



# Talking with Children and Teens About Substance Use

A handbook for parents,  
caregivers and youth allies



To cite this resource: Alberta Health Services. (2024). Talking with Children and Teens About Substance Use: A handbook for parents, caregivers and youth allies. Calgary, AB: Author.

For more information or to request a print or digital copy, please contact AHS Tobacco, Vaping & Cannabis Program, at [TVCP@ahs.ca](mailto:TVCP@ahs.ca).

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Tell us what you think! Scan the QR code to take a brief survey about this handbook.



# Introduction

Having positive and caring relationships with your child is one of the best ways to help protect them from harmful substance use. Children and teens who feel connected to their parents and talk with them often about different issues, tend to feel more comfortable talking to their parents about tough topics, like substance use.

Open, honest, and regular talks can help give your child the tools and support they need to make healthy decisions. Even though it might not seem like it, your opinion matters to your child or teen.

There's a lot of information out there. This handbook was developed to help parents feel more prepared to have conversations about substance use.

**Substance use can include the use of alcohol, cannabis, tobacco\*, vaping, caffeine, and other drugs.**

*\*Note: In this resource, "tobacco" refers to commercial tobacco products, like cigarettes sold in stores. It does not include the traditional tobacco used by First Nations and some Métis groups for ceremonial purposes and as a sacred medicine.*



Families come in many forms. In this handbook, the term “parent” is used to mean anyone who cares for a young person at home. This may include:

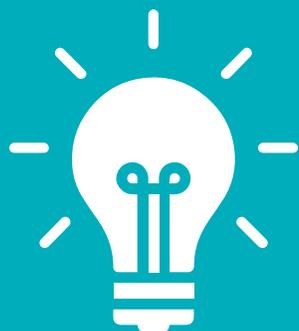
- Stepparents
- Foster parents
- Uncles
- Aunties
- Grandparents
- Other guardians

# The impact of parents

It's easy to see how children watch and learn from adults when they're little. It can be harder to notice this as they get older. Sometimes it may seem like they're not watching or listening at all.

The truth is, no matter how old your child is, parents continue to be role models and strong influences for children as they grow. Children and teens notice how you deal with problems, manage feelings, and celebrate. They notice when, why, and how you and the other adults around them use substances. You set examples for them.

There are no perfect parents. What matters most is that your child or teen knows they are loved, and that you'll be there for them. Creating a solid connection with your child, where they feel emotionally supported, is an important way to help them build the communication and decision-making skills they'll need when they face pressures to use substance. You can do this by taking the time to connect with them on a regular basis.



## Try this!

**Here are some ways to connect with your child or teen:**

- Find hobbies or activities you both enjoy and do them together.
- Show interest in the things they care about.
- Aim to eat meals together at least once a day. Turn off the TV or other electronics and use this focused time as a chance to connect. Tell stories about how the day went, ask questions, talk about upcoming plans, and get to know each other.
- Try to spend one-on-one time together, especially if you have more than one child.
- Share stories about when you were growing up and what you learned. This may help your teen reflect on some of their own struggles and how to get through them.

# Why do people use substances?

**Substance use is part of the social norms in many communities and cultures.**

**People use substances for different reasons.**

**Some include:**

- Being social
- Having fun or celebrating
- Culture
- Peer pressure
- Availability
- Boredom, loneliness, or curiosity
- Improving performance
- Managing pain or self-medicating
- Coping with stress or trauma
- Coping with mental health struggles

Take a moment to think about some of the reasons why people might use substances like, drinking coffee, taking medicines, or having wine with a meal. Generally, these reasons give people some kind of benefit. For example:

- Coffee helps people stay alert
- Medicine can be used to improve health like treating aches, pains, and fever
- Wine might taste good with a meal

Learning about why people use substances can help you understand why your child or teen might try them. While there may be benefits, it's important to talk about the risks as well. Any substance use can come with a risk of harm to the person using them and to others. By understanding the pros and cons of substance use, you'll understand why some teens might choose to experiment. You'll also have a more balanced view when you talk with your child or teen.



**Young people who use substances from an early age have a higher risk of:**

- Legal problems
- Alcohol or other drug poisoning
- Conflict or fights
- Physical or sexual violence
- Injury
- Motor vehicle crashes
- Poor mental health and mental illness
- Lower school grades
- Lower school attendance or dropping out
- Unplanned and unprotected sexual activity
- Unplanned pregnancy
- Sexually transmitted blood borne infections
- Substance use disorder
- Some cancers
- Suicide

# What substances are youth using?

In 2021–2022, a national survey asked students in grades 7–12 about their use of substances. Here's what they said:



**39%**

reported using alcohol in the past 12 months.



**21%**

reported high-risk drinking (having 5 or more drinks on one occasion) in the past 12 months.



**18%**

reported using cannabis in the past 12 months.

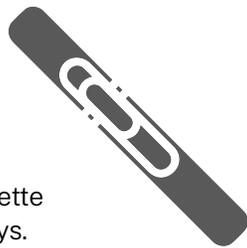


**7%**

reported using prescription medicines to get high in the past 12 months.

**17%**

reported using an e-cigarette (vaping) in the past 30 days.



**13**

The average age of first use of alcohol.



**14**

The average age of first use of cannabis.

**64%**

thought it would be “fairly easy” or “very easy” to get alcohol.



# Get the facts

You don't need to be an expert to talk about substance use, but it helps to know a few facts.

Find out how different substances affect the body and brain. Then you'll feel more ready to talk with your child or teen and answer their questions.

**Try these trusted websites:**

- Drug Safe (Alberta Health Services)  
[drugsafe.ca](https://drugsafe.ca)
- Drug Spotlights (Drug Free Kids Canada)  
[drugfreekidsCanada.org/drug-spotlights/](https://drugfreekidsCanada.org/drug-spotlights/)
- Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health (Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction)  
[ccsa.ca/canadas-guidance-alcohol-and-health](https://ccsa.ca/canadas-guidance-alcohol-and-health)
- Consider the Consequences of Vaping (Government of Canada)  
[canada.ca/vaping-info](https://canada.ca/vaping-info)



If you or someone you know needs help with substance use, these free, confidential services are here for you 24 hours a day, 7 days a week:

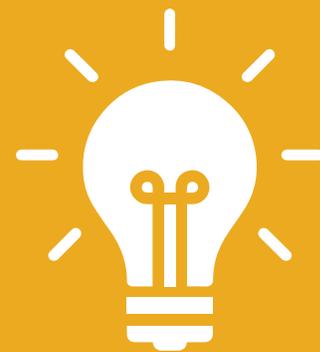
- Dial **811** for Health Link
- Dial **1-866-332-2322** for the Addiction Helpline

# Talk and listen

Take time to connect with your child or teen and talk about the things they care about. If they feel comfortable talking to you, you can support them better. If they know they can count on you when they need help, they'll be more likely to turn to you if they run into trouble.

Tell your child or teen that you're open to talking with them about substance use and you want to hear their thoughts. If they won't connect with you, try again later. Aim for lots of smaller talks, instead of one big conversation.

Try talking about substance use when you see it, like at an event where alcohol is served or when you see substance use in a movie. You could also bring up the topic in a more planned way, such as at a family meeting.



## Try this!

### Here are some conversation tips:

- Listen as much or more than you talk. Resist the urge to lecture.
- Start conversations when you're doing something together, like riding in the car, walking the dog, or eating a family meal.
- Be curious and ask questions. Ask about their views on substance use and keep an open mind.
- Encourage your child or teen to ask questions. Help them find answers.
- Talk about substances in an age-appropriate way. For tips on what to say, see [page 15](#).
- Stick to the facts. Don't use scare tactics or exaggerate the risks of substance use. If your child doesn't think you're telling the truth, they might look to other sources, like their friends or the internet.
- Talk about some of the reasons people use substances too. For more on this, see [page 4](#).
- Be ready to answer your child's questions about your own substance use. Plan how you'll respond in an age-appropriate way.
- Keep trying. Check in often. Your child may avoid or deflect topics and that's okay. Keep the conversation going and be there when they are ready to talk.

# Support healthy decisions

## Build on their strengths

Children and teens who feel good about themselves may be less likely to use substances in a harmful way.

Build your child's self-esteem by helping them find interests they're good at and enjoy. Help them build and practice skills that make them feel confident. For example, let them plan or assist with meals, take care of pets, or help a neighbour.

When they finish a task, take notice! Take time to praise them. Tell them they should be proud of themselves too.

## Learn about brain development

Sometimes you might wonder why your child does what they do or why they take risks without thinking about what might happen. This is because their brain is still developing.

Brains grow and develop until around the age of 25. Until that time, the brain is more controlled by the parts of the brain that deal with emotions, rather than logic or reasoning. This means it's harder for young people to control how they behave and connect actions to outcomes.

As their brain develops, your child or teen can still make good choices and tell right from wrong. You can support them to make good decisions by helping them to:

- Predict consequences
- Learn from their actions
- Reflect on what happened

Take time to learn about the growing brain. You'll have a better sense of what your child or teen's going through. To learn more, check out [The Developing Brain](#).



## Brain development affects how young people behave.

Children and teens are **more likely** than adults to:

- Get emotional
- Mistake social signs
- Misread emotions
- Have arguments
- Get injured
- Take part in risky or harmful behaviors

Children and teens are **less likely** than adults to:

- Think before they act
- Pause to consider the consequences of their actions

# Use critical thinking

## Critical thinking can help your child or teen make safer choices about substance use.

Critical thinking is the skill of looking at all the information on a topic before deciding what to believe or how to act. It starts by collecting all the available information and deciding how accurate it is. Next, you compare the information to your current beliefs. Finally, you shift your beliefs if you find that they're not the same as the information you found.

Critical thinking helps children and teens work through ideas, instead of just accepting them as facts. It helps them make safer choices about substance use.

Until their brain is fully developed, you'll need to support your child or teen with critical thinking. Build their skills by talking them through a choice they've made. Ask them to reflect on something that happened at school or with friends, like a time when they faced pressure to vape or smoke.

Use the five steps below to help them think through what happened.



## Try this!

Follow these steps to help your child or teen think critically about a decision they've made:

### Step 1: Determine the decision.

- What did you need to decide about?
- Who was involved in the decision? (Just you? Or other people too?)
- Who was affected by your decision?

### Step 2: Find out more about the decision.

- How did you feel about making the decision you made?
- How did others feel?

### Step 3: Talk about the choices and options.

- What were all the choices or options to decide on?
- Did you consider all the options?

### Step 4: Talk through pros and cons.

- What were the pros and cons of each option?
- How did you weigh them?

### Step 5: Talk about the results of the choice you made.

- What were the results of your decision? For you? For others?
- Would you make the same choice again? What would you do differently?

# Set family agreements

Teaching your children about acceptable behaviour and boundaries can be tough. Family agreements can help with this.

Family agreements are lists of things that all family members agree to — like what's okay and not okay, and what happens when agreements are not followed. They're often set by the whole family and based around your family values.

Agreements help children and teens know what's expected of them. They empower young people to make better choices. Agreements show your child that you trust and care about them.

As your child gets older, they can have more input in creating agreements, but some may be set by parents only. Make sure to balance monitoring your child's behaviour with allowing them to develop their independence.

Show your child or teen that adults have rules and boundaries to live by as well. For example, traffic laws are in place to keep us and others safe.

While it's important to be consistent, be sure to review and update your family agreements as your child grows or your family changes.

Use the tips below to get started.



## Try this!

### Use these tips to set agreements:

- Start by talking about your shared values. Ask everyone about what matters to them. Talk about how you all want to be treated and how you'll treat others.
- Be clear about rules that will be set by adults. Then talk about what's open for input from children or teens.
- Keep it positive. Be specific. Set clear expectations so kids and teens know what the boundaries are and how to handle them.
- Decide on a range of consequences for breaking different agreements from the start. Based on the behavior, some will result in larger consequences than others.

### Family agreements on substance use could include things like:

- Where medicines are stored and who can access them.
- What to do when someone who has been drinking offers your child a ride.
- No one in the family will use substances and drive (including a bike, scooter, ATV, boat, personal watercraft, car, truck, motor bike, or snowmobile).
- What to do if someone offers your teen alcohol or other drugs, including family friends and hosts.
- Delaying first use of alcohol and cannabis as long as possible.

# Understand peer influence



## Your child or teen's peers help shape their identity.

As your child gets older, they'll become more influenced by their friends and peers, however, your opinion still matters to them. Talking with your teen may become harder because they're building their own identity.

Most of the time, peer influence or "peer pressure" is healthy and supportive. Peers help your teen figure out who they are and who they're becoming. Your teen can also have the same positive influence on

others. But peer influence can also be negative. For example, your teen's friends might pressure them to try vaping or alcohol. At times, your teen may feel the pressure to give in.

You can help by giving your child or teen the tools to handle peer influence. Teach them what to say when someone pressures them to use substances. Help them practice what to do. Use the strategies on [page 12](#) as a guide.



## Try this!

Get to know your child or teen's friends and their family. Invite them over, talk with them in person at school or at other activities outside of school.

Check in with your child or teen to see what their friends or other peers think about substance use. If their values are different than your family values, talk to your child or teen about why some people might have other beliefs or make different choices.

**Practice these ideas with your child or teen so they feel comfortable handling peer pressure. Act out situations and make them appropriate for your child's age.**

## Try this

**Here are two ideas:**

**Example 1:** If your young child has places they're allowed to play, act out a scene where they say 'no' to a friend who wants them to go outside the boundaries you've set.

**Example 2:** With your teen, talk about a situation where they're asked if they'd like to use alcohol or cannabis at a party.



### Say “no thanks”

**The first step is to say, “no thanks, I don't want to.”**

It's a simple response and sometimes it's enough to end the conversation. They've made a choice and it should be accepted.

### Repeat no again and again

**Say “no thanks.” Then say it again.**

Sometimes the pressure doesn't stop after the first “no thanks.” Teach your child to repeat these words, over and over. Tell them to be firm but kind — they don't need to explain or defend their choice. With time, the person putting on the pressure may give up.

### Flip the pressure

**Say “why do you keep asking me?”**

This response helps when your child is faced with peers who won't stop asking them to use substances. It flips the pressure, so the other person needs to explain themselves. It also implies the issue is with the other person, not the person saying no.

### Walk away

**Say “sorry, I have to go.”**

Sometimes leaving is the best thing to do. Tell your child they don't have to explain their actions. Just walk away. They don't need to stick around if they feel uneasy.

### Use an excuse

**Say “I don't want to get into trouble.”**

Have your child use family agreements, sports, school, health conditions, or other excuses. Teach them to say something like “I'd get grounded for ages for doing that.” They'll shift the focus to the boundaries and expectations they agreed to at home.

### Make a code

**Plan their escape.**

Make a code word, phrase, or action with your child that only you know. If they're in a situation where they need your help but don't want others to know, they can use the code and you'll know they need you.

# Safe storage



Store substances safely so that children and teens don't use them by accident or on purpose. Here are some tips for your home.



Keep all substances (including medicines, alcohol, cannabis, tobacco, and vaping products) locked up, out of sight and out of reach from children and pets. Share this rule with visitors to your home and other people your children spend time with.



Keep alcohol and cannabis products in their original containers, with labels. Cannabis products bought from legal sources are sold in child-proof containers marked with the universal symbol for tetrahydrocannabinol (THC).



Store edible cannabis products separately from regular food and drinks. Don't leave them in spots that are easy to access, like counters, cupboards, purses, pockets, or suitcases.



Store products that contain alcohol like cosmetics, mouthwash, sanitizers, and cleansers out of sight and reach.



Keep track of alcohol or other drugs you have in the house. Make a rule that only adults can take alcohol out of the fridge or storage place.



If you choose to grow cannabis at home, visit [ncceh.ca](https://www.ncceh.ca) for storage and safety tips. Growing cannabis at home has health and safety risks.



Throw out leftover alcohol from beer cans, wine glasses, and other drinks. Clean them up often, not just at the end of an event.



When locking up substances and medicines, use a locked box, cabinet, or fridge. If you want a separate fridge to cool drinks with alcohol or cannabis, buy one with a lock.



If you're hosting a party or event with alcohol or cannabis, let everyone know that only adults of legal age (18+) can mix or serve drinks or other products. Have an adult keep an eye on open alcohol or cannabis products.

**Use these storage tips at home and in places you visit. If someone else is caring for your child or teen, make sure they also know how to store substances safely.**



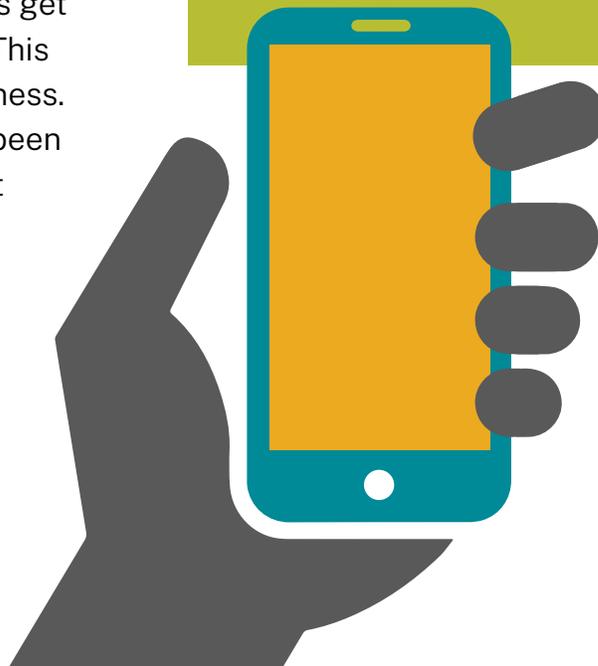
## Remember

Young children are curious — they'll swallow just about anything.

Their lower body weight means blood alcohol levels can rise dangerously fast.

Cannabis also affects children much differently than adults. Their bodies get rid of cannabis much more slowly. This may affect their level of consciousness. If you're concerned your child has been exposed to or eaten cannabis, don't make them vomit.

**If there's any chance your child has consumed alcohol, cannabis, or other drugs, call the Poison & Drug Information Service (PADIS) toll-free at 1-800-332-1414. In an emergency, call 911.**



# Conversation ideas for different ages

It's never too early or too late to talk about substance use. Get started with these age-appropriate topics.

## Toddler/Preschool 2–4 years



### Talk about:

- How to care for our bodies by eating healthy food, getting enough sleep, and not putting things in our body that can harm us.
- When and who can give medicine to your child and why it's not a good idea to take other people's medicine.
- How household chemicals can be harmful and why they need to be stored safely.

## Child/Elementary 5–8 years



### Talk about:

- How medicine, legal, and illegal drugs are different from each other.
- How avoiding harmful substances helps keep their body healthy.
- What your child thinks when you both see substance use on TV or in real time. Ask what they've heard about it or what their friends say about it.

## Preteen/Middle School 9–12 years



### Talk about:

- Your family's values and expectations on substance use.
- What they want to know about substance use and find the answers together.
- Their experiences with peer pressure. Make up and act out situations to practice how they can react. For ideas, see [page 12](#).

## Teenager/High School 13–18 years



### Talk about:

- How substance use could get in the way of their current responsibilities, commitments, and future goals and plans.
- If they have used substances, and the reasons why or why not.
- Who else they could turn to if they have questions about substance use or need help.

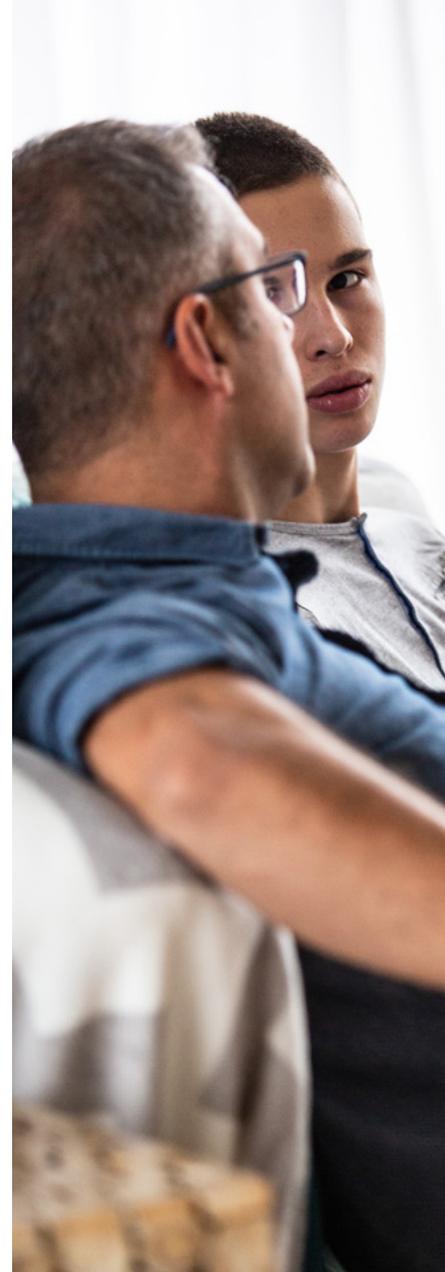
Let your child or teen know they can always talk to you and that you'll always be there for them, no matter what.

# How to spot harmful substance use

Experimenting with substance use may be a normal part of growing up for some, but it can become a problem if it starts to affect your child or teen's responsibilities, commitments, relationships, coping skills, and mental health.

Learn the signs of harmful substance use below. If your child shows signs, try not to jump to conclusions – there may be other reasons to explain what's going on.

Talk with other people who spend time with your child or teen, like teachers, coaches, Elders, clergy, or extended family members. Find out if they are seeing similar changes.



**If you notice any of these signs of harmful substance use, reach out to a health care provider. Help and support is available.**

- Unexplained weight loss or weight gain
- Changes in sleep (like not being able to sleep, being tired all the time, or taking more naps)
- Red or watery eyes, or pupils that are bigger or smaller than normal
- Runny nose, coughing, or headaches
- Slurred speech
- Using strong colognes, mouthwash, or eye drops more often
- Avoiding contact with you when they come home
- Changes in emotions like increased moodiness, depression, anger, or crying
- Lying or keeping secrets
- Having new or different friends, especially ones they don't want you to meet
- Changes in how they're doing at school (like lower grades, being late, or not going to school)
- Losing interest in sports, hobbies, or other activities they used to enjoy
- Asking for more money, borrowing or stealing money



If you or someone you know needs help with substance use, these free, confidential services are here for you 24 hours a day, 7 days a week:

- Dial **811** for Health Link
- Dial **1-866-332-2322** for the Addiction Helpline



If you think your child or teen is using substances in a harmful way or see a pattern of change in their behaviour that concerns you, talk with them. Tell them that you care about them and are concerned. Say what you've noticed and give examples. If substance use is part of the issue, let them know that help is available.

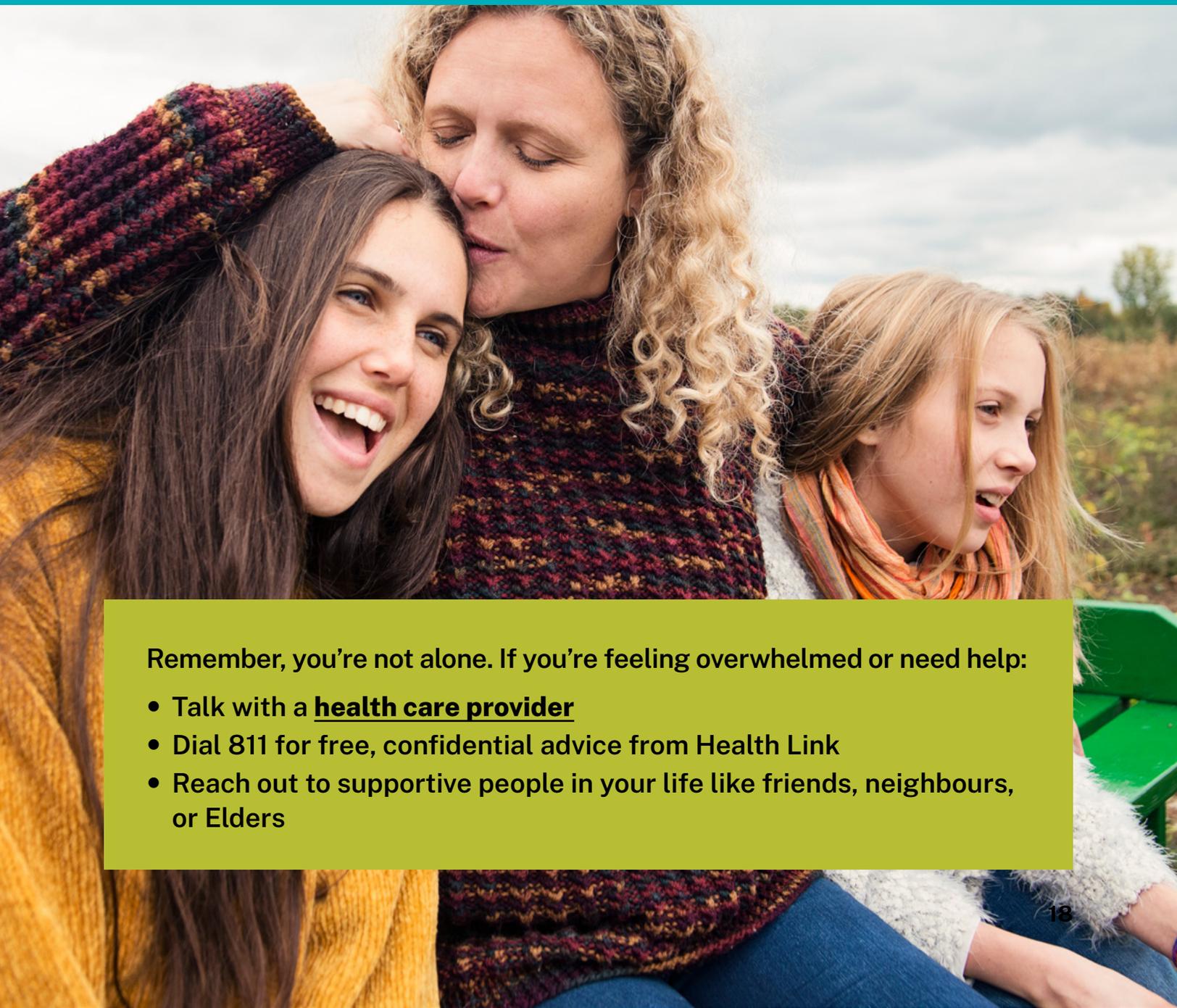
As a parent, you can also seek support from a health care provider for you and your whole family. They can help you make a plan, find new ways to reach your child, and access local programs and services.

# A final word

**Staying connected with your child or teen is important as they become a young adult. The connections you make every day might seem small, but they have a big impact over time.**

Help reduce your child or teen's risk from harmful substance use:

- Have open and supportive conversations
- Show interest in the things they care about
- Help them make good decisions
- Set family agreements
- Practice ways to handle peer pressure
- Watch for signs of harm
- Let them know you care



Remember, you're not alone. If you're feeling overwhelmed or need help:

- Talk with a **health care provider**
- Dial 811 for free, confidential advice from Health Link
- Reach out to supportive people in your life like friends, neighbours, or Elders