



Strategies to Support a Positive School Climate

Risky Behaviours and Sexual Health

Risky behaviours are actions that result in a greater probability of undesirable personal, social or developmental outcomes (Richter, 2010). Adolescence is regarded as the time when individuals begin to engage in risky behaviours, including tobacco, drug and alcohol use and early sexual activity (Schofield et al., 2008).

Sexual health is defined as “a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being related to sexuality” (World Health Organization, 2006, p. 10). Early initiation of sexual activity during adolescence is a risk factor for sexually transmitted infections (Vasilenko et al., 2016) and often co-occurs with other risky activities, such as substance abuse (Schofield et al., 2008).



Why is it important?

- Student involvement in substance use is negatively associated with academic test scores (Arthur et al., 2015).
- Use of alcohol and drugs in adolescence increases the risk of pregnancy (Krohn et al., 1997).
- Body image and sexual health are connected and body dissatisfaction is a risk factor for the sexual health of adolescents (Schooler et al., 2008).
- Gambling among youth is a growing concern and adolescents with gambling problems are more likely to take part in other risky behaviours (Gupta & Derevensky, 1998).

In Practice

Schools can adopt preventative strategies designed to counter risk taking among youth.



What can schools do?

The following strategies may be used to guide preventative initiatives within the school setting:

- Foster a school environment characterized by emotional attachment to the school and a commitment to learning, as these factors serve a protective influence on student behaviour (Mihic et al., 2022).
- Create opportunities for student involvement in structured extracurricular activities (e.g., athletics, art or drama club, student government etc.), which can offer a protective benefit in reducing risky behaviours (Crispin, 2017).
- Provide education in socio-emotional learning, including self-regulation and social skills training, to counter risky behaviours and promote positive student development (Terzian et al., 2011).



In the Classroom

Teachers can help identify students who may be engaging in high-risk behaviors.

- Increased incidents of misbehaviour at school, including acting out against peers or staff
- Sustained negative mood, fatigue, inability to focus or lack of motivation
- Shifts in peer groups and a loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities
- Sudden changes in behavior patterns, such as severe mood swings and emotional outbursts
- Signs of disengagement from school (e.g., declines in performance or decreased attendance)
- Overt signs of substance abuse, including drug paraphernalia

When several of these warning signs are present, and are sudden or extreme in nature, educators should attempt to reach out to the affected student, communicate with parents and caregivers and, if deemed necessary, refer them to relevant counselling supports.

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