

northern child and youth

**AN ELECTRONIC PUBLICATION OF THE UNBC TASK FORCE ON SUBSTANCE ABUSE,
THE CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS.
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CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE FOR CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

Children and Adolescents with Special Needs

Centre of Excellence for Children and Adolescents with Special Needs

Health Canada established the Centre of Excellence for Children and Adolescents with Special Needs to ensure that young people with special needs living in rural and northern communities receive the best services Canada has to offer.

The Centre is based at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario, but works in partnership with five sites across the country to address specific areas of children's well-being: Memorial University in Newfoundland is focussing on nutrition, Lakehead University on learning and communication, Mount St. Vincent University in Nova Scotia on early intervention, the University of Northern British Columbia on substance abuse, and the Government of Nunavut on mental health.

The Centre is also involved with more than 300 community, government and corporate partners across Canada.

The UNBC Task Force on Substance Abuse

The UNBC Task Force examines how substance abuse is related to a variety of special needs, including fetal alcohol syndrome and brain injury; how to design, develop and deliver substance abuse programs that meet the specific needs of young people in rural and northern communities.

For More Information

For more about the Centre of Excellence for Children and Adolescents with Special Needs, visit www.coespecialneeds.ca.

For more about the UNBC Task Force on Substance Abuse, contact us at:

Centre of Excellence for Children and Adolescents with Special Needs
UNBC Task Force on Substance Abuse
3333 University Way
Prince George, BC V2N 4Z9

Phone: (250) 960-5806

Fax: (250) 960-5644

Email: special@unbc.ca

Web: www.unbc.ca/centreca

Welcome to 2007

Two years ago, the Centre of Excellence for Children and Adolescents with Special Needs completed an innovative study.

The Centre wanted to create a youth-led study into substance abuse and at risk youth in their home community of Prince George. However, the study wasn't as simple as it seemed.

After establishing the process, researchers began the difficult task of deciding how to ask participants the right questions to guarantee honesty and academic value, who would be involved in the study and how to train the youth researchers who would ultimately lead the study.

Three years later, the project *Youth Voices on the Prevention and Intervention of Youth Substance Abuse* was published.

In it, youth at risk share their views into substance abuse, how they got to where they are today, and what they believe would help themselves and others.

More info for youth on substance abuse

- <http://www.deal.org> Find tips, sharing opportunities and information at the knowzone, a comprehensive site geared to youth and substance abuse.
- <http://www.futurecents.ca> Visit the website of the program Prince George youth say works for them.
- <http://www.camh.net> Check out Ontario's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health website. This site offers information on a variety of drugs and their uses.
- <http://www.thirteen.org/closetohome/home.html> Journalist Bill Moyers look at addiction and teens. Originally aired as a PBS series, the online version features real life stories and a discussion on the prevention, treatment and science behind addiction.
- <http://zoot2.com> The Alberta Alcohol and Drug Commission's youth based website offers information on alcohol, drug and addictions.

In Their Own Words



"My first time with alcohol was like when I was four or five years old. I always went to my dad's hockey games, 'cause whenever their games ended in the locker rooms, everybody would just sit in the locker rooms for two or three hours just drinking beer and everything because everybody would bring at least a case each. And everyone would give me beer. And to this day I still have at least a beer a day."

They said it.

As much as academics like to study youth attitudes toward alcohol and drug use and abuse, sometimes no one says it better than the teens themselves.

The Centre of Excellence for Children with Adolescents and Special Needs recently involved teens in a research project, called Youth Voices on the Prevention and Intervention of Youth Substance Abuse.

The project saw four key young researchers talk to more than 25 street workers, drug users and other youth aged 15 to 19 in Prince George about their experiences with drugs and alcohol.

They wanted to know how programs could work better for youth, what teens thought about their own experiences and how they came to be where they are.

Their results are realistic and enlightening.

It found most of the youth began using harmful substances in the company of family or friends.

They cited those family and friends as one of the reasons they started using - but didn't end there.

Youth accepted drugs because their family and friends did. Whether an aunt, uncle or older sibling first introduced drugs, teens said the environment also made it more difficult to control their drug use.

"[I am] growing up in a family that says it's ok to drink. It's ok to do crack. It's ok to smoke pot. Then I am thinking it's ok, so I'm going to do it. The influences around you make it harder for you to control that," said one teen.

One participant also related their drug habit to their willingness and ability to cope with problems in their life.

Others blamed a need to rebel and boredom for their substance abuse.

Teens also admitted to short-term thinking – a sense that somehow they can't or won't lose control of their use.

When it came to stopping, or getting help for substance abuse, Prince George has its challenges.

The northern B.C. city has a higher per cent of its youth population relying on government assistance (11.4% vs. 5.9% in



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the rest of the province's population).

While the average income is higher than the province, its economy is largely resource dependant – making it prone to economic swings.

It has several key indicators for at risk youth. More of the city's youth don't graduate high school (36.3%) than the rest of the province (27.3%).

It has a slightly higher crime rate (20.8 crimes per 1000 population) and youth crime rate (12 offences per 1000 population) than the rest of the province.

Its residents also drink nine more litres of alcohol per person than the rest of its provincial residents annually (66 vs. 57 litres per year).

Its government agencies have difficulty retaining good staff, and teens who 'lost' a good worker felt it.

Participants said it was easy to be forgotten after a worker left, that their one-on-one contact with a counsellor was never reinstated after a worker left. In turn, they felt the system and its staff, simply didn't care.

However, teens had good experiences with at least two of the city's programs. They credited both Future Cents and Reconnect for being beneficial, for having social workers who cared as a friend would.

From their positive experiences they relayed advice for other programs.

Substance abuse programs should start much earlier – perhaps as early as Grade 3, or even for five and six-year-olds.

The conversation should start at home, they said, but often doesn't.

But when parents don't or can't explain the effects of drugs, schools and community-based programs should step in.

Participants Recommend Honesty, Flexibility

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"I wish I had someone teaching me about not doing drugs," one participant said.

Other youth in the study suggested more youth-based programs and free recreation in rural settings for teens, as well as a program to teach positive coping strategies.

What did participants think should be done better?

They made these four recommendations for parents, educators and treatment centres.

- Parents should be completely honest about drugs – don't sugar coat it, lie about it or deny their existence.
- Teachers should start telling students about drugs as early as Grade 3. Catch students before bad habits start or get passed down in the home.
- Social workers and counselors should be able to relate and care enough to see a youth in need through their issue.
- Government administrators should create programs with a friendly and welcoming environment, allow youth involvement in the program design and allow greater flexibility in the admission rules. Youth don't stop needing help when they turn 18.



To read the study yourself, check out www.uncbc.ca/centrecal/english/publications/piysa.pdf

Youth in the program knew when social workers based their work on academics, rather than experience. Participants felt they couldn't understand the circumstances surrounding an abusive home or drug addiction.

One teen said the staff member simply didn't care or stay long enough to finish the progress that was started.

"I had somebody there that was helping me so much, that I believed in, that believed in me. And then all of a sudden, it's just poof he's gone. You're stuck back in the same situation without that person who's helping you."

The study authors summarized their needs into a list of suggestions for government.

From more support for programs that support families and prevent abuse and to broader perspective health programs the study recommends giving participants a chance before drugs become a habit.

They also ask for their cultural, geographic and social differences be included in a program's design.



Want to Attend? Upcoming conferences and events

February 20 - 21, 2007 Building Success for Individuals with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD): La Ronge Training Workshops. La Ronge Motor Hotel, La Ronge, Saskatchewan.

A two-day workshop to consider the possibility of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder's presence and lifelong implications, while examining practical strategies and supports for working with those affected with FASD.

Information is especially pertinent to those working as a mentor or support persons, family members, frontline workers, government employees and professionals.

Contact:

FASD Support Network of Saskatchewan Inc.

Tel: 306- 975-0896

Fax: 306-242-8007

www.skfasnetwork.ca

e-mail: fasdoffice@sasktel.net

March 7-10, 2007 The 2nd International Conference on Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder: Research, Policy and Practice Around the World. Victoria Conference Centre, Victoria, British Columbia.

This conference provides a forum on current research. Topics include substance use in pregnancy, biomedical, clinical and diagnostic research, and the evaluation of intervention and prevention activities.

It shares lessons learned in a way that fosters improved policy and practice, promotes healthy communities and social inclusion, and local, national and international collaboration on FASD.

Voices of affected children, youth and adults will be heard throughout the event. The conference goal is to provide participants with the means to use research and practice to inform and shape policy.

Contact:

UBC Interprofessional Continuing Education

Tel: 604-822-6156

Fax 604-822-4835

www.interprofessional.ubc.ca

e-mail: ipconf@interchange.ubc.ca