

## FAQ' S ABOUT STEP

### **What is STEP's attitude towards youth and substance use?**

We believe, as shown by research, that there are always risks associated with substance use, and that these risks are increased for youth. STEP takes a holistic approach that focuses on and supports each individual and their personal goals, instead of the focus being placed on substance use.

### **What happens before and after STEP?**

STEP is a part of a continuum of education and support. What happens before and after the program influences the success of the student as much as what happens during the three days. Student growth and needs continue after the program, and positive outcomes are more likely to be sustained or have lasting effects with the continued support from their schools, community, family, and peers. Before and after STEP, parent and family support is crucial. Family support might include:

- Parents attending the school for universal parenting workshops through SACY Parent Engagement
- Parents referred to SACY Parent Engagement for support and education through the counsellors, administrators or SACY youth worker when a student appears to be in need of support
- Parents receive the offer of support and education as soon as a student is referred to STEP

Parents are invited to a specific "STEP for parents" workshop when a student is referred. An increase in adult health literacy around student substance use may help families align their messaging with the teachings the student receives at STEP. Schools and SACY collaborate in what happens before and after a STEP referral.

Examples might include:

- Regular classroom education, participation in SACY-lead school-based activities throughout the year
- Meetings with school counselors or youth engagement and prevention worker
- Small group or lunchtime sessions with the SACY worker
- Community service activities and reengaging with goals such as school clubs or sports
- Meeting with a designated follow up lead (often the SACY youth worker) to reflect on their goals and their experiences coming out of STEP.

Students' attachment to school, teachers, counselors and staff and their engagement with school activities forms the year-long support that students are grounded in. STEP is three days of focused learning embedded in the larger system. SACY and STEP staff can support schools to help students integrate or reintegrate into the school as part of the school's ongoing education and support of students across domains.

### **Our student hasn't been caught at school but we are aware that they're smoking marijuana regularly. Is it appropriate for the school to be involved and make a referral?**

Schools provide support for many health-related and interpersonal concerns in students' lives. Regular or recreational substance use can impact learning and the student's ability to be present and connected in the classroom. Student substance use can indicate underlying interpersonal or emotional issues in the student's life, therefore the earlier we pay attention to the youth, the more likelihood for positive outcomes.

Points to consider:

- STEP is an educational and health promotion program, not treatment.
- Referring students before there is a problem at school is more effective, reduces stigma, and creates a culture of prevention at the school.
- The earlier education and information are introduced, the larger the impact is on substance involvement.
- In order to attend STEP, it is not required that a student be using substances at school or have been caught.
- Parents, counselors and teachers have all encouraged past students to attend STEP in order to get more education to support their decision-making.
- • Approximately half of the VSB students that attend STEP are not mandated or referred in response to an incident.

VSB students anywhere on the continuum from curiosity to chronic use can potentially benefit from health promotion supports by preventing, delaying, reducing or stopping use. The school age years are ideal for this type of biopsychosocial learning as students have the benefit of a healthy school environment and consistent caregivers surrounding them to reinforce and support their learning.

### **How do I talk about the STEP program if there has not been an incident at school?**

Discuss with students and families that STEP focuses on:

- Understanding adolescent development and individual goals.
- Teaching critical thinking skills around alcohol and drugs.
- Navigating the choices of the teen years.
- Developing a strength-based assessment of values, goals, social relationships, and changing family dynamics.

All these approaches have been shown to be appropriate and successful when offering the resource to students and their families where an incident has not occurred.

### **Parents\* wonder whom their child will meet at STEP. What shall I tell them?**

Since 2007, approx. 2,300 students have attended STEP. These include:

- Students who do not use substances
- Students who possess risk factors and few protective factors concerning possible substance use
- Students who are substance-affected due to their friends' or families' use.
- Students whose use varies widely:
  - Curious, experimental, or sporadic use
  - Frequent use
  - Chronic use

Great care is taken when assigning a student a week to attend. Schools are required to share clear information regarding every referral so that students can attend during an appropriate week. We consider:

- Age
- Level of substance use
- Maturity
- Vulnerability in many domains
- The potential influence of other students participating

\*Parents with specific questions or concerns are always welcome to call STEP staff directly to discuss (main line: 604 612 8959).

**What safety precautions are in place at STEP? I'm concerned about the issues and ideas students will be exposed to.**

This is a question we also concern ourselves with. In the alcohol and drug prevention field, our objective is to first do no harm. We have developed policies and procedures over the years that are evidence-based, rigorous, and create a structured environment that protects and supports youth. For example:

- Each morning a thorough list of guidelines are reviewed, with relevant reasons for the shared guidelines. Guidelines include not sharing personal information, not glorifying substance use, attending to confidentiality and curtailing cell phone use.
- Students explore the idea of making the program a success for themselves while not being a hindrance to a peer's successful completion of the program.
- The students are always supervised.
- Students are required to stay in the portable except when stepping out, one at a time, to use the washroom with a hall pass.
- Plans for departing at the end of the day are developed for each student. These may include the possibility of being driven home by staff.
- Conversation among youth is monitored and facilitated by staff.

The majority of the time is spent on strength-based, health promotion content, and activities that enhance self-awareness and promote complex decision-making. Approximately 30% of the program content is about alcohol and drugs. When the focus is on substance use the facilitators ask the students to examine their own potential for risk and consider how to enhance protective factors.

**I referred a student to the SACY STEP Program and they sometimes still use drugs. Yet I hear the program was considered successful in this student's case. How does the SACY Teen Engagement Program measure success?**

While STEP is not a treatment program, STEP facilitators have years of experience in the addictions and health promotion field. We offer a three-day brief intervention and education program.

Prevention and early intervention work is complex. For each individual we must consider:

- Readiness of change.
- Family connectedness.
- Behavior.
- Social environment.

- Emotional, physical and mental health issues.
- School and community supports available.
- The goals of the youth themselves.

SACY staff are skilled at supporting youth to move past posturing, minimizing the consequences, or glorifying substance use in order to have a frank and meaningful experience.

Given the complexities involved and the individualized approach, success is seen as any movement toward improved health. Data shows that all youth benefit from enhanced self-awareness and skills regarding personal values and goals, critical thinking, risk assessment, authenticity, peer relations, etc.

Our goal is for each individual student to take steps toward greater health.

**The following are 5 common examples of student situations that might help to clarify the different ways STEP can be a successful experience for a wide variety of students:**

1. Student A is adamant that there is no problem with his/her substance use except for getting caught and other people's perceptions of marijuana. Some possible positive outcomes of attending STEP:
  - Student begins to see that cannabis may be affecting their lives more than they thought.
  - Student may consider making changes, or may even make an initial commitment to change through small steps (such as cutting back, or not using at school, etc.) and creating a plan for the future.
  - Student will become newly aware of greater harms and potential harms, whereas before they honestly thought there was no risk at all.
  - Student may make a commitment to ongoing assessment of personal consequences, which can lead to a decision to make changes months after the program ends.
2. Student B wants to stop use but is unsure how to do so while peer group continues to use. Some possible positive outcomes for student:
  - Concrete tools to support this desire to stop, and a plan to implement them.
  - Tools to support implications of her/his change in the peer group.
  - Accept a referral for ongoing support and counseling, or connection with adult allies.
  - Increased interest in other activities and possible new friendships.
3. Student C is aware he smokes a lot of cannabis but his family is okay with it. He feels he can stop whenever he wants but sees no current need to do so. Possible positive outcomes include:
  - Youth is encouraged to place boundaries around his use that he can agree are useful and beneficial.
  - Student learns skills to monitor his ability to follow through with this decision.
  - Student is connected with an adult who can help when/if youth is not able to manage new goals.
  - Student is educated about other substances so that he is less likely to expand his use to other substances.
  - Student gains increased and accurate information on substance use, and is encouraged to consider potential harms and risk mitigation.

4. 4) Student D was caught in possession of marijuana at school and says he has used once or twice. In addition to the goal-setting and critical-thinking outcomes listed in scenario C above, possible positive outcomes for this student include:
  - Deciding to revert to non-use.
  - Deciding to delay further use until older.
  - Greater self-awareness
  - Focusing on positive protective factors through activities and school engagement.
  - Understanding the risks of use and the benefits of non-use during adolescence.
5. Student E: Struggling with mental health issues and possibly using substances to “self-medicate.” Possible positive outcomes for this student include:
  - Understanding the exponential risks involved with continued use based on student’s profile.
  - Increasing willingness to weigh the harms and potential harms associated with use.
  - Enhanced awareness of and ability to deal with triggers that can lead to substance use.
  - Enhanced understanding of their own personal red flags (both risks and triggers) and the development of coping skills to support mental health.
  - Motivated towards positive change, including more effective responses to mental health issues than substance use.
  - Accepting referral to appropriate supports, including on-going mental health supports.

One of the fundamental principles of STEP is that we take an individualized, holistic approach to each student and their circumstances. As a result, students are willing to stay for the full three days and learn to take an all-inclusive approach to themselves.

The benefits and changes (“successes”) a young person individually experiences as a result of this approach are not always immediately visible to others.

### **I have heard that STEP used evidence-based practices? What does this mean?**

The work of STEP and all of SACY is evidence informed. For instance, from the beginning of the program two independent studies were conducted. One was a consultation survey with the schools, and the second one was a literature review of best practices and interventions. As well, an external research and evaluation expert has been working closely with the project over the years. The experienced SACY staff is committed to professional development, which they achieve by rigorously engaging in ongoing education and regular consultation with experts in the field. The team remains plugged into leading research organizations that keep them updated on the latest developments in health promotion efforts emphasizing substance use.

**\* For more information about SACY or to contact SACY staff, please visit: <http://www.vsb.bc.ca/sacy>**