Family Resource

LANGUAGE MATTERS!

Understanding Mental Health and Substance Use: A Resource for Families and School Communities

BRITISH COLUMBIA
Ministry of Education and Child Care

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This resource is designed to help parents, guardians and caregivers of school-age children (ages 5-11) and youth (ages 12-18) learn more about common language and concepts on mental health and substance use.

The guide can be read all together or in sections. The sections are:

- Defining and Understanding Mental Health and Substance Use *[7-9 minutes]*
- Home and School Working Together for Mental Health and Well-being *[5-7 minutes]*
- Supporting your Child or Youth with their Mental Health and Well-being *[3-5 minutes]*

This resource was developed by the B.C. Ministry of Education and Child Care in partnership with the BC Children's Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre. Many people contributed to its development, including parents, guardians and caregivers. The project was guided by an advisory committee made up of provincial education, mental health and public health partners.

The Ministry of Education and Child Care offices are situated on the lək̓ʷəŋən speaking territory of the Xwepsum and Songhees Nations and on the territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓ əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. BC Children's Hospital is located on the territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓ əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

Those involved in creating and reviewing this guide acknowledge that they work on the territories of First Nations around B.C. and are grateful to carry out their work on these lands.



[Approximate reading time: 15-20 mins]

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Background

Mental health is a part of everyone's overall health. It affects how we feel and what we do every day. Just like we take care of our bodies, we can take care of our minds too. You play a key role in supporting your child's mental health and well-being. This guide will help you learn about mental health and how it affects your child or youth. It includes information on where to find help if needed.[1]

Teachers and other school staff learn about mental health and substance use so they can support children and youth at school. A useful resource for educators is Language Matters! An Introductory Guide for Understanding Mental Health and Substance Use: A Resource for Educators and School Communities. We all need to be able to talk about mental health in a way that is accurate, inclusive and respectful.



1 This guide will cover topics that some may find difficult to read about, such as self-harm and suicide. If you need immediate support, call or text 988 for the National Suicide Crisis Helpline.

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Defining and Understanding Mental Health and Substance Use

It is important to learn about mental health and substance use and know how to talk about it. That knowledge will help you to understand and support your child as they go through life's ups and downs.

This section talks about:

- mental health and substance use
- what influences our mental health and well-being
- how mental illnesses can impact children and youth

What is mental health?

The way each of us views mental health may be different and can depend on many things. This may include how our own culture and community understand and speak about mental health. Our understanding is also affected by our experiences. Talking about mental health may feel easy and natural to some. Others may feel nervous, embarrassed or even fearful. Some of us may use different words to describe mental health and illness or have different opinions about substance use.

Mental health[2] can be defined as a **state of well-being where we can live and work with purpose, have healthy relationships, and handle life's everyday stresses.**

Our brains interact with the environment around us, and the state[3] of our mental health can change depending on what is happening in our lives. All of us struggle with poor mental health at times.

2 Some common examples of how mental health is referred to: good mental health, positive mental health, mental wellness, well-being.

3 The Mental Health Literacy Pyramid is one way to describe the different states of mental health and what levels of support might be needed.

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Indigenous perspectives take a holistic approach to wellness. The First Nations Health Authority's *First Nations Perspective on Health and Wellness* is a helpful way to understand what supports our well-being. This holistic approach includes our mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health. The aim is to find a balance between these things and see them as connected.

This view of wellness includes:

- upholding and supporting certain values (like respect and responsibility)
- building strong relationships with people (family, community) and places (land)
- knowing that things in our bigger society affect our health (the economy, our environments, culture)

Source: BC First Nations Health Authority

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What is substance use?

Substance use refers to the use of substances that make us see, think, feel and behave differently than we usually do. This includes using alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, prescription drugs and illegal drugs. There are many kinds of substances and many reasons why someone may use them. It is common for youth to want new experiences as they age and to try substances like alcohol or cannabis. Just because a youth is using substances, it does not mean they will go on to develop a substance use disorder. However, children and youth are more vulnerable to the effects of different substances because their bodies and brains are still developing. It is important to know about the effects of substance use to make informed decisions about our own health.

Substance use can be viewed on a spectrum with varying stages of benefits and harm including: *non-use, beneficial use, low-risk use, high-risk use and addiction (substance use disorder).*



Learn more about:

- Substance Use & Youth
- Mental Health and Substance Use

Why is it important to know about mental health and substance use?

The more we know about mental health and substance use and how the conditions we live in play a role, the more we can do to build well-being and prevent or address mental illness. Learning about mental health and substance use can make family relationships stronger. It can also help create a safe and supportive environment.

Learning about mental health and substance use helps us understand how to:

1. **Improve mental well-being** by supporting protective factors. Protective factors contribute to good mental health and protect against mental illness and harms from substance use.

Protective factors include:

individual factors	*social factors*	*societal factors*
examples: • nutrition • regular physical activity • quality sleep • helping others • sense of cultural identity • social emotional competencies	examples: • positive relationships with peers and supportive adults • media literacy and healthy use of technology	examples: • safe and caring school/ neighbourhood • positive educational experiences • housing and income security • connections with culture

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2. **Have open, kind conversations** with your child or youth about their feelings, stress and choices.
3. **Guide and support** your child or youth to manage emotions, cope with challenges and make safe decisions.
4. **Recognize issues early and seek help**. Changes in the ways children or youth behave or feel can sometimes indicate a mental illness or a substance use concern.
5. **Model healthy behaviours**. Look after your own mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health and seek help when you need it.
6. **Understand and prevent harm from substance use**. Learn about substance use, have open conversations with your child and help them develop knowledge about it. Improving overall health and well-being can reduce the **risk of harm from substance use**.
7. **Reduce stigma**[4] around mental illness. Use language that is clear and respectful. This can reduce shame, fear, or discomfort that children or adults may feel. It also shows children how to be kind to others who might be struggling.
8. **Help your child form connections with other trusted adults**. Connection to trusted and supportive adults (like relatives, teachers and coaches) and a sense of belonging are important protective factors for mental health.

What about mental illness?

Mental health and mental illness[5] are two separate things that sometimes overlap. Mental illness is when someone has a mental disorder that affects what they do, think and feel. Mental disorders can be diagnosed by medical doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists and nurse practitioners. Mental illnesses, like mental health, can change. People with mental illnesses can still have good mental health and enjoy well-being. Some people who do not have a diagnosed mental illness can have poor mental health and need help and support.

4 Negative beliefs attached to a characteristic of an individual that can lead to thinking about and treating a person differently (for example: discrimination, exclusion).

5 Mental illness is a general term used to describe the wide range of diagnosable mental disorders.

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What are some examples of common mental disorders that impact children and youth?



Anxiety disorders are when there is intense and ongoing fear of social situations, panic attacks, or constant worrying. *Social Anxiety is an example*.



Mood disorders are long periods of feeling sad, hopeless or withdrawn from usual activities. *An example is Major Depressive Disorder*.



Eating disorders involve abnormal eating behaviours that may or may not be combined with body shape and weight concerns. *Anorexia Nervosa is an example*.



Behavioural disorders are ongoing, argumentative and disruptive behaviours. *Oppositional Defiant Disorder is an example*.

When we describe someone who has a mental disorder, it is often recommended to use person-first language to distinguish the disorder from the person. For example, "a person with Oppositional-Defiant Disorder" or "a person experiencing Depression."

What about neurodevelopmental disorders?

Neurodevelopmental disorders can affect a person's ability to function at school, work or socially to varying degrees. Examples of some neurodevelopmental disorders include autism spectrum disorder, tics and Tourette syndrome.



Learn more about:

- Mental Health & Neurodevelopmental Challenges

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What about self-harming behaviours?

Some experiences can be difficult to hear about or talk about. Below are two challenging behaviours that young people may experience.

- **Self-Injury** is when someone hurts themselves on purpose without intending to end their life. It is a way of coping with difficult situations and intense emotions or stress. If a child or youth is self-harming, it is important to stay calm and avoid shame, guilt or judgment. People who self-harm benefit from care and support from someone concerned for their well-being. This may include help from a mental health professional and medical attention if they have serious injuries.
- **Thinking about Suicide.** In most cases, having thoughts of suicide is not about wanting to die; it is about wanting the pain to stop. Talking to someone about suicide does not cause or intensify suicidal thoughts or cause the person to act on them. Instead, it can help them feel less alone.

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Learn more about:

- Self-injury
- Suicide

What factors influence our mental health?

Our mental health is affected by complex interactions between our brains and the environment around us. Substance use and its level of risk or harm also depends on a variety of biological, psychological and social factors.

Social Factors that Influence Health



Adapted from: Comox Valley Community Health Network

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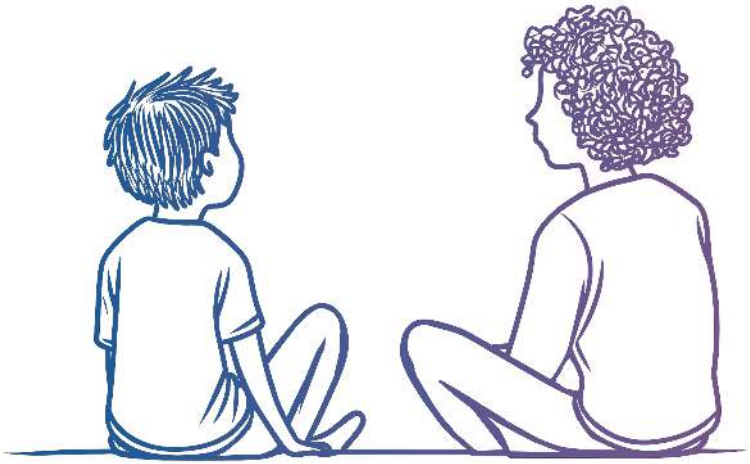
Experiences like racism, discrimination and poverty impact mental health and mental illness. They can also make it harder for someone to get help. Protective factors like supportive relationships at home, in school and in our community can help to buffer these challenging experiences.

It can be difficult to learn about mental illnesses and overwhelming to support a child or youth affected by them. Know that you are not alone in trying to help. There are people and places in school communities where you can learn more and get support.



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Home and School Working Together for Mental Health and Well-being

Everyone in a school community has a role in supporting students' mental health.

School staff and educators:

- Provide safe, inclusive spaces for students to build skills and relationships with friends, other students and adults that help them be well and resilient
- Help students understand mental health and how to grow and maintain their well-being
- Teach about mental disorders and substance use, which helps reduce stigma
- May notice changes in students' behaviour and help students and families identify and access supports in the school or community

What is mental health promotion, and why is it important for schools to do it?

Mental health promotion helps to build up the protective factors that support good mental health. This approach helps to protect against mental illness and the harms of substance use. Mental health promotion is an important way to make school communities a place where EVERY student and their family can feel safe, welcomed, cared for and that they belong. These feelings support mental health and well-being. They are especially important for families that face difficulties like racism or are being treated badly or unfairly because of differences and disabilities.



Everyone is different!

Schools use an approach that recognizes that each person has a unique mix of who they are and what they have experienced. This is known as intersectionality. Schools can build awareness and celebrate different family structures, identities, cultural practices, goals, or learning styles. **Schools can create inclusive environments that support mental health and well-being for everyone.**

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How are schools supporting mental health?

The **Physical and Health Education (PHE) curriculum** includes a focus on overall well-being and the connections between physical, intellectual, mental and social health. In addition to physical literacy, the PHE curriculum includes important topics related to physical and mental health, such as building positive relationships, healthy and active living, substance use education, and how these collectively affect well-being.

Schools follow the Mental Health in Schools Strategy from the Ministry of Education and Child Care. That means mental health promotion is in all aspects of the education system including culture, leadership, curriculum and learning environments. Some ways schools promote mental health are:

- **Social emotional learning**
- **Mental health literacy**
- **Trauma-informed practice**

Social emotional learning is a key aspect of the core competencies in B.C.'s K-12 curriculum. It helps students grow the knowledge, skills and attitudes to:

- ✓ recognize their strengths and values and build a positive sense of themselves
- ✓ manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals
- ✓ feel and show empathy for others
- ✓ establish and maintain supportive relationships
- ✓ make responsible and caring decisions

We build **mental health literacy** by:

- ✓ learning how to have and keep good mental health
- ✓ understanding the different states of mental health (mental distress, mental health problem and mental disorder)
- ✓ building an understanding of mental disorders
- ✓ knowing how to get help when needed
- ✓ decreasing the stigma around the topic of mental illness

When talking about the different states of mental health, it is important to use accurate terms to describe moods and emotions. For example, "I'm feeling sad or blue" rather than "I'm depressed."

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Trauma-informed practice recognizes the short- and long-term effects of trauma. When adults at school understand how trauma can impact students' behaviour and learning they can work with families to create strategies to support the well-being of all students.

Trauma-Informed Practice can help:

- ✓ build a safe, compassionate and trusting environment
- ✓ empower students
- ✓ avoid re-traumatizing
- ✓ build connections with others
- ✓ develop strengths and skills

Trauma is a deep emotional wound caused by stressful experiences. It can be directly experienced or passed down through generations (intergenerational trauma). It can lead to mental and physical health problems, including harms from substance use. Trauma may show up as anxiety, anger, withdrawal or trouble focusing. It can make it hard for adults, children and youth to feel safe, learn or work. When we recognize trauma and respond with care, it helps to rebuild trust, safety and connections. It also supports healing and well-being.

Who do I talk to, and what can I do if I have questions or concerns about my child's mental health or substance use?

You are often the best person to judge if your child is struggling. If you notice something is different about your child's behaviour, mood or relationships, be curious about it. Here are some ways to get support.



In School: Start with talking to a school staff member your child trusts. This could be one of your child's teachers or the school principal. Many schools may also have a school counsellor. They can help direct you and your child to the support needed.

- School counsellors[6] can talk to you about mental health as well as specific concerns you may have about your child. What is said between a child or youth and the school counsellor is confidential[7] unless they are given consent by the child or youth to share information with you.

6 School counsellors provide support and information to students and their families. They can offer personal counselling, academic guidance, and career information to help students succeed in their studies and beyond.

7 There are exceptions to confidentiality such as in cases where a student threatens potential serious harm to themselves or to others, if the student is being harmed or abused, or in the case that a court order requires this information.

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- School counsellors can help teachers find ways to support your child's learning and well-being in the classroom.
- The school counsellor or teacher may consult with specialized school staff if a mental health need is impacting your child at school.
- School staff can work with you and your child or youth to identify and connect you with the right support. For example, they can refer you to community agencies such as Foundry, Integrated Child and Youth Teams, Child and Youth Mental Health clinics, or counselling therapy in the community.
- A Student Support Plan or an Individual Education Plan may be developed if a child or youth has a diagnosed mental disorder that requires support at school.



In the Community: Many healthcare professionals can help with understanding and supporting the mental health and well-being of children and youth. Some can make a diagnosis of a mental disorder (medical doctors, psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, nurse practitioners). A diagnosis can help you and your child get the necessary support in your community.

Other healthcare providers can offer helpful services and programs (social workers, mental health counsellors, nurses). There may be people in your community that can offer support with mental well-being such as cultural knowledge keepers, community counsellors and faith leaders. It may also be helpful for Indigenous students and their families to connect with their local nation or community for resources and supports.



Learn more:

- Getting Started: Where to Start When Looking for Support
- Mental Health and Wellness Supports for Indigenous Families

You can tap into a network of care by learning how schools and communities support mental health. There are many resources that can help build well-being for ourselves and our children.

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Supporting your Child or Youth with their Mental Health and Well-being

As parents and caring adults, your instincts, observations and nurturing relationship with your child are important for supporting their mental health and well-being.

What can I do to support the mental health and well-being of my child or youth?



Express your love and concern for them often. Feeling loved is a big part of children's well-being – it brings them a sense of security that helps them to cope with difficulties.



Focus on their strengths, like what they can do, what they are good at or what they have achieved. It helps them see their strengths and abilities, builds confidence and helps them overcome challenges.



Create a safe space for their emotions. Sometimes children or youth have big thoughts and feelings that they need support to figure out. Help them to feel and understand their emotions so they can experience how things will eventually get better.



Build their coping and problem-solving skills. Help them figure out ways to calm themselves or ask for support when they feel anxious or overwhelmed. These could be positive self-talk reminders, comforting physical objects or soothing activities. Even the smallest action can reduce the feeling of powerlessness and help them feel more confident.



Helpful resources for supporting well-being as a family:

- Healthy Living - Building the Foundations of Mental Wellness
- Mental Health and Substance Use

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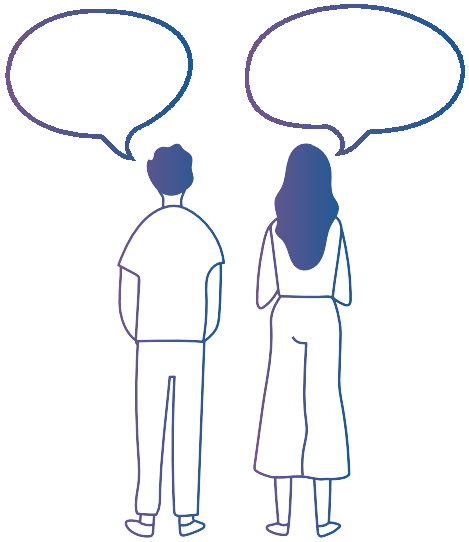
How do I talk to my child/youth about mental health?

- **Try to talk about mental health often so that it feels 'normal' and not awkward or worrying to bring up.** You can talk about it as another part of our well-being like our physical health. What we eat and how we move can affect our bodies. In a similar way, our thoughts and things happening around us can affect our minds and spirit.
- **Try talking openly about feelings** (yours, others', even movie or book characters'). Include uncomfortable feelings like worry or sadness as part of everyday conversations. This helps children or youth understand that a range of feelings are normal. It will make it easier for them to share their own emotions when they are struggling.
- **Ask them about what's on their minds and in their hearts** when you're doing something together and are not in a hurry (for example when on a walk or cooking). You could say "What are some things you're looking forward to? What are some things you are worried about?"
- The goal is to **listen and understand what's happening for them.** Try to resist jumping in with your perspective or a solution right away. That can shut down further sharing.
- Ask them what **they would like to do or think they need**, and if and how you can help. It's ok if they don't want to do anything just yet – being able to talk to you is already helping.



LEARN MORE!

Other helpful resources to start the conversation:

- Talking to Youth About Mental Health
- Have a conversation

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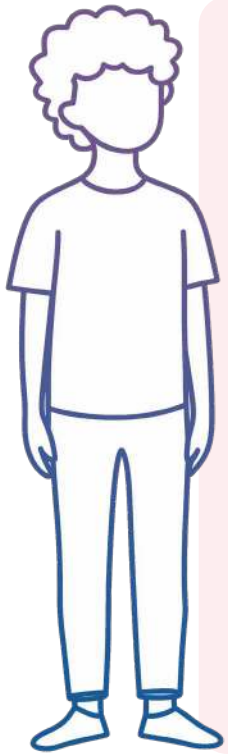
How do I take care of my own mental health and well-being?

Raising a child is rewarding but also really hard work. There is constant decision-making, problem-solving and managing both your child's emotions as well as your own. It takes a lot of mental and emotional energy.



Taking care of your own mental health is so important and an essential part of parenting and caregiving. It will help you to stay patient, handle challenges in healthy ways, and create a calm, supportive home environment.

By looking after yourself, you are supporting your child's well-being. You are also showing them the importance of taking care of their own mental health.

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Other helpful resources to support your mental health and well-being:

- Taking Care of Yourself
- Building a Support Network and Community

You can also talk to peer support workers at the BC Children's Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre or FamilySmart.

It is important to nurture your child's mental health alongside your own. In that way, you build a lasting foundation of mental health and well-being for the whole family. You do not have to be perfect – often just being present, caring and willing to reach out when you need support can have a big impact.

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Conclusion

Supporting the mental health of children and youth is a shared effort between home, school and our communities. Your love and understanding help build your child's mental health and well-being. Talking about mental health and substance use and doing it in a kind, respectful and inclusive way makes a big difference—for your family, for your child's school and for the entire community. Together, we can create a positive and supportive environment where all children and families feel valued and are able to thrive.



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