

# Douglas County Youth Focus Group Snapshot

The Douglas County Youth Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition brings together community members who work and/or live in Douglas County and are committed to combating youth substance abuse in their community. To better understand substance abuse issues through the lens of youth in the community, Tri-County Health Department contracted with OMNI Institute, a social sciences nonprofit agency, to conduct a qualitative assessment. The coalition will use the results of these focus groups to help identify effective strategies to reduce youth substance abuse in Douglas County. This summary presents the findings of the four youth focus groups conducted by OMNI.

---

## Data Collection

- In August and September of 2016, OMNI conducted four focus groups with high school-aged youth to learn more about youth thoughts and attitudes regarding alcohol, marijuana, and prescription drug use. Four high schools were sampled – three traditional high schools and one alternative school in Douglas County.
- This summary of findings aggregates themes across the four focus groups and separates findings by substance. Each bulleted finding is presented in order of response frequency, from most-indicated response to least.
- It is worth noting that participants in the alternative school tended to draw upon their own experiences with substance use and its consequences, while participants at the other sessions tended to speak in more general terms about substance use issues.

---

## Focus Group Findings

In total, 43 youth participated in four focus groups. Demographic data on the sample include:

- Eleven youth from Highlands Ranch, 10 from Castle Rock, 23 from Parker (10 in one focus group and 13 in a second focus group).
- Eleven youth were in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, 10 in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, eight in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, and 14 in 12<sup>th</sup> grade.
- Ages ranged from 13 to 18 years old, with the average being 15.6 years old.
- Twenty-one participants identified as male (49%), 21 as female (49%), and one participant identified as “Other” (2%).
- Almost all identified as White (88%), three youth (7%) identified as Hispanic/Latino, one (2%) as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and one (2%) as American Indian.

### *Social Norms and Access*

#### **Alcohol and marijuana are the substances that youth most commonly use.**

Participants indicated that alcohol and marijuana appear to be the most common substances that youth use. This perception may be in part because these substances are often the most talked about among youth, according to participants. Other substances such as acid, Molly, cocaine, and cough syrup were mentioned, but were not seen as commonly used.

#### **Access**

##### ***Alcohol:***

- Taken from what is stored in their own homes;
- At parties that occur frequently;
- Purchased for them by known older adults such as siblings, college-aged friends, or staff at local stores;
- From peers with fake identification;
- At concerts and other social events; and
- At home with parent/guardian supervision.

### **Key Quotes on Social Norms/Social Access**

- “I think it’s kind of a big issue just because it’s so easy to get a hold of [alcohol] and anyone can do it. It’s not like only a specific person can do it. Anybody could do it if they really wanted to.”
- “Kids don’t go to these parties and just have one beer. They are not able to get ahold of it on a regular basis, that when they do have it, it’s like they want to drink as much of it as they possibly can.”
- “I feel like alcohol is more at just like parties and stuff. But marijuana is like a normal thing to use.”
- “Because we are in Colorado and marijuana is legal here, it affects the accessibility.”
- “I grew up and both my parents were smoking weed all the time, so I didn’t see anything bad in it. I mean, all the adult figures around me were too.”
- “Adderall, because lots of kids are prescribed it, so I feel like those are really easy to get.”

## Key Quotes on Social Norms

- “It [marijuana] is risky, but it’s a safe risky. Because it is so accessible, a lot of people are doing it, and you’re not doing anything, in their mind, extreme.”
- “A lot of people are bored. There’s not a weekend that goes by during the school year without a party. So it’s very much a social thing, because there’s a lot of people who really want to fit in.”
- “They think they are super cool if they’ve done marijuana; they’re like ‘I’ve got to do more’. It will just lead them on a bad road.”
- “Go to a party with drinking, you’re probably going to drink to impress the cute girl in the corner.”
- “I think it’s just become so prominent that it’s like acceptable by just being common.”

## Key Quotes on Perceived Impact

- “They don’t think they can have fun without it. And then one thing leads to another, and that’s all they do to have fun.”
- “There’s a lot of home issues and stuff, and I think that’s where a lot of it comes from. If you have a bad home life, that usually translates into bad decisions.”
- “So with marijuana, I feel one of the main reasons people actually use it is to get rid of some stress.”
- “When I started smoking, I started to become positive, was starting to feel better about myself. It makes you happy just all around.”
- “A lot of kids will think it’s helpful, or think that what they’re doing, there is nothing wrong with it, or that nothing is going to affect them in the long term. But, I don’t think they realize that it will.”

### **Marijuana:**

- Through peers inside and outside of school;
- From older sibling or friends with a medical marijuana card;
- At dispensaries known for not checking identification; and
- From strangers using publicly (places such as at concerts or parks).

### **Prescription medications:**

- From medicine cabinets at home;
- Obtained easily from peers (Adderall was mentioned often);
- “Pharm Parties”; and
- Youth can lie about symptoms to obtain a prescription from a doctor.

### **Social norms**

#### **Alcohol**

- Participants felt alcohol use was an issue because it is easily accessible and commonly used.
- Parties with large quantities of alcohol occur frequently, often every weekend, and it is common for everyone in attendance to drink.

#### **Marijuana**

- Due to its legalization in Colorado, youth stated that it is socially acceptable for them to use the substance.

#### **Prescription medication**

- Not as common or accepted as other substances because its use is not as social. Many associated the substance with someone who has an addiction.

## **Perceived Impact of Substance Abuse**

Participants were asked why youth might use or not use substances, as well as their perception of possible benefits and consequences of substance use.

### **Why use Alcohol?**

- Most indicated alcohol is used to fit into social situations, as it is readily available at parties and other activities.
- Some participants indicated wanting to be perceived as more mature by using alcohol because of the legal age of use associated with the substance.

### **Why use Marijuana?**

- Many saw marijuana as a way to escape from stressors and feelings associated with depression or anxiety.
- Youth discussed satisfying curiosity, as the substance has become very common and frequently discussed.
- Some youth grew up around marijuana use, some for medical reasons. As a result, these youth did not see the substance as risky.

### **Why misuse prescription medications?**

- To help with studying, staying awake, or to make school “more fun”, some youth indicated using attention enhancing medications such as Adderall.
- It can have a “numbing” effect. Some misuse prescription drugs to deal with stress at home or school, or misuse to dull their anxiety.

### **Reasons not to use substances:**

- Negative impact on ability to go to college, get a job, and pursue activities such as sports;
- The risk of getting caught, by both parents/guardians and other trusted adults, and its impact on those relationships;
- The physical implications, such as destruction to the liver, brain cells, possible developmental delays, and hangovers;
- Being impaired makes someone appear and sound “stupid”; and
- The possibility of fatal consequences such as overdose or impaired driving.

## **Talking with Trusted Adults about Substance Abuse**

Youth were asked about conversations they have had with an adult about substance abuse, what was said, what they learned, and any possible challenges to talking about substance use with adults.

- Most youth have had a conversation at some point with an adult, many of which occurred recently. These conversations typically happen with parents, but a few youth mentioned a coach or neighbor.
- Alcohol seemed to be discussed more frequently than other substances.
- Conversations usually come about after an incident in the community such as a driving accident, overdose, or another youth getting in trouble with the law.
- Certain events for youth, such as beginning to drive or going to Prom, also prompt discussion.

### **Alcohol**

- Most youth state that adults tell them they would prefer to get a call for help rather than the youth drinking and driving.
- Parents propose being safe about alcohol if youth choose to use it.
- Parents indicate alcohol use is okay once youth are of legal age.

### **Marijuana**

- Parents discourage youth from using marijuana all together.
- A few youth had conversations around its potential negative implications on health and future aspirations.

### **Prescription medication**

- Only a minority of youth had conversations on this substance specifically, which were brought about by something occurring in the community.
- Generally, adults indicate the misuse of prescription medications can have serious consequences.
- Youth feel adults assume they know not to misuse prescription drugs and are aware of the negative effects of the substance.

### **Challenges/barriers to talking to adults**

- Youth expressed concern that talking openly about the use they see around them will lead to their friends getting in trouble, or their parents no longer allowing them to spend time with certain friends. This is especially difficult when they feel their friends may need help.
- Some mentioned that a potential change in the relationship with the adult might deter them from speaking openly about substance use. Trust on both sides may be negatively affected.
- If a conversation around substance abuse has not yet happened, some are too concerned about their parent's reactions to speak up.

## **Substance Abuse Prevention Strategies**

### **Resources**

- Overall, youth seek education from a trustworthy source on the health effects of marijuana.
- Prevention programs would be more effective if they related to things currently happening in youth's lives: applying to college, building lasting relationships, and planning for the future. It is not enough to simply quote side effects and health consequences.
- Utilizing individuals who have experienced negative consequences due to substance abuse, especially those in a similar age group, would be powerful.

## **Key Quotes on Conversations With Adults**

- "They don't want their kids to do it, but then they're doing it. Its kind of hard to say 'You can't do it' while they are smoking a joint."
- "They say, 'We cant stop you if you're going to go out drinking and stuff. Don't be driving. Be safe. Call us. We'll come pick you up.' Marijuana-wise, they said 'Don't do it.'"
- "They're pretty much like, 'Don't mess up your future. You've got sports, and that will get in the way'."
- "...knowing that my parents are pretty judgmental at times. They would have a big blowup reaction if they found out that my friends are doing pot or alcohol. So that would definitely be a turnoff for me telling my parents."

## **Key Quotes on Substance Use Prevention**

- "If you're going to talk to high schoolers about drugs, get another high schooler or someone who's around that age to talk and share their personal experience."
- "If you do it and don't talk to anybody, you're going to do it again. But if you talk to your parents, and they find out everything, it might deter you from doing it again."
- "They need to take the parent approach and accept that a good chunk of kids use alcohol and marijuana, and focus on the strategies to use it reasonably and safely so that it is not abused."
- "Kids are way too easy on each other, because in high school, people don't care so much what adults think as they do what their friends think. I think it's more than just putting posters up, but it's getting more kids involved in the programs to develop these normal social codes."

### **Parents, guardians, and other trusted adults**

- Youth appreciate adults opening the lines of communication, as long as it is non-judgmental. Importantly, youth want to be heard instead of simply being scolded.
- Youth mentioned that hearing from adults who are modeling the desired behavior resonates with them. It is difficult to listen to someone telling youth not to use substances when they themselves use.

### **Schools**

- Youth seek a safe space to discuss what they are seeing and experiencing. Peer counselors were suggested.
- Strictly zero-tolerance efforts lead some youth to want to rebel. Harm reduction and abuse prevention strategies would be appreciated.
- In order to help change social norms, involve youth in creating and facilitating efforts and programming.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings in this assessment, the Douglas County Youth Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition may wish to consider:

- Providing resources to youth that are educational, relevant to the developmental stage of the youth, and that go beyond negative effects and “scare tactics.”
- Utilizing individuals – adults and youth – who can serve as positive role models and support to youth in a non-judgmental way. Individuals who have experienced negative consequences of substance use can be effective in reaching youth.
- Partnering with schools to create safe spaces for youth to discuss youth substance abuse.
- Encouraging parents, guardians, and trusted adults to discuss youth abuse of all substances, not just alcohol and marijuana.
- Involving youth in substance abuse prevention strategies and initiatives to promote buy-in and a change in social norms.

## **Key Quotes on Substance Use Prevention**

- “There is an emphasis on ‘If you get caught, you’re going to get in so much trouble.’ That is making it so kids don’t want to speak out about it, or turn in their friends, because they don’t want them to get in trouble. They should more like ‘Hear something, say something. Let us help!’. It should be easier for kids to be okay with saying ‘My friend has a problem’. The way it is now, kids don’t want to say something, so kids never do.”
- “Learning from someone with experience – we could apply that with adults in schools, like giving teachers the freedom to talk about it. Just getting real with a teacher is always special...If you learn from them and their own experiences, I feel like that can have a big impact.”
- “Why would you go to somebody who you know for a fact has the power to seriously put your schooling in jeopardy just because you want somebody to talk to?”

---

### **For more information please contact:**

Paola Molina, PhD  
[pmolina@omni.org](mailto:pmolina@omni.org)  
p. 303-839-9422 ext. 113  
[www.omni.org](http://www.omni.org)

Erica Winslow  
[ewinslow@omni.org](mailto:ewinslow@omni.org)  
p. 303-839-9422 ext. 168  
[www.omni.org](http://www.omni.org)

