Positive Choices
Drug and Alcohol Information
Get informed, stay smart, stay safe

Stigma and language in drug education: why it matters

Introduction

When talking about alcohol and other drugs with young people, it's important to consider the language used. Our language and attitudes can help reduce stigma and create a more supportive environment. It can be challenging to balance educating young people, preventing AOD harms, and avoiding stigma. In this blog post we explore ways educators and school communities can navigate this.

What is stigma?

Stigma refers to a negative view or belief about an individual or group because of a particular characteristic or trait about them. It can come from misunderstandings or stereotypes and can lead to unfair treatment, known as discrimination.

Stigma can be reinforced through our beliefs, language and actions, as well as laws and policies, news coverage and the media.

Stigma, mental health, and alcohol and other drugs

People can experience stigma due to their experience of mental health concerns or use of alcohol and other drugs. Stigma can also impact the families and friends of people who use substances, which can include some students.

When educating young people about alcohol and other drugs, it is important to be mindful of stigmatising attitudes and their impacts. For example, using stigmatising language when discussing people who use substances, the impact of substance use, and treatment programs may influence how young people view and treat others.

What are the impacts of stigma?

There are many ways stigma impacts people. It can lead to bullying, harassment, feelings of shame, as well as isolation and poorer mental health.

Stigma can prevent people from seeking help. They may be worried about how they will be treated or feel uncomfortable asking what support is available. Recent analysis found that Australians with substance use disorders waited an average of eight years to seek treatment. Stigma was identified as a possible reason for this delay. People may also avoid seeking help from, or discussing problems with, their family and friends because of stigma, which can add to feeling of isolation. Some people who do seek help face discrimination and unfair treatment. Discrimination can also make it harder for people to find and keep jobs, which can also increase isolation and reduce the support they receive.

How can educators reduce stigma?

Educating young people about the context of alcohol and other drug use may help reduce stigma. Research has found that people with higher levels of knowledge about a stigmatised group tend to be more understanding towards them. For example, people with higher knowledge about crystal methamphetamine's effects, rates of use and legal status tend to hold less stigmatising attitudes towards people who use this drug.

Similarly, educating young people about why people use alcohol and other drugs may help to reduce stigma. We know there are many factors that contribute to people's substance use, including trauma, mental health issues, and broader social factors such as poverty. Making young people aware of these complexities can reduce stigma by promoting empathy and understanding.

When talking about alcohol and other drugs, the words we use can contribute to stigma. Person first language is recommended. The Network of Alcohol and Other Drugs Agencies (NADA) and the NSW Users & AIDS Association (NUAA) have developed a 'Language Matters' guide with suggested terms to use and avoid.

Instead of:	Try using:
Drug abuser	Person who uses drugs
Addict, junkie	Person with a dependence
Clean	Person who has stopped using drugs

Try to avoid talking about alcohol and other drug use as an 'epidemic'. This is sensationalist and can give the wrong impression about how many people use substances. When communicating with young people, rather than saying that lots of youth are using alcohol and other drugs, talk about whether patterns have increased or decreased. See 'How many young people in Australia use alcohol or other drugs' for up-to-date figures.

It is important to avoid demonising (portraying as bad or evil) people who use substances. Using scare tactics or fear-based techniques in drug education can stigmatise people who use substances and prevent help-seeking. Research also shows that scare tactics are not an effective strategy for preventing or reducing alcohol and drug use. It's more effective to talk about health effects with credible, evidence-based information, rather than focusing on the risks. Our 'Drugs A to Z' factsheets list the effects associated with different substances.

Reminding young people that treatment is available, and providing information about how to access it, can also reduce stigma and barriers to help seeking.

Resources

There are lots of available resources to help support non-stigmatising alcohol and other drug education.

- The Alcohol and Drug Foundation have free posters that were made to support non-stigmatising conversations about alcohol and other drugs.
- Mindframe developed guidelines for communicating about alcohol and other drugs, including language to use and avoid.
- Watch our webinar with Dr Steph Kershaw to learn more about stigma and hear a case study of crystal methamphetamine use and stigma.
- Positive Choices has a range of factsheets providing guidance on effective communication:
  - For teachers:
    - Talking to a young person about alcohol and other drugs
    - Talking to a young person about e-cigarettes/vaping
    - Talking with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth about alcohol and other drugs
  - For parents:
    - Talking to a young person about alcohol and other drugs
      - Also available in Arabic, Hindi, and Simplified Chinese
    - Talking to your child about e-cigarettes/vaping
    - Starting the conversation when you are concerned about drug and alcohol use

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