

Spring 2009

NEWSNEWS & VIEWSNEWS

Responding to Addiction Issues

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The crocuses are popping, the peepers are peeping, and the Spring Edition of *News & Views* is pinging into inboxes across Nova Scotia!

In poetry, springtime is the childhood or youth of the year. So for this edition of *News & Views*, we're focusing on youth, and how the Department of Health Promotion and Protection and the District Health Authorities work to educate young people about the risks of some substances and activities; to provide early intervention to reduce their use if they are already involved; and to assist with the development of health-promoting policies to govern the control, promotion, and availability of these substances and activities, as well as the response to them.

All of the articles in this newsletter were suggested by professionals who work either directly or indirectly in the field of addictions in Nova Scotia. They were eager to share their experiences with others to keep the learning going and growing. If you have an idea you'd like to share, or a comment on this issue's content, please let us know. You can contact us at addictionservicesnews@gov.ns.ca. You can also find this newsletter online at www.gov.ns.ca/hpp/addictions/resources.asp.

YOUTH

Reading, 'Riting and Reducing the Harm Addiction Services in the Schools

When did gambling go from being an illegal activity (one that our grandparents would have considered immoral) to a televised sport where poker players are stars?

When did alcohol go from being an adult-only, special-occasion activity to something cartoon characters use to excess?

Today's young people are growing up in a world that tolerates more forms of substance use and gambling activity than ever before. And the risks and the problems that can result from being involved rarely get top billing.

And speaking of billing, here's another type we need to consider: the cost of that involvement. Along with the emotional trauma and the impact to families and communities, substance use and gambling are a very real cost for Nova Scotia's healthcare system.

That's why the Department of Health Promotion and Protection (HPP) and the District Health Authorities provide an array of programs within schools.

Education: *A Question of Influence*

A Question of Influence is a curriculum supplement provided to health education teachers at the junior high school level (grades 7-9). "This is a very exciting program," says Natalie Cochrane, Prevention Coordinator, Addiction Services, HPP, "because it is informed by what youth are actually involved in here in Nova Scotia and is based on the latest best practices in school-based drug education."



Developed as a joint project among HPP, Addiction Services, and the Department of Education, *A Question of Influence* is an interactive program that encourages youth to look at the world around them and consider how it influences their decision making. It helps them identify personal, social, and cultural influences; set and maintain personal limits; and avoid potentially dangerous situations.

Natalie says the program is generating very positive feedback, with teachers reporting that students are using the WHOA method taught in the program (a "thought-stopping tool" that stands for Wait, Have a brain, Options, and Action) in situations outside the classroom.

The resource is currently being translated into French, and once an implementation evaluation is complete, will see programs developed for primary-grade 6, and high school as well, so it will cover the entire curriculum.

For more information about *A Question of Influence*, go to: www.druged.ednet.ns.ca.

Reducing Use: Addiction Services in the School

Some young students are already at risk for their use or involvement in substances or gambling. One way to help prevent the behaviour from escalating into a problem is to connect them with Addiction Services as early as possible. And the best way to do that is to make Addiction Services staff easily accessible in a familiar environment.

Kris Garby, Community Health Worker (Nicotine Addiction Treatment) Addiction Services, Annapolis Valley Health, runs a series of eight-week Stop Smoking programs in all high schools through the valley. Students learn about the groups through posters put up around the schools or are referred by guidance counsellors.

High school can be a stressful time. Many students are challenged to start thinking about life after high school at a time when they are still developing their coping skills and are open to the influence of peers and the media.

"We do a lot of sharing in the school groups," says Kris. "We talk about how they are doing, how things are going. Another part is focusing on topics such as how to deal with certain situations and not smoke. How to go to parties. How to deal with certain friends. The group is really driven by the students' concerns. I don't have a set module week by week."

Kris says the concept of smoking being bad for their health is “very far down the road” for youth. So one key incentive she uses as a reason to stop is money. “I ask them: ‘If you’re not buying cigarettes, what could you be spending the money on?’ Money is a big motivator for youth.” Another is physical activity. “If they’re into skateboarding or hip-hop dance, we’ll talk about how smoking impacts their ability to perform those activities.”

And while the program is aimed at youth, Kris says another major influence that cannot be ignored is the parents. If the parents smoke, it’s harder to get the child to stop. So when one of her students said he had shared his plans to stop with his parents and they said they wanted to stop too, she gave him advice they could share as a family to become tobacco-free together. “That was a unique situation,” says Kris. “I’m not aware of that happening in the valley district before.”

Stop Smoking is just one of the adolescent school-based services delivered throughout Kings and Annapolis Counties via Annapolis Valley Health Addiction Services.

For more information, visit: www.avdha.nshealth.ca/programs/adolescents.asp



Policy: Promoting Health and Prevention

Many workplaces have come to realize how important health-promoting policy can be in reducing absenteeism and the costs of employees using benefits, while protecting productivity and the safety of all workers. It can also help those employees misusing substances to connect with Addiction Services.

A policy can do the same thing in the school environment.

When James Shedden, Prevention and Community Education Officer, Addiction Services, Colchester East Hants, started working with the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board on their substance-use policy back in 2006, he noted that the standing policy could be used in a way that penalized all youth alike, without considering the context of the offense.

“Using the same procedure to punish a young person who shows up drunk at a school dance one time and a student who is engaged in habitual misuse of narcotics, or selling drugs on school property, is not an equitable response for those different scenarios,” says James.

So he looked at policies in place around Nova Scotia and across the country, as well as best practices in the area of school policy, and made recommendations to the school board on how they could improve their response. “What we wanted to do was move away from being mainly punitive to engaging in a variety of responses that could include a therapeutic component, depending on the circumstances. We also



*“What we wanted to do was ...
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wanted to recognize that students may use different substances for a range of reasons at different points in their academic career.”

The new policy breaks down substance use into different categories and guides administrators as to what an appropriate course of action would be. “If a youth is caught trafficking, the immediate response is to contact the police,” continues James. “But for a youth who shows up for the first time under the influence, there is a broader response that recognizes the student may be having a problem. It engages the student with other services to help them

learn about what they’re using, what it represents, and what harm it can do.”

The new policy went into effect in September 2008. “It’s a great improvement,” says James. “Chignecto-Central Regional School Board has moved the bar on how schools can respond to students who are at risk of using substances.”

For more information on the policy, go to p. 176 of the CCRB’s *Policy and Procedure Manual* at:

<http://www.ccrb.ednet.ns.ca/POLICYANDPROCEDUREMANUAL2008.pdf>

All In the Family

Taking a Comprehensive Approach to Treatment and Prevention

Erin's* 16-year-old son took off last weekend. He didn't say where he was going and he didn't call in once. When he finally did show up again, she was sure he had been drinking. But he wouldn't talk about it and just went to bed.

Situations like this are frightening for parents. They worry they are losing control of their child and don't know how to get it back. They're afraid their child is going to continue being harmfully involved and possibly have serious problems.

For some parents, these concerns are compounded by the fact that they had limited parenting skills to begin with, are parents with very little support, or are dual-working couples already struggling to find enough time to deal with daily responsibilities.

That's why Nova Scotia's Addiction Services takes a comprehensive approach to youth with substance/activity issues and involve both the youth and the parents in treatment. While it may be just the youth who is involved with the substance/activity, it's the whole family that needs education, support, and counseling because they all have an influence and effect on each other's worlds.

Adolescent Clinical Therapists Tara MacDonald and Tammy Kontuk say communication in the home is a key focus of both their approaches.

"Communication often breaks down in families where the youth is abusing substances," says Tara. "We frequently see what limited communication there is can be quite negative, with lots of arguing."

"We'll have sessions in which both the youth and the parents come in together and we'll work on re-establishing positive communications," she continues. It could be as simple as having the family agree to discuss something neutral for just ten minutes. "It could be a TV show, or anything," says Tara, "as long as it does not turn into a discussion related to the youth's

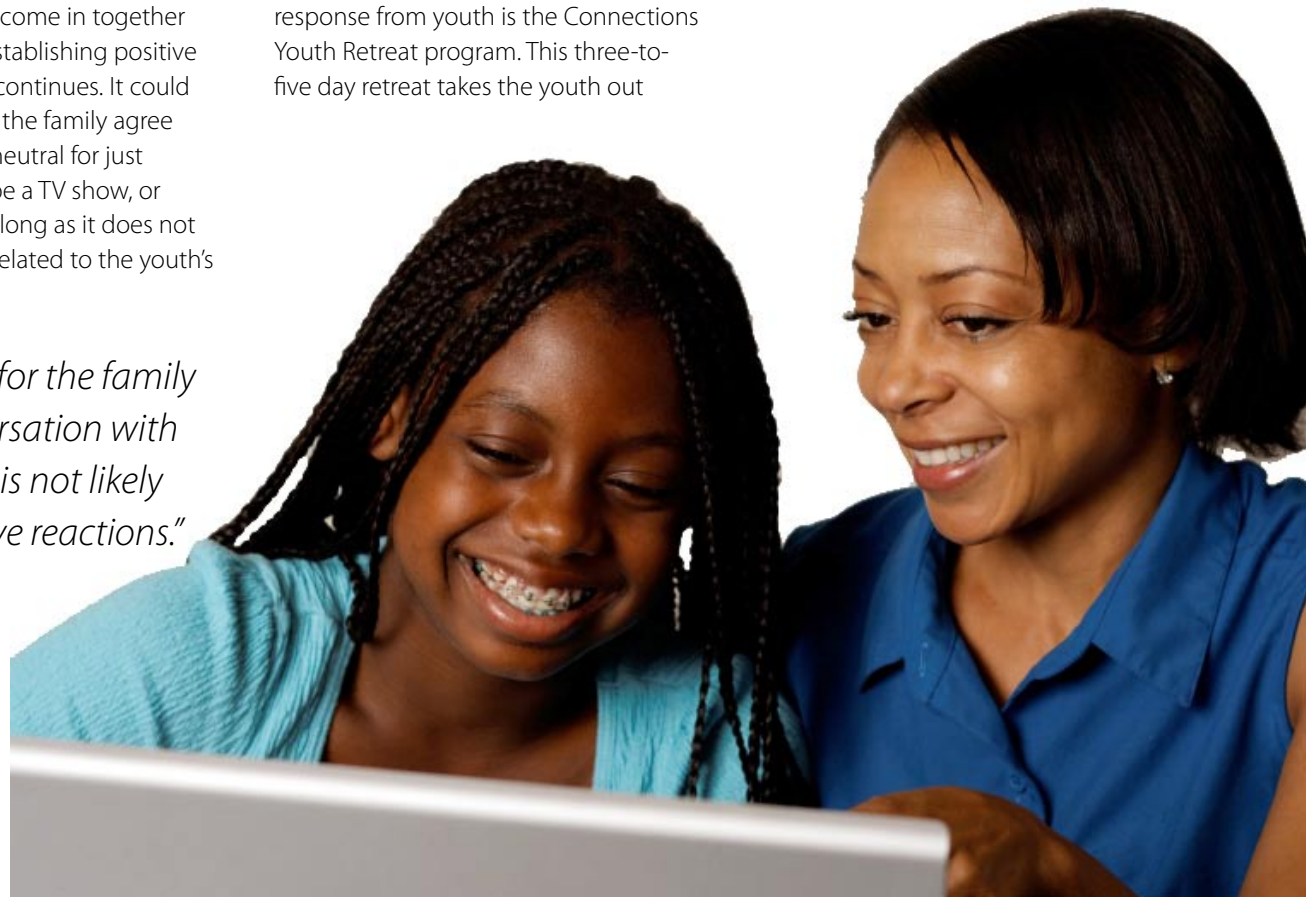
behaviour or the parents' rules. The purpose is for the family to have a conversation with each other that is not likely to evoke negative reactions."

In other sessions, the youth may come in alone to work on personal issues, such as assertiveness, drink/drug refusal skills, stress management and coping skills.

One of the programs in Districts seven and eight that gets an enthusiastic response from youth is the Connections Youth Retreat program. This three-to-five day retreat takes the youth out

of their community to experience new surroundings and new activities. "Sometimes it's one of the first opportunities they have for not using (drugs, alcohol, or gambling)," says Tara. It introduces them to activities that build self-awareness and self-efficiency. And could even encourage an interest in healthy leisure activities they could find at home to

"The purpose is for the family to have a conversation with each other that is not likely to evoke negative reactions."



*not a real person

"...parental monitoring can lower at-risk adolescent behaviour... by as much as 93 per cent..."

replace their harmful involvement. Again, parents are encouraged to be supportive of these activities.

Parents also get their turn to come in for sessions on their own. "There are two pillars of parenting," says Tammy, "the empathetic relationship, and consistent rules and consequences. Parents need to be a soft place for their kids to land, but they also have to firm up the boundaries."

Firming up and monitoring those boundaries has proven to be one of the most important tools to keeping a child safe. "Some of the data I've read says that parental monitoring can lower at-risk adolescent behaviour (drinking, drug use, and sexual activity) by as much as 93 per cent," says Tammy. "Parents can have a lot of impact... maybe more than they actually realize. It's my job to help them identify where they can maximize that impact."

Parents learn monitoring techniques such as consistently asking their children where they are going, who they will be with, what they will be doing, and how they are getting back and forth. She also recommends that the parents set up the expectation that the parent (or a friend or relative of the parent) may drop by or

phone to make sure the child is in the stated location, and that they actually do those check-ups from time to time and implement consequences if the youth is not being truthful.

"The child's perception that the parents are going to follow-through will keep them away from at-risk behaviour as well," she says.

While monitoring may come across as a long list of rules, the message that children actually get from it is that the parent cares. "Here's what I see as a therapist," says Tammy, "the youth that aren't getting monitoring are crying out for it. Kids want and need to know where the fence is so they can feel safe. Establishing that fence both protects the child and makes them feel cared for."

Adolescence is a time when youth are trying to establish their own identities and find coping skills. It's also a time when exposure to at-risk activities goes up. Helping more Nova Scotian families create home environments that encourage positive communications and make their children feel cared for and protected can go a long way to creating healthy, young adults. •



Do you have any topic suggestions for future News & Views?

We would love to hear from you.

Contact us at
addictionservicesnews@gov.ns.ca.

What do they do with all that Research?

The first step to knowing where you are going is always to figure out where you are. That's why mall maps have the big "You Are Here" dot.

And that's also why the Department of Health Promotion and Protection (HPP) regularly performs surveys and research surrounding issues such as drug use, alcohol, and gambling: knowing as much as possible about who is involved in these activities, to what extent, and any changes that have occurred since the last study informs the development of new education materials, social marketing messages, and policy direction.

"It also provides checks and balances to help ensure our existing messages, programs, and our way of working has the intended outcome," says Natalie Cochrane, Prevention Coordinator, Addiction Services, HPP.

Nova Scotia Student Drug Survey

The Nova Scotia Student Drug Survey provides a long-standing example of how HPP uses research. Done in partnership with Dalhousie University and the Department of Education, the survey has been conducted approximately every four years since 1992.

Among the range of issues captured, the survey delivers a snapshot of what substances young people are using, where they get those substances, and at what age youth become initiated with them.

As Natalie explains, having this information identifies which substances education programs, such as *A Question of Influence*, need to talk about.

"The research also determines the appropriate messages for each age group."

"We want the messaging we develop for the classroom to have impact and meaning," she continues. "We want it to influence knowledge, skills, and attitudes. For that to happen, youth need to have a personal connection with the issue. So in *A Question of Influence*

we focus on the top substances that the research tells us the youth are involved in. Consistently, alcohol is the substance of choice, followed by marijuana and tobacco."

The research also determines the appropriate messages for each age group. "When you look at a class in grade 7," continues Natalie, "the research shows some initiation with alcohol—but the majority are not using it. So a harm reduction message, which assumes use and focuses on increasing safety when using, would not be appropriate for

*harm
reduction*



that group because it could be viewed as encouragement. A more appropriate message would focus on teaching them good decision-making skills and helping them develop an awareness of how the world influences them." In the high school grades, where the research indicates 80 per cent are using alcohol, the message switches to one of harm reduction.

Adolescent Gambling

Both the 2007 Nova Scotia Student Drug Survey and the 2007 Nova Scotia Adult Gambling Prevalence Study included youth and gambling. The results are consistent with others collected since HPP first started measuring youth gambling: gambling surpasses alcohol as an activity in which young people are involved.

While the involvement level is high, ranging from 60 – 80 per cent depending on the type of gambling, the research also shows that only a small percentage are experiencing severely negative impacts.

teach



“That kind of information helps us develop an appropriate message for use in the schools,” says Natalie. “For junior high school youth, the messaging is more general—defining gambling, exploring the concepts of randomness and the odds. For older students, who are approaching legal age where they’ll have access to VLTs, the messaging would shift to include information about why electronic gambling carries more risks.”

Scratch tickets were the most popular gambling activity with teens according to the research, with 38 per cent of youth in grades 7-12 using them. A recent proposed policy change in Nova Scotia will make it illegal for retailers to sell these tickets to minors. While Addictions Services did not lead this particular policy change, Natalie says they fully support it: “It will send the message to both retailers and parents that commercial gambling carries risks and is not an acceptable activity for people this young.”

Both the 2007 and 2003 prevalence studies showed that young adults aged 19-24 were at the highest risk for gambling problems. Social marketing initiatives, such as the yellowflag.ca site, deliver an important message to this priority population. “In general, this group does not see themselves as needing traditional counseling and does not access face-to-face treatment,” says Natalie. “They don’t equate themselves

with people who have gambling problems. But it’s still important to give them the information they need to monitor the impact of their gambling.” By understanding this group—who they are and how they see themselves—HPP was able to strike the right tone with the messaging on the site and in the media advertising, delivering it in a humorous, “tongue-in-cheek” manner.

HPP is committed to using research as their guide in developing education programs, social marketing messages, and policy direction. For the latest version of all of their research go to: www.gov.ns.ca/hpp



New HPP website

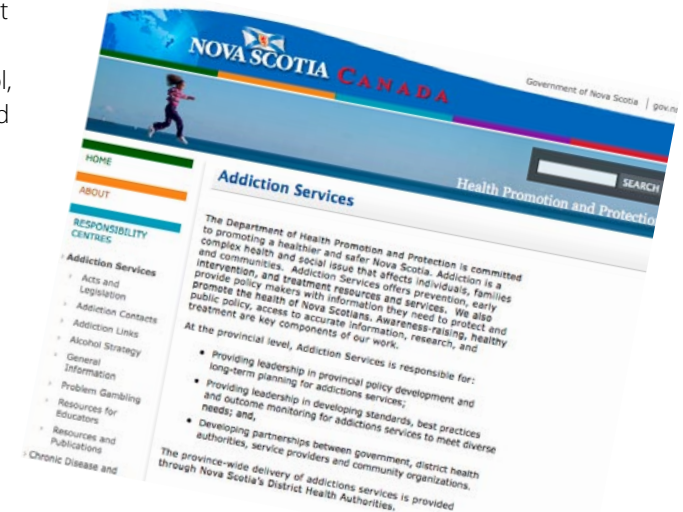
Health Promotion and Protection (HPP) Addiction Services is updating their website so Nova Scotians can easily access the information they need to live healthier and safer lives.

The focus of the revised website is to help connect Nova Scotians to the Addictions Services system in their area of the province, as well as to provide the most up-to-date, practical and important information that everyone will find useful. Topic areas include alcohol, other drugs, gambling, and tobacco. There are also new and revised sections on assessing whether you need help making changes in your life, how

to get the help you need, and what that process looks like.

HPP Addiction Services works together with the District Health Authorities to provide comprehensive supports and services to clients across the province.

To learn more, visit <http://www.gov.ns.ca/hpp/addictions/>



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