

Youth Smoking Cessation: An Executive Summary

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Background and Methodology

This needs assessment study aimed to answer the question “What are youth smokers looking for when it comes to helping them quit smoking?” Youth smokers (n=35) from four different schools in Guelph were recruited to participate in a demographic survey and focus groups where they had a chance to discuss their smoking behaviour and potential strategies that may help them quit smoking when they are ready. Participants ranged in age from 14 to 19 years with an average age of 16.8 years. Sixty percent (n=21) of participants were female and the majority of respondents (59%, n=20) have smoked a minimum of 100 cigarettes in their lifetime and a minimum of 10 per day in the last month.

Key Findings

The key findings from the focus group and survey analysis are as follows:

- Youth smokers report obtaining their first cigarette from friends or family.
- Youth develop a relationship with smoking and come to routinely rely on it for a variety of purposes including weight control, coping with stress, and to feel socially connected to friends and family.
- Youth feel that personal readiness, quit options, and low-pressure support may contribute to successful smoking cessation.
- Everybody is unique and having a variety of options for quitting or cutting back is essential in order to meet the needs of different people.
- Youth identify smoking cessation as a low priority with many barriers including: a supportive smoking environment, widespread tobacco availability, concurrent substance use, and unpleasant side effects.
- Program design features including an accessible location, a supportive environment, subsidized costs, a genuinely caring leader with lived cessation experience, and incentives may prove successful in attracting and retaining more participants.

Recommendations

Based on the information collected through the literature review, participant demographic surveys, and the four focus groups a number of recommendations have been developed to address youth smoking cessation in Guelph. To support youth in quitting smoking when they are ready, public health professionals should consider implementing the following program components:

1. Meet with school administrators to discuss how the school environment influences youth smoking behaviour despite the current smoke-free policy. Discussions may include topics such as the physical placement of the smoking area at the school, and the frequency and length of breaks throughout the school day.
2. Partner with existing health and social service professionals (e.g. Family Health Teams) who are working in secondary schools to develop coordinated cessation approaches that optimize available human and financial resources to address youth cessation.
3. Consider options for standardized formal youth cessation training for adult allies from in and outside of the school (e.g., teachers, child and youth workers, peers, coaches) so that youth may seek support from people that they trust.
4. Consider a program that provides multiple approaches to successfully reach the different needs of individuals. Some of the more popular approaches discussed in this needs assessment could be offered concurrently at the same site. For example, organize a “challenge your friends” contest with incentives for cessation, cutting back, and non-smoking behaviours. Another idea is to organize a harm reduction campaign to encourage cutting back on smoking during school hours.
5. Offer free or subsidized NRT to youth as one cessation strategy recognizing that multiple strategies are required to meet the needs of smokers.
6. Encourage the adoption of smoke-free homes within this population.

Further research can add to existing results and more clearly focus on defining what strategies will work for whom under which conditions.