

Youth Substance Use in the Digital Age

- Dr. Kineka Hull: [00:03](#) Welcome to Elevate Youth Programming, a podcast for adolescent pregnancy prevention programs and other youth-serving agencies. In each episode, we will discuss best practices, tips, and strategies to strengthen your programming. Each episode will cover a specific topic discussed with experts from the field. Listen along as our guests join me to discuss these relevant topics. I'm your host, Dr. Kineka Hull.
- [00:30](#) [00:00:30] During adolescence, risk-taking is a normative part of development. However, when youth engage in unhealthy risk, it presents challenges for their overall health and well-being. Substance use is a topic of great concern and is connected to sexual health, mental health, and even academic success for youth. It is important for trusted adults to be aware of current trends, perceptions, and realities of how substance use is woven [00:01:00] into youth culture today. In this episode, we speak with Doctors Asari Offiong and Andra Wilkinson to discuss current trends around availability and access to substance use and opportunities to address these concerns within programming.
- [01:15](#) Dr. Offiong is a sexual and reproductive health senior research scientist with expertise in community-engaged research focused on adolescent health, particularly preventing risky behaviors and promoting well-being among youth from marginalized [00:01:30] communities. Dr. Wilkinson researches the relationship between substance use and mental health during the transition from adolescence to adulthood, and she has done a great deal of work on school-based behavioral healthcare as a potential equitable, accessible source of care for adolescents.
- [01:49](#) Welcome to the Elevate Youth Programming Podcast, Asari and Andra. I'm looking forward to our conversation on youth substance use in the digital age. How are you?
- Dr. Asari Offio...: [01:49](#) Thank you, Kineka. It's always a pleasure chatting with you.
- Dr. Andra Wilki...: [02:00](#) [00:02:00] Happy to be here. Thank you for having me.
- Dr. Kineka Hull: [02:04](#) So let's jump right into our conversation and let's start by laying a foundation about normative youth development. Can you tell me what's normative during the adolescent stage and what role risk taking place?
- Dr. Asari Offio...: [02:19](#) To start, we know that risk taking is a normative feature of adolescence. During this developmental stage, the brain evolves to support exploration and a heightened sense of curiosity,

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which helps young [00:02:30] people find their experiences and skills needed for adulthood. Young people want to try new things. They want to learn for themselves, but the key is that we teach them that there are healthy and unhealthy risks which come with different levels of consequences. By understanding that risk taking is normative, we can identify ways to activate that part of the brain, such as encouraging young people to start a new sport, make new friends, or visit somewhere new.

- Dr. Kineka Hull: [02:57](#) We know that adolescent is [00:03:00] a time where young people sometimes feel that they are invincible, and so part of that risk-taking is, like you said, exploring different things, but being mindful that this is normative behavior, that there is going to be some risk-taking behavior. How might we preference the way that we speak to young people about this time, especially when it comes to using substances?
- Dr. Andra Wilki...: [03:22](#) I'm really glad you asked because how we talk about substance use with youth in particular is critical. Like many experiences [00:03:30] we all have, substance use is complex. It should not be described or viewed in our black and white manner. There are multiple reasons why people use substances or even how they were introduced to substance use in the first place. In many marginalized communities, substance misuse is a consequence of systemic oppression, racism, and inequities. During the heart of the pandemic, substance misuse was the aftermath for youth of months of social isolation, [00:04:00] loneliness, and trauma.
- Dr. Asari Offio...: [04:01](#) Therefore, when we think about substance use and the use of stigmatizing language doesn't help nor allow us room to address the issues from a youth-centered or person-centered empathetic perspective. Terms and phrases such as addict, junkie, getting clean, or substance abuser are stigmatizing and create dynamics where people feel unsafe to seek support from others. Or if young people have family members that have a history of substance use, it makes them less likely [00:04:30] to come to us and ask questions.
- [04:32](#) So in this podcast as we're having this discussion, we won't perpetuate that stigma, but rather approach the discussion from a standpoint of education, awareness and a consciousness so that we not only as researchers, youth-supporting professionals, adults, parents, whatever role we play in the lives of young people, but that we come with this conversation from a way that we want to protect our young people and help them to make healthy decisions to thrive.

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- Dr. Kineka Hull: [04:58](#) I'm glad that you mentioned [00:05:00] that there are systematic issues and inequities when it comes to substance use and that you also mentioned the pandemic. I think that a lot of times as adults, we underestimate the way that young people are reacting to some of the same things that we are experiencing. And so I think that it's very important for us to have, as you said, a human-centered, empathetic perspective because young people are struggling with some of the same [00:05:30] things that we are. They're experiencing some of the same things that we are, and so it is normative for them to react to some of the things the same way as we would. And so let's talk about trends in substance use. What are we seeing when it comes to young people and how they are experiencing substance use, especially after the pandemic?
- Dr. Andra Wilki...: [05:54](#) We all may have seen the incredibly scary headlines early in the pandemic that substance [00:06:00] use among youth was increasing significantly. The most recent data, I'm happy to say, has some good news and some bad news. The good news is that overall youth substance use decreased to pre-pandemic levels. So that scary increase we were seeing during the pandemic has gone back down.
- [06:20](#) The bad news is that due to fentanyl, which is a highly potent synthetic opioid, it's about 100 times more powerful [00:06:30] than morphine, so we're talking about a very powerful opioid, is contaminating more of the drug supply. So it's being mixed with other substances and increasing the lethality or danger of those substances. With fentanyl contaminating more of the drug supply, unfortunately, overdose deaths among teens have increased dramatically in the past few years and remain high. So while overall substance use has fallen, overdose deaths are increasing. From 2019 to 2021 among 10 to 19- [00:07:00] year-olds, overdose deaths increased by over 109%, and deaths involving illicit fentanyl, that contaminant increased 182%. So overdose deaths are up and increasing at a scary rate among youth.
- [07:15](#) Also, vaping is increasingly common, or e-cigarette use. About 23% of high school seniors reported vaping nicotine last year and 20% reported vaping marijuana. I'm a little more concerned about the second stat. Vaping marijuana can be more dangerous [00:07:30] because of the byproducts it can put into your lungs. Some of us may remember in 2019 there was a rash of youth hospitalizations that was tied to a byproduct from vaping marijuana. These are trends in opioids, these are trends in marijuana. None of these things are new, but the safety of

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the substances and how they're being used by youth is shifting dramatically.

Dr. Kineka Hull: [07:53](#) Wow, those statistics are staggering. I know with the increase of vaping in hookah, that is [00:08:00] something that is really, I think, being underestimated about the impact that it has. What are some other new substances that we should be aware that youth have access on the market?

Dr. Asari Offio...: [08:12](#) Before we even go into some of that, Kineka, I think it's important for us to share that even us as researchers, as we were preparing for this discussion, we were on Google and learning a lot of new things and given the digital age, we know that things shift so quickly. And so we wanted to state that and just also [00:08:30] highlight the value of this discussion and us as adults and as practitioners really staying on task or up to date with what's going on in the conversation.

Dr. Andra Wilki...: [08:41](#) We've mentioned this before, but there's some important things that I think all adults should know about fentanyl to keep up to date and in the loop about this scary contaminant. Fentanyl can be a liquid, a powder, or it can be pressed into pills that look [00:09:00] legitimate. Fentanyl does not have a distinct appearance, taste or smell. Youth may think they are buying Adderall or Xanax. The pill might look exactly the same. They Google the image of what should Xanax look like and the fake pills they got look exactly the same and they can have no way of knowing that it is contaminated with Fentanyl.

[09:21](#) Further, small amounts of Fentanyl can be lethal and youth cannot know how much Fentanyl is in what they're taking. When the drug enforcement [00:09:30] agency has done random tests of fake prescription pills you can buy online, seven of the 10 of them had lethal doses of Fentanyl. They had enough to kill the person who took it. In a powder form, Fentanyl can be easily mixed with heroin, cocaine, and meth. In a liquid form, Fentanyl can be found in nasal sprays, eye drops and it can be dropped onto paper. And this last piece I think is especially challenging for youth. It can be dropped onto candies.

[09:58](#) Some other new opioids on [00:10:00] the scene include xylazine, which is an animal tranquilizer. We're starting to see that playing a bigger role in overdose deaths. Kratom is an herbal supplement that has opioid properties. You can buy this on Amazon, you can find it in smoke shops. And finally, another new class of opioids on the scene is called gas station heroin. And this is because these are medicines youth can find in gas

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stations that are advertised as things like diet [00:10:30] pills or allergy pills that have opioids in them.

- Dr. Asari Offio...: [10:34](#) And like we mentioned earlier, marijuana is nothing new, but there are new marijuana products called delta-8, and about 10% of high school seniors reported using it last year. Delta-8 has very low levels of marijuana, so the FDA is concerned about the chemicals used to extract it and make products. Poison control has seen increases in cases with many involving hospitalizations and one pediatric [00:11:00] death that happened most recently. And so when we think about what's on the market for young people, like Andra mentioned before, it's not that some of these things are new, but it's the variations and a lot of these synthetic products that are on the market that young people have access to.
- Dr. Kineka Hull: [11:14](#) The use of xylazine, the animal tranquilizer is very concerning. And as someone who orders something off of Amazon, it feels like every day is very concerning, that things are so easily accessible, especially [00:11:30] by young people who may not be aware of what it is they are ordering. So what are some additional ways that youth are accessing substances?
- Dr. Asari Offio...: [11:40](#) Youth have new ways to access substances, and the three main ones are through electronic or e-cigarettes, online marijuana dispensaries and social media. We know programs and parents have been talking about the increases in vaping or e-cigarette use even in middle school and the problems that they can pose. While technically [00:12:00] the correct term is e-cigarettes, the most commonly term used by youth is vaping, but we'll use both in the context of this discussion. E-cigarettes is a new way to consume drugs like nicotine and marijuana. Youth can also access or use e-cigarettes to consume flavoring. E-cigarettes have many names including mods or vape, and they can look like a cigarette, a USB flash drive, a pen, and just everyday items, meaning that they're easy [00:12:30] for young people to conceal and use discreetly, which is something that us as adults and programs that we should just be more aware of because you may not realize what young people are using.
- Dr. Andra Wilki...: [12:41](#) I think it can help to understand the risks of vaping and how they're a very different thing than youth smoking a cigarette. Nothing is being lit. They don't need a lighter. Their exhales do not smell like tobacco. There's not a distinct smell with vaping. [00:13:00] And because they're heating up a liquid to create a vapor, they can use it every 10 minutes the whole day. There is no, they've gone outside, they've smoked a cigarette until the

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cigarette is done and they're done. The use can be throughout the entire day and because there's no distinct smell, they can use it incredibly discreetly.

Dr. Asari Offio...:

[13:23](#)

Like alcohol, e-cigarette makers appeal to young people through flavors such as fruit-like flavors, candy, [00:13:30] desserts and mint. And the Food and Drug Administration is trying to crack down on the sell of sweet flavors. I mean, at least one study has shown that it can be connected to young people's use. 2023 data, so data from last year, indicate that youth who use e-cigarette, nearly 90% use a flavored product. So just confirming the value in putting more restrictions around flavored products. And it's important to know that tests have shown even products promising not to have nicotine have been [00:14:00] found to have nicotine. So youth may not be aware that they're using a nicotine product.

Dr. Kineka Hull:

[14:06](#)

I like that you highlighted the flavors in the draw that they have for young people. I know that is particularly a factor in hookah use. And so I know a lot of times whenever you are asking people, not just young people, "Do you smoke," your mind immediately goes to cigarettes, which for some people have a negative connotation. [00:14:30] And so if you say, "Do you smoke?" They'll say no, because they're immediately thinking about cigarettes. But they don't think about the e-cigarette, they don't think about hookah, they don't think about the cigar pipe, so Black & Milds as the brand. They don't think about the clove cigars. They don't necessarily think about some of the other products that they may not be aware contain nicotine and have some of the same side effects or consequences as cigarettes.

[NEW_PARAGRAPH]And so I think that's [00:15:00] very important because a lot of people now view e-cigarettes or hookah as more recreational, as more socially acceptable than some of the traditional nicotine methods that we are aware of. And so I remember when I was growing up, you would see the movies and it was glamorous and everyone smoked. And the way that a man approached a woman, it was like, "May I give you a light?" So they changed some of that popularity to try to [00:15:30] cut down on the appeal that it had to people and to young people because that was seen as a sign of glamour and sophistication. So now we've gone from that to something that is fruity and flavorful, which mask what the true impact might be.

Dr. Asari Offio...:

[15:45](#)

I mean, I think the same thing is around edibles too. And so when we're thinking about marijuana, people may not be

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smoking marijuana. They're in brownies, they're candies, they're gummies-

Dr. Kineka Hull: [15:57](#)

And tea and lotions.

Dr. Asari Offio...: [16:00](#)

[00:16:00] And tea. And so then that kind of creates, similar to what you were saying decades ago, I think we're kind of having a revamp on marijuana as well. And I know there've been tons of stories around contaminations in school, young people bringing edibles to school and kids getting sick and having to go to the hospital. And again, the same thing. Young people don't know what is included in those edibles or especially baked goods. And so it does create a lot of harm around what young people are ingesting.

Dr. Kineka Hull: [16:28](#)

And so that's a touchy [00:16:30] subject for a lot, the expansion of the legalization of marijuana across the country. But as you said, we have to be very mindful of the products that are easily accessible to young people. So can you elaborate on what this new change in this landscape might mean?

Dr. Andra Wilki...: [16:48](#)

The expansion of the legalization of marijuana can mean a number of things for youth. One that has caught my attention recently is there are online marijuana dispensaries. [00:17:00] So even if you are in a state that does not have legalized marijuana, you might still be able to access it online. There was a recent review of marijuana dispensary websites from 32 states, and about one in five of them had no age verification on their website. And I will say this is improving because just a few years ago, three out of four didn't have any age verification on their websites.

[17:24](#)

So I think we're seeing a trend of online marijuana dispensaries trying to be careful about [00:17:30] youth access. But in addition to a lack of age verification, more than 80% accepted types of non-traceable payment like prepaid cards or cash, because that's harder for a parent or caregiver in a youth's life to understand what they're purchasing online. And one-third offer delivery across state lines. And when they asked the marijuana dispensaries that would deliver across state lines, "Would you send your products to a state with different laws than yours?" 95% of them said yes. So even if [00:18:00] you are a program or a parent in a state where marijuana is not legalized, this does not mean the youth you're interacting with do not have access to it.

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- Dr. Kineka Hull: [18:09](#) I think that's important. The fact that 95% would deliver to states and do so in a method that youth easily have access to prepaid card or cash is very telling. What are some other substances that youth can get online?
- Dr. Asari Offio...: [18:23](#) Youth can also access substances through social media platforms like Instagram. At [00:18:30] a base level, we know social media uses trends to increase exposure to things like e-cigarette advertising. We also know exposure to advertising can decrease perceptions of risk, and we know decreased perceptions of risk can then increase chances of use. A 2020 study found online drug purchasing was relatively rare among 15 to 25 year olds, but when it did happen, it happened via social media. A study of Instagram posts [00:19:00] about e-cigarettes found the post came from 20 different countries and about half were from sellers versus individuals. So most sellers were selling flavored liquids for the use of e-cigarettes. So like we mentioned, they appeal young people.
- [19:14](#) But one of the things that I think is really important for us to know is that when young people are accessing these substances online or social media, whatever they're using, they don't know what it has. If it's coming from different countries, they may not have the same regulations or policies around [00:19:30] substance use or controls around substance use. They may think that they're getting products that lack nicotine or lack whatever substance, but we don't have confidence to know that for sure. And only 29% of those selling flavored liquids included age verification in their site.
- Dr. Andra Wilki...: [19:47](#) Something to really underline there. It's one thing when youth can stick around online and find an online marijuana dispensary, they're going out and seeking it. Youth accessing substances [00:20:00] via social media turns it from a pull into a push. They might not have to seek it at all. It might be being pushed towards them. It might show up on their for you page. So I think the frequency of exposure, the level of exposure could be so much greater to a wider group of youth through social media than online. And all of this can feel incredibly scary and overwhelming for people who work with youth. These trends can sound upsetting, but [00:20:30] something that I always try to remind myself is that real-life connections and education can matter so much more than the advertising youth are exposed to. So you really do have power in your interactions with youth.
- Dr. Kineka Hull: [20:44](#) I acknowledge that I knew about the availability and, like you said, the push of information that sometimes can desensitize

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you, but social media has really changed the game. That's a little scary [00:21:00] as a funtie, if you listen to the podcast, I talk about being a funtie, that's the fun auntie. I'm very concerned about young people, nieces, nephews, children, youth, people in our programs are on social media every day. And sometimes you click things just being curious and what you have access now, to me, that is very concerning. And so let's shift our conversation now that we know what the trends [00:21:30] are, we know what young people are being exposed to, to what we can actually do to increase this real-life connection education that you talked about, Andra. So what are some recommendations or some best practices that you would recommend for parents, guardians and trusted adults?

Dr. Asari Offio...:

[21:48](#)

From the perspective of parents, it's imperative that we first listen to our young people, listen to not only what they say but what they don't say. And that is, [00:22:00] I think, the craft in being a parent is being able to pick up on everything. And like you mentioned, our young people have exposure to social media and just more influences than we may know. And so it requires our parents to be very present. Like you mentioned, Kineka, in this ever-changing world where we feel like things are moving faster than we can even process and interpret, we have to be able to keep up with the new trends and our young people are going to be [00:22:30] the ones that teach us that because they're closest to it.

Dr. Andra Wilki...:

[22:33](#)

Yeah, jumping in here, I think by keeping up with the trends, you might see that on the front page of your newspaper there's been so many unfortunate recent instances of youth experiencing overdose fatalities due to buying counterfeit Adderall pills. So you might get exposure to this more often than you'd like, but it's a way for you to keep very informed about what the youth in your life may be getting exposed to.

Dr. Asari Offio...:

[22:59](#)

And so youth [00:23:00] are aware and in this context will be your first teachers. And I know for a lot of us culturally it's been the parents or the adults are the ones with all the knowledge and all the wisdom and young people listen to what we say, but we have to change with the times and allow our young people to teach us. And so in listening, it will require us or parents not to be impulsive in our reactions, but rather present and inviting. This will create a space for our youth to be honest [00:23:30] with us, to be open and to be transparent about what's happening not only with themselves and their peers.

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- [23:36](#) And I think that last piece is so important that we mention because it's not only what our young people are doing, but what their peers may be doing because that creates this peer norm or peer culture. And so we want to hear what their friends are saying. We want to hear what the kids on the block are saying because that's going to help us to understand the larger context even if our young person isn't engaged [00:24:00] in those behaviors gaps.
- Dr. Kineka Hull: [24:01](#) We know that peer pressure is a strong pull into activity, and I'm glad that you mentioned things like Adderall and Ritalin. Coming from higher education, I would hear grumblings of young people using it to focus, as a high performer, using it to improve their grades and using it to stay on top of their game. And so I think that as we are thinking about substance use and understanding the [00:24:30] trends and hearing what may be occurring with the young people that we serve, really being mindful to the conversations and the whys. And so being sure that we are there to provide guidance and education and just knowing that saying "don't do it" is not enough. Can you elaborate on that?
- Dr. Andra Wilki...: [24:49](#) Oh, I'm so glad you brought that up, Kineka, because Asari's talking about we need to listen and you're listening and you hear something terrifying. You hear that their peers [00:25:00] are buying things online that are helping them perform better on their tests, and the young people in your life are curious about that. They want to perform better on their tests and everything in you may be screaming to say, "Don't do it!"
- Dr. Kineka Hull: [25:11](#) Don't do it.
- Dr. Andra Wilki...: [25:12](#) "Just say no. Because I said so." The parenting mantras that we might have all heard growing up, I know I did, but it can be more effective to explain why so they can have a full understanding of the dangers [00:25:30] and consequences of what they're curious about or what their friends are doing. Without that explanation, youth will seek and likely find answers elsewhere. So trying to be a trusted source for them can help prevent them finding misinformation which can be difficult to undo or unlearn when they believe they have a trusted source. The adults in their life don't know this is the truth, this is the facts of it.
- [25:59](#) So trying to be [00:26:00] not only a really good listener, but also a good teacher for the youth in your life. And I will say, if you don't know, this is a lot to keep on top of. If you don't

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know, please say so. You can even suggest let's research together and you could show them what are the trusted sources to learn more about this, how you as an adult look for reliable information about these substances. So avoiding things like "because I said so" and instead inviting them in to say, "Well, as I understand it the consequences [00:26:30] can be X, Y, and Z. tell me more about what you're seeing." This will help youth to trust you and feel comfortable coming to you with questions or experiences they're going through. And maintaining that trust is critical.

Dr. Asari Offio...:

[26:43](#)

Going back to what we said at the very beginning adolescence is linked to risk-taking. We know that. We were all on this call, 16, 15, 13, maybe some of us longer than others, but we know that that time period comes with curiosity, [00:27:00] it comes with exploration, it comes with who do I want to be? And so acknowledging that and being honest and open about your own experiences or your own questions that you have makes young people feel like, oh, this is not abnormal. This is not something that I need to hide, but when I come to you with questions, you're not going to judge me, reprimand me or make me feel less than because I have these questions.

[27:25](#)

And so I think even as uncomfortable as it is for a parent [00:27:30] to have those conversations, it's so important that when we acknowledge that this is appropriate for this developmental stage that they're in and, too, this is the crux, this is the opportunity that we have to really impart those healthy decision-making, those skills that we want young people to have that's not only going to help them at this time period, but will transcend into adulthood as well.

Dr. Kineka Hull:

[27:53](#)

And listening to hear and not necessarily immediately respond. I know as a trusted adult, [00:28:00] a parent or a guardian, when you're hearing about what peers are doing, when young people are asking these probing, normative questions, the immediate response sometimes is that, "Don't do it. Say no. Here's why." Rather than actually listening to what it may be and what type of measures may need to be taken. So if it's something with stress or some type of mental health issue, getting [00:28:30] some type of therapy so that substances are not being used as a coping mechanism. If it's someone saying, "I'm stressed about grades. I'm stressed about school." And so I hearing that people are doing things that are enhancing their performance, they're having some conversations about what would be, like you said, a healthy alternative for substance use.

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[28:51](#) I think that a lot of times we forget that young people have the same emotions and the same stressors and the same desires and the same pressures [00:29:00] as we do. In the same way adults cope and may turn to substances, young people may do the same. And so as we are trying to be stewards of youth who come through our youth-serving agencies and try to be sure that we are providing the best education to help them cope and be prepared and mindful, what recommendations do you have for grantees and youth-serving agencies?

Dr. Asari Offio...: [29:27](#) Like parents and families, programs [00:29:30] like those funded by FYSB also play a significant role in addressing youth substance use. In a recent webinar for prep grantees, we discussed how substance use prevention can be woven into sexual health education and sexual health programming. The realities or the same decision-making skills needed to promote positive sexual health can be applied to substance use. So helping young people develop skills around assertiveness, establishing boundaries, emotional regulation, all of [00:30:00] those skills and competencies that we want young people to have as it relates to sexual health, are applicable to substance use, to mental health, violence prevention. When we think about all these different risky behaviors, those same skills are necessary.

[30:14](#) Program facilitators can be proactive and create opportunities to discuss the current trends that we mentioned around substance use, bringing up the new words being used in songs or in social media, and then again, providing those healthy alternatives and then [00:30:30] also educating those social media literacy and helping young people to stay safe. And I'll also add, too, it's so important that we have these conversations early. I always say prevention is better than treatment. And how to do that is the earlier we start, the more likely we're able to see those benefits from prevention work.

Dr. Kineka Hull: [30:50](#) I'm glad that you mentioned songs, especially when it comes to sexual and reproductive health and substance use. We talked about how youth [00:31:00] are just bombarded sometimes with words and imagery that are related to sexual health and substance use until sometimes I do believe they become desensitized to some of the things that they see and they hear. I know I was riding in the car with a young person and I don't think I actually listened to the lyrics to a particular song until I heard them repeating them. I was like, wait a minute, that should not be something. No, I need the Kidz Bop or something that has [00:31:30] the clean version of something because it

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becomes almost ingrained until it doesn't seem foreign to hear some of the things.

[NEW_PARAGRAPH]And so when we are talking to them about things in our programming, risk-taking and curiosity are normative, but things are not always portrayed accurately. Young people think that that is the normative behavior when a lot of times it is not. So with that in mind, how can we educate [00:32:00] ourselves about ways to be more informed about substance use and how to help youth?

Dr. Andra Wilki...:

[32:07](#)

Coming at this from a different angle, I think programs also have a role in informing the young people they're working with about the policies in their state. Substance use often involves the criminal justice system and legal issues, and those really vary by state. There's a number of policies, programs could cover, too, that really jump to my mind are [00:32:30] how young people can access naloxone in their state. Naloxone is a drug that you use to reverse an overdose. So if young people are together and they're using and someone they're using with seems to lose consciousness, is unresponsive, the difference between young people not having naloxone and young people having naloxone is the difference between life and death for that young person that lost consciousness. It's easy. It's a nasal spray. You can give it several times. It's not going to hurt the person [00:33:00] and it can revive them.

[33:02](#)

An exciting update here, just last week, the Food and Drug Administration approved a nonprescription version of naloxone. Historically, it really varied state by state if youth could get it, but with a nonprescription version, hopefully soon young people could get naloxone at CVS and Walgreens and Rite Aid and have really ready access to it. So that is a policy landscape I think programs could do well to make sure the young people in their life [00:33:30] are informed of.

[33:31](#)

Another policy that can help in that scary situation where youth are using together, generally people use in groups and someone seems to be experiencing an overdose event, which is really common with fentanyl contamination, people can be using meth and think they have no risk of overdose, but if there's fentanyl contamination, they do have a risk of overdose is good Samaritan laws. Good Samaritan laws are intended to protect the bystander when they call 911 in the case of a suspected overdose event. And [00:34:00] I think it could be really powerful for the programs to let the young people in their state know how much protection they have as bystanders in emergency situation.

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[34:09](#)

When I last looked at those policies, the variation by state was incredible. In some states, if a young person calls 911 because their friend seems to be experiencing an overdose, law enforcement shows up and they see drug paraphernalia and people using, but they only help the person who is experiencing the overdose event. And there are not consequences for the bystanders who called for help. In other [00:34:30] states that bystander could still end up in the criminal justice system. So what states mean by protect bystanders varies widely, and I think programs could really empower youth by making sure they're aware of that.

Dr. Asari Offio...:

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I would just add to that to say that especially the policy piece is so important, and I know a lot of the programs that grantees are implementing really focus on the skill building, but I think in the current context that we live in and that we work in, the policy piece is critical and empowering [00:35:00] young people to understand that is very important. And so programs can find resources online with worksheets or lesson plans that can be used to guide some of those discussions, bring in guest speakers or connect with other community organizations that are really entrenched in that work to be able to help to educate young people.

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For example, there's a program called Class Action, which was developed by high schoolers. It's a substance use prevention program. And what that program does, it uses case studies [00:35:30] involving substance use and youth role play as attorneys to solve the case. It's kind of like a mock trial kind of approach to the program. And this kind of hands-on practice is not only engaging for young people, but also is a way to actively learn information around policies and consequences of substance use, not only just legal consequences, but what it means for the young people, for their families, for their school. It really helps to delve deeper into some of those conversations.

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[00:36:00] And so when programs are thinking about ways to educate young people around substance use, again, it's not about the just don't do it, but how can we help young people to engage in deep conversations, really think through what this means for them, what it means for their peers, what they're seeing, where do their perceptions come from? All of that is really, really important. And we encourage programs to not shy away from having those discussions, [00:36:30] but instead inviting those discussions into their classrooms and making those connections for young people because that's why our job is there. We're there to make connections for young people and

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help to give them the skills to thrive and make those healthier decisions.

Dr. Kineka Hull:

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And those connections can include amplifying voices of people with lived experience. And so I feel like, for me, that's always something that is impactful. And so reach out. There may be individuals in your local communities who would love [00:37:00] to come and speak to young people in your programs to talk about how life was for them if they're speaking from lived experience, providing education. A lot of times we see people use scare tactics, which we know is not the way. So having an open conversation, great dialogue is a good way to reach young people.

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And I love a good educational role play because we can all say what we would do in a scenario, but being able to work that out in real time, [00:37:30] to be able to see how you would respond with changing pressures. A lot of times some young people may be more vocal or more prepared than others. So seeing how others may respond in a certain situation gives you a good arsenal of what to do. And so sometimes I think for people after you are doing role plays and you are practicing and practicing, that muscle memory kicks in. And so it gives you an opportunity to be prepared.

Dr. Asari Offio...:

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[00:38:00] I'll also add too, particularly for programs that are working with young people from marginalized communities and identities, I think it's so important that we include the history lessons in all of this. And because the realities are unfortunately here in the US that many of these policies, many of these experiences are rooted in racism and systemic oppression and institutionalized racism. And I think a lot of our young people may not be aware of that long history, [00:38:30] how did we get here?

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And so even including those aspects is empowering for young people because when they understand the communities that we have today, what is that rooted in? How does certain substances get into certain communities and not others? Why are there certain people that are more likely to be criminalized? What is mass incarceration? Understanding that, that in itself can be enough to encourage a young person to say like, "Oh, this has been to the detriment [00:39:00] of my community. This has been a detriment to my family and what we've had access to or not had access to. And so I don't want to perpetuate that. I don't want to be involved in that." And so we underestimate that young people find value in that kind of

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information as well. And so I would also encourage programs to think about that and incorporate that using news articles, using history books to help young people make those connections, I think is really, really important as well.

Dr. Kineka Hull: [39:27](#) So this has been a lot of great information. What [00:39:30] recommendations do you have for funders?

Dr. Andra Wilki...: [39:32](#) Yeah, I'm really glad we're mentioning funders. Parents and programs obviously have a huge role, but funders do too. When the opioid epidemic was dominating national headlines a few years ago, so many funders came to the scene, which was great. There was the federal government funders, state funders, foundations, they were interested in supporting efforts to prevent opioid use, prevent overdoses, provide addiction treatment. These are all wonderful, noble and [00:40:00] important goals. These are still important things to fund, but when funding is tied to particular substances, it can hinder state and programmatic response. From the data and hopefully from this podcast, you've learned that substance patterns vary significantly. We know they vary by geography, race, ethnicity, age, gender, by community, and they are highly variable over time. There's new things being created all the time. So [00:40:30] allowing states and programs to have flexibility in how they use funding really helps response.

Dr. Asari Offio...: [40:35](#) I'll also add to that, that unfortunately, a lot of the dollars when we think about the substance use world, so when we think about prevention, treatment and recovery, a lot of the funds are actually in the treatment sector of the spectrum, which we understand why, because it takes a lot of money to really support folks that need treatment. But unfortunately, prevention has the smallest piece in the pie. And so if we [00:41:00] think about how we can invest more money on the front end so that we don't have as much to do on the back end, that will make a huge difference. And so when we think about prevention dollars, so things like drug-free communities, things like investing in services within our school systems, within community centers, really thinking about putting those prevention dollars in high-risk communities is really, really important because it does [00:41:30] have effects on the long term.

[41:32](#) So that would be one of the other things that I would say is really important is thinking about how do we fund prevention? The beauty in that is that when we think about prevention, there's so many angles in what that can look like. Is it murals or

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community activities? Is it environmental strategies, how do we physically change spaces? Do we add lighting to parks that are high traffic areas for drug supply or drug trafficking and things like that? [00:42:00] How do we engage in social media literacy? Prevention allows more creativity and funders have a great opportunity to support organizations that are looking to do that work. And so I would say that would be something else that we would love funders to think more about.

Dr. Kineka Hull: [42:15](#) Absolutely. Especially now as we are seeing the rollout of the opioid settlement funds, looking at what has been proposed by a lot of states does focus on treatment, [00:42:30] but that was one reason that I, like so many of us, I think went into public health being more proactive than reactive and understanding the importance of education and the impact that it can have on multiple levels. I have thoroughly enjoyed our conversation. You've given our listeners a lot to think about. What is one or two key takeaways that you would like to leave listeners with?

Dr. Asari Offio...: [42:56](#) I think one of the main things that we can all say that has been the focus of this conversation [00:43:00] is around social media and the digital market. And we know that those two have drastically changed how youth have access to substances, making them more susceptible to acquiring counterfeit pills and harder for trusted adults to keep track of what young people are exposed to. And so while we know that this can be very scary, there are things that we as individuals, as researchers, and as communities, can do to protect our young people and prevent their engagement in substance use. But [00:43:30] first, it requires us being and staying informed about current trends. And so whether that's following the CDC, whether that's following key researchers that are in the field or really staying abreast on new resources that are being developed, but it's going to require us first to really be active and proactive in following current trends around substance use.

Dr. Andra Wilki...: [43:52](#) I think one way for folks to stay in the know about what's going on for substance use prevention in their communities is getting connected [00:44:00] to a local drug-free community coalition in your area. Those are entirely focused on preventing or reducing substance misuse in communities, so they could be a really great resource. And next, it's important to be a trusted source for young people, that you're not only an information source for them, but hopefully also someone who will listen to their experiences, who will listen to their questions. Just cannot stress enough that when youth feel safe, they're more likely to make healthy and protective decisions.

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Dr. Kineka Hull:

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Absolutely, Andra. [00:44:30] And as individuals who work with young people, we have to realize that this is a really formative time in their life where they are learning to make healthy decisions that will impact them across their lifetime. And so I've really enjoyed this conversation. I know that our listeners, like me, have learned some eye-opening things that will help them be a better support to young people and the communities that they serve. Thank you for listening.

[45:00](#)

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