Likes, Shares, and Dares: Substance Use Safety and Social Media Trends

What's the issue?



Social media can be a big part of young people's lives, and parents and caregivers can help them stay safer. While some social media trends may seem fun and harmless, others can encourage higher risk behavior. Youth may join substance related trends without fully understanding the risks. These trends can spread fast through likes and views, making higher risk actions seem normal and fun.

Why does this issue matter?

Social media trends can involve ingesting substances or participating in behaviors that can harm youth health and wellbeing. For example, some challenges involve holding your breath until you feel dizzy or pass out, inhaling substances like nail polish or aerosol sprays to feel a brief high, taking large amounts of over the counter medications like anti-histamine to cause hallucinations, or microwaving objects (like dolls), which can release harmful chemicals or cause burns. These can lead to injuries, poisoning or trauma that require immediate or urgent medical care.



What trusted adults can do:

Talk early and often

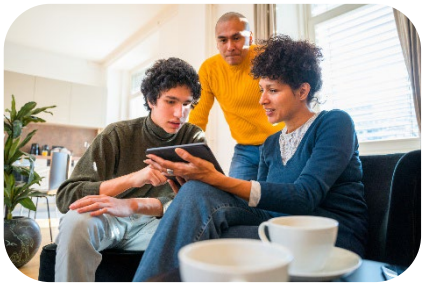
- Have open conversations and build trust
- Visit the Ottawa Public Health Small Talks Matter | Ottawa Public Health webpage to learn more about the Spectrum of Substance Use and substance use health
- Check in regularly
    - Example: What have you been seeing online recently? What do you think about it?

Build digital literacy and critical thinking skills

- Consider the impact of sharing personal information
- Encourage youth to pause and think critically before acting or engaging online
- Encourage youth to question what they see
- Talk about how social media promotes content (likes, views, algorithms)

- Talk about online safety and trends related to substance use

Stay involved and aware



- Know which platforms your youth uses
- Use privacy settings and age-appropriate supervision
- Talk about the different types of trends and the potential risks that come with these trends.
    - Some challenges pose a higher risk than others for physical or psychological harm. Consider questions such as:
        - Can this challenge hurt your body, your mental health?
        - Does this challenge have the potential of harming others?
        - Could this challenge result in legal trouble?
        - Does this challenge ask you to use substances (e.g., drugs including alcohol)?
        - Do the videos make this challenge look safer than it really is?
        - Does this challenge ask you to share personal or sensitive information (name, address, compromising pictures of yourself, etc.)?
- Encourage offline activities and balanced screen time
    - As a family create a dedicated place in a common area in your home (i.e. kitchen, family/living room) to store electronic devices (phones, tablets, laptops, etc.). This can support healthy routines, improve sleep, keep devices out of bedrooms and help parents and caregivers stay aware of online activities.



- Look for warning signs
    - Change in mood or behavior
    - New slang about challenges
    - Unexplained injuries or missing medications

Need more information? Visit:

1. Digital Media Literacy Core Competencies | MediaSmarts
2. A Quick Guide to TikTok™ – ProtectKidsOnline.ca
3. Technology and Family Life
4. Keeping Families Connected in a Wired World
5. Social Media Tips for Parents
6. Stop Overdose Ottawa Alert System - Ottawa Public Health
7. Party Safer - Ottawa Public Health