-making regarding substance use and should not be used as a primary resource for addressing substance use disorders or related health concerns.

# What is conscious substance use?

Substances play a role in many people's lives, and how we choose to engage with them matters. Conscious substance use means taking a mindful, responsible approach, balancing the potential pleasures with the possible harms. It emphasizes self-awareness, informed choices, and open communication.

This approach moves away from the abstinence-focused teachings of the past and expands upon the safety-oriented harm reduction strategies that are more common today. Conscious substance use focuses on motivation and intentionality—the why and the how behind our choices.

By prioritizing self-awareness and personal agency, conscious substance use respects that your approach will be uniquely yours, just as your family's approach may differ from others. This isn't a one-size-fits-all solution; it's a call to cultivate self-knowledge and a set of shared family values that suit your circumstances.

To embrace conscious substance use is to accept that values and choices may change over time. It's an ongoing, evolving conversation with yourself, your family, and your friends.

# Dialogue makes a difference

For a long time, our culture has shut down intergenerational conversations about substances because of stigma, shame, and misinformation. But we can change.

Fostering open conversations at home is important for the following reasons:

**Basic education:** Students in North America receive little information about substance use and misuse in school, so they must get it at home. This helps them understand the risks and signs of substance use and misuse. This prevents harm and promotes informed decisions.

**Early intervention:** Open dialogue allows for early detection of potential substance use issues, making them easier to address before they escalate.

**Breaking taboos:** Frequent conversation normalizes discussions about substance use, reducing shame and stigma.

**Encouraging help-seeking:** Open discussion makes it more likely that family members will seek parental or professional help if they need it.

**Intergenerational updates:** As the landscape around substances changes, families can adapt to new information, strengthening relationships.

# The right time is now

Most North American people have their first experiences with substances in their mid-teens. Begin talking to your kids long before that. Start early, as soon as your child is verbal. In a neutral tone, describe and explain the common substances your children encounter or are likely to encounter in their daily lives.

For example, a toddler may see adults drinking wine. Explain that it's okay for adults to drink alcohol in small amounts, but it can harm people who use too much too often, and it's not good for a child's developing brain. Be on the lookout for calm, quiet learning opportunities.

As children develop into their preteen years, expand their awareness to include a wider range of substances, helping your child see them in the context of drug categories: depressants, stimulants, psychedelics, dissociatives, opioids, cannabinoids and empathogens.

You may need to educate yourself first! Use Google. You'll probably be surprised about the wide variety of substances available these days.

In the teen years, discuss the complex reasons that motivate people to use substances. For example, some people use substances to reduce pain, or to expand pleasure. Others use them for spiritual, mental and emotional benefit.

# Talk about your own experiences

Talking about substance use at home with preteens and teens is vital. You might think they're too young, but by talking about substance use now, while they're still in the nest, you can guide them, set expectations, and be a source of support once they move away.

Beware: Lectures don't work! To make a connection with your teen or young adult, take a casual approach and bring up substances when driving or taking a walk.

Using a neutral tone is essential. Manage your own emotions. Keep your voice calm. If you can't do that, step away and come back later.

Looking inward is essential. Reflect on your own experiences with substances. Talk about what motivates your choices, and be honest about the fact that making conscious substance choices isn't easy, but it's an essential skill for living a happy life and developing trust in family relationships.

This may feel uncomfortable, but in a good way. This is how it feels to grow and learn as a parent. What your kid really needs is your presence, not your perfection. Start before you feel ready.

# Update your attitude

If you grew up in the '70s, '80s or '90s, it might be time to refresh your understanding. Many of us were taught about substances according to ill-informed, fear-based approaches that didn't fully reflect the realities of substance use—and it's clear those tactics weren't effective.

Updating our understanding will require us to challenge dated stereotypes and assumptions about who uses substances and why. Substance use can affect people from all walks of life and is often tied to complex factors like stress, trauma, and mental health.

Spectrum thinking has changed the way we approach gender, sexuality, and neurodiversity. It can also help us rethink substance use in a modern way.

Substance use exists on a spectrum of human behaviours that can change over time. And each substance has its own range of potential benefits and risks. Understanding these spectrums gives people the power to make informed choices.

Everyone's experience is unique, so self-awareness is key. Take time to know yourself, and encourage your kids to do the same. This awareness is a valuable tool for making thoughtful decisions.



# The spectrum of substance use

Understanding substance use as a spectrum of behaviours that can shift over time provides a more nuanced view of how individuals engage with substances. People may move between different points on the spectrum at various times.

Here's a brief overview of the spectrum:

**No use:** The person does not use substances.

**Experimental use:** The person has tried substances, typically only a few times.

**Recreational use:** The person uses substances occasionally in social settings or for enjoyment.

**Situational use:** The person uses substances in specific situations to cope with stress, anxiety, or other challenges.

**Regular use:** The person uses regularly. It might be part of their daily or weekly routine. It may be causing negative impacts, but they're managing.

**Problematic use:** Substance use starts to cause noticeable problems in the person's life, such as issues at work, school, or in relationships.

**Substance use disorder:** The person has a chronic, relapsing disorder that may involve compulsive drug seeking and continued use despite harmful consequences.

# A pleasure spectrum

When talking to kids and teens about substances, it's helpful to acknowledge that people often use them with particular goals in mind. Exploring why someone might choose to use certain substances can encourage self-awareness and build open, honest relationships.

For some, substances may be a way to manage physical or emotional pain. Others may use them to explore or elevate their mental, physical, or spiritual state. In some conversations, the word "benefits" can feel more fitting than "pleasures," especially when considering the longer-term impact substances can have on well-being.

Below is an example of where some common substances might land on a pleasure spectrum:

**No pleasure:** Many people find salvia divinorum unpleasant. It can lead to confusion and fear.

**Mild pleasure:** Caffeine provides a mild boost that can lead to increased alertness.

**Moderate pleasure:** A small amount of alcohol is relaxing and pleasurable for most people.

**High pleasure:** MDMA tends to create intense euphoria, emotional warmth, and can heighten a person's sensory awareness and empathy.

**Very high pleasure:** Psilocybin mushrooms can lead to deep euphoria, mystical experiences, and an uplifted mood.

# A harm spectrum

As you begin to introduce your children to various substances, you can map them onto personalized pleasure and harm spectrums. In our home, we have researched various substances and shared the info with each other at family meetings. We discuss where the substances sit on both of the spectrums.

Here's an example of where some common substances might land on a harm spectrum:

**Low harm:** Psilocybin mushrooms aren't considered addictive or toxic, but they can sometimes cause unpredictable effects, especially for those with underlying mental health issues.

**Moderate harm:** Alcohol, in small amounts, is generally safe. In larger doses, it can lead to impaired thinking, headaches, nausea, and dehydration.

**High harm:** Prescription opioids have a high risk of addiction and overdose, with even greater risks when taken without a prescription.

**Very high harm:** Cocaine is highly addictive and comes with serious physical, social, and mental health risks.

**Extreme harm:** Heroin has a very high risk of addiction and overdose, along with severe physical and social consequences.

# Secondary harms

Secondary harms are indirect consequences that can arise from substance use. They can impact the user's social, economic, and legal status. They may also affect those around the person who uses.

Secondary harms are complex, but they should be considered in the substance decision-making process.

When discussing secondary harms with young people, expect that the seeds of wisdom you're planting may be slow to take root. Teenagers are self-focused by nature, and that's okay. Expect them to grow into their understanding. You can help by modelling consideration of secondary harms in your own substance choices.

Here are some common secondary harms associated with substance use:

**Social harms:** Substance use can lead to conflicts with family members, friends, and partners, sometimes resulting in estrangement or relationship breakdowns.

**Economic harms:** Spending money on substances can lead to financial instability, debt, and inability to afford basic needs such as housing, food, education and health care. Impaired performance, absenteeism, or substance-related incidents at work or school,

leading to issues like lower performance, missed days, loss of school credits, or job loss.

**Legal harms:** Getting caught with illegal substances can lead to a criminal record, which might come with fines, jail time or probation. It can make it harder to land a job, travel across borders, or find housing. Substance misuse can also affect custody decisions in divorce cases.

**Health and safety harms:** Substance use can affect a person's judgment and coordination, which can lead to accidents like falls, burns, or car crashes. It also raises the risk of ending up in violent situations, whether as the one causing harm or as the one getting hurt.

**Harms to others:** Substance use can take a toll on the whole family, sometimes causing emotional distress, or leading to domestic violence and child neglect. People can also be affected indirectly, like through secondhand smoke, or when young children accidentally consume substances left within their reach.

**Generational harms:** Research increasingly shows that when parents misuse drugs, it can affect the health and behaviour of their children and future generations, even when the children have not been directly exposed. Substance misuse can lead to changes in how certain genes function, and these changes can be passed down through families.

# Harm reduction tips

Harm reduction strategies minimize the risks of drug use. Here are some basics:

**Know the risks:** Understand the effects of specific substances, including their potential for addiction, toxicity and secondary harms.

**Trust your source:** Never buy substances from unknown sources. Consider using testing services, which may be available at harm reduction organizations in your community.

**Start low and go slow:** Start with a low dose to gauge your body's reaction, especially with substances you haven't used before. Avoid taking multiple doses in a short period.

**Consider environment:** Choose a safe, comfortable environment to use substances.

**Assess mental state:** Check in with yourself and your friends. Avoid using substances if you're unusually anxious, depressed, or stressed.

**Use with trusted friends:** Never use alone or with strangers.

**Avoid mixing substances:** Combining drugs can increase the risk of adverse effects and overdose.

**Plan ahead:** Know how you will get home. Avoid driving under the influence. Know the signs of overdose and plan to seek help if needed.

# Social media is a drug marketplace

Social media has become a mainstay in teens' lives, connecting them to friends, trends, and information. However, this digital space also has a dark side you may not be aware of—illicit drugs are readily accessible. Talk openly with your child about online risks, use parental controls, and stay involved in their social media activity, including knowing their passwords.

Here's why it's so risky for young people:

**Ease of access:** Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and Snapchat make it easy for anyone, regardless of age, to find or sell drugs.

**Anonymity for criminals:** Many sellers use multiple anonymous accounts or encrypted messaging, making it difficult for law enforcement to track them down.

**Stealthy delivery methods:** Delivery may happen through mail services, with sellers using discreet packaging that makes it difficult to intercept transactions. Other sellers seek out local buyers for quick, in-person delivery.

**Limited law enforcement:** The volume of posts and the global reach of social media make monitoring and enforcement across jurisdictions extremely challenging.

# Be a lighthouse, not a helicopter

To encourage open conversation with a young person, it's important to focus on learning and boundaries rather than rules and punishments.

Even when your preteen or teen experiments with substances, you need to be a lighthouse, not a rescue helicopter.

According to author Dr. Kenneth Ginsberg, who specializes in adolescent health, parents must accept that kids can learn to steer their own ships. Learning comes through trial and error.

In his book *Raising Kids to Thrive*, Ginsberg says that lighthouse parents can offer guidance and support but they must give teens space to learn, grow and make mistakes. (I recommend this book!)

Instead of teaching and lecturing, lighthouse parents ask questions and listen. They encourage children to talk about their feelings. They also talk openly about their own feelings.

Lighthouse parents accept all emotions but not all behaviours. Lighthouse parents set high expectations, but they ensure the expectations are realistic. Lighthouse parents give unconditional love, but not unconditional approval.



Here's how you can be a lighthouse:

**Set expectations:** Let your teen know you expect them to avoid substances until they are older. Focus on self-respect and self-awareness rather than adherence to your rules.

**Establish clear consequences:** If family expectations about substance use are not met, communicate consequences. These should be reasonable and tied to the behaviour.

**Explore motivations:** Seek to understand why a young person might have used substances. Was it peer pressure, curiosity, or something else? This context can guide your response.

**Problem solve:** If your teen has failed to meet family expectations, work together to find solutions or alternatives to avoid such situations in the future.

**Avoid harsh punishments:** Extreme punishments can lead to secrecy and resentment, making it harder for a young person to seek help. Teach them to navigate the social influences that lead to substance use without blocking their relationships.

**Keep them busy:** As much as possible, support your teen's involvement in activities such as sports, the arts, and other social outlets.

**Ask for help:** If you think your child is physically dependent on a substance, they may need medical help for withdrawal symptoms. Talk to a doctor.

# Conscious use questions

Deciding to use a substance requires conscious thought and information gathering.

The questions below can help you think it through. Use these prompts for a reflective writing session or to start a conversation with a friend or family member.

If you don't have someone you can trust to talk about your substance use, it's a sign you need to develop a community of care. That might seem daunting, but it could transform your life.

1. How am I feeling right now? Name your emotional state and any concerns you are conscious of today.
2. What substance am I considering using?
3. What are the potential benefits and/or pleasures of this substance for me?
4. What are the potential harms of this substance for me?
5. What is my intention? What do I want or need from using this substance?
6. How might my choice to use this substance affect others in my friend group or family?
7. What is my plan for maximizing the benefits or pleasures while minimizing the harms of this substance? (Consider the source, the dosage, and when, where, and with whom you will use the substance.)

# Make a substance plan

In my home, we talk a lot about substance planning. Before we enter social situations, we make conscious decisions about substances. It works for us because it creates relationships founded on accountability and trust.

For example, if my husband and I plan to use alcohol, we know approximately how much we plan to use before we even take a sip of our first drink. We make sure we're hydrated, we eat a meal before, and we plan a ride home. We talk about it with each other.

If we expect to use cannabis, we buy it in advance so we know the source and potency. We avoid mixing it with alcohol. And again, we communicate about our plans.

By openly talking about our substance use as a family, we are giving ourselves a moment to be intentional about our use. We use each other as reflection and accountability partners.

Things don't always go as planned. But if social events go sideways, everyone in our family knows they can call for a non-judgy ride home at any time.

I recommend trying out these behaviours in your home. Talk about your substance use plans in front of your kids. It's a way of modelling responsible use and transparent relationships.

# Family resources

I put together a list of resources that are relevant for my family. If you live in Toronto, feel free to adopt these resources. If you are located outside of Toronto, adapt this list so it's relevant to your local community. Print it out, talk about it, and place it in an accessible area.

Gather these resources now, before you think you need them. You and your kids will know what to do if and when help is needed.

**Kids Help Phone:** This national service offers 24/7 support for children and teens on various topics, including substance use. Call 1-800-668-6868 or text CONNECT to 686868

**Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction:** This national non-governmental organization provides parent- and teen-oriented information about substance use trends and news. Go to [ccsa.ca](http://ccsa.ca).

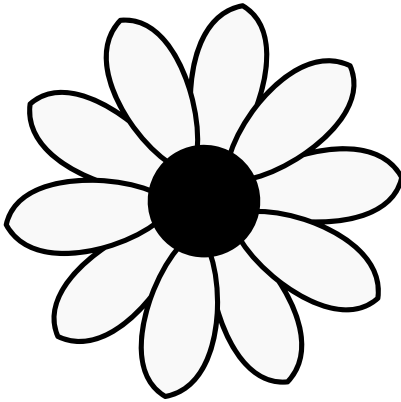
**Toronto's Drug Checking Services:** Free, anonymous services are available to anyone. Go to [drugchecking.community](http://drugchecking.community) for locations.

**Breakaway:** This Toronto-based organization provides harm reduction and addiction treatment services for families. See [breakawaycs.ca](http://breakawaycs.ca) or call 416-537-9346 x 225 for more information.

## Let's connect

I appreciate feedback! If you have comments, concerns or suggestions, contact me at [daphne@daphnegordon.com](mailto:daphne@daphnegordon.com).

I publish a newsletter called Psychedelic Sundays, where I explore how the psychedelic renaissance will affect regular people like you, me, and our children. For more stories about substance education at home, go to [daphnegordon.substack.com](http://daphnegordon.substack.com) and sign up for my newsletter.



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