

School Health Promotion: Choices Rewired Campaign

To: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

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Recommendations

It is recommended that the Board of Health receive this report for information.

Key Points

- Key trends and findings from the 2024 Well-being and Health Youth (WHY) survey highlighted concerning patterns regarding substance use and screen use among youth in Wellington Dufferin Guelph.
- Upper Grand District School Board (UGDSB) and Wellington Catholic District School Board (WCDSB) requested partnership with WDG Public Health to develop a parent and caregiver awareness campaign on youth substance use and screen use.
- Choices Rewired is a call to action, educational campaign aimed to empower parents and guardians to address the growing impact of substance use and excessive screen use on youth health and well-being. The campaign offers parents and caregivers the tools to help youth rewire their choices from harmful to healthy, promoting overall wellness, resilience and connection. It also links to resources available in the community for parents and youth who may need additional supports.
- Community partners have played an essential role in knowledge mobilization efforts and collaborative planning for ongoing campaign outreach strategies.

Background

Substance use and screen use trends among youth in Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph continue to be a concern. Findings from the 2024 Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Well-being and Health Youth (WHY) survey found 17 percent of high school students reported vaping as well as 17 percent of high school students reported using cannabis.¹ The data also showed a concerning trend among the use of cough syrup to get high with 21 percent of Grade 7-8 students reporting this behaviour.¹ Screen use behaviours among youth in the region was another area of concern with 86 percent of students in Grades 9-12, 74 percent of students in Grades 7-8 and 50 percent of students in Grades 4-6 reporting more than three hours per day of screentime outside of school.¹

The harms of substance use and excessive screen use among youth can be significant on overall health and well-being. It's critical to understand the various reasons youth may engage in substance use and screen use and it's important that parents and caregivers are able to identify problematic use early to initiate open conversations about these behaviours.

In the Spring of 2025, UGDSB and WCDSB initiated a partnership with WDG Public Health for the development of the Choices Rewired campaign to bring awareness to parents and guardians of the local trends and harms around youth substance use and screen use. The initiative offers practical guidance families can use at home to support youth in making informed and healthy choices with respect to these behaviours.

Discussion

The Choices Rewired initiative highlights data from the Well-being and Health Youth (WHY) survey. Every two years students in grades 4 through 12 across Wellington County, Dufferin County and the city of Guelph, are invited to participate in the WHY survey. This survey gives students an opportunity to speak up about their health, experiences and well-being by answering questions regarding physical activity, substance use, screen use, mental health, school experiences and other behaviours.

Youth Substance Use Trends

Although many youth still report using substances, there have been some encouraging local trends highlighting decreases in the use of alcohol, cigarettes and vaping since 2019.¹ Provincial data has shown a similar downward trend across Ontario.² However, the data has shown some concerning trends among students in grades 7-8 for other substance use, particularly the use of cough medicine to get high and taking prescription pain pills without a prescription¹. Again, this is similar to trends being reported across Ontario.²

The physical harms of substance use include harm to lungs, brain development alongside the risk of addiction. Often less considered are the effects that substance use can have on social impacts and mental health including school absenteeism, poor academics and reduced time spent with family and friends.³

Youth may engage in substance use for a variety of reasons ranging from social influences, curiosity, easy access, coping with stress and modeling behaviours they see at home. Although peer influence is a factor in why some youth start using substances, the continuation of substance use is often associated with stress and mental health related challenges.³ Understanding the underlying factors is important when addressing the reasons youth may turn to substance use.

Research indicates that fear-based approaches or scare tactics are ineffective in preventing substance use among youth.³ However, youth are interested in understanding why people use substances, the potential harms associated with substance use and the factors that can increase risk.³ That is why Choices Rewired helps increase awareness of the risks and harms while highlighting protective factors like family support, peer connectedness and participation in youth programs. The campaign helps adults support youth in coping with their emotions and managing stress while also providing the information to empower informed choices.

Youth Screen Use Trends

The WHY survey shows that youth are spending more time on screens and reporting more cyberbullying compared to 2019.¹ It also shows more youth are spending two or more hours on social media apps and video games daily.¹ Ontario data reveals similar trends, with an overall rise in screen use, cyberbullying, excessive social media use and video gaming across the years.² Excessive screen use among youth has been linked to sleep disruption, poor academic performance, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and social withdrawal.⁴ Research has also identified a strong link between gaming and online problem gambling, highlighting concerns about youth exposure to gambling through video games, loot box unlocking, sports betting and other online marketing practices.⁵

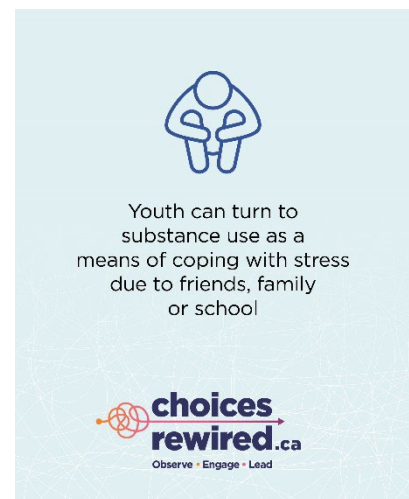


Figure 1. Sample of a social media asset on youth substance use.

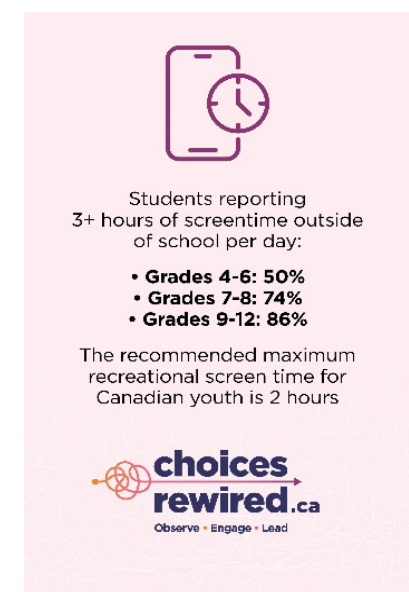


Figure 2. Sample of a social media asset on youth screen use.

Although excessive screen use can have negative impacts on mental health and well-being, screens and digital technology are also a part of daily life and can provide many benefits to support learning, skill development, meaningful experiences and connections. Therefore, the goal isn't to remove screens altogether, rather to encourage a balance between screen use and reconnecting offline.⁴

Similar to substance use, the reasons youth may engage in excessive screen use includes peer pressure, fear of missing out, coping with stress, loneliness, lack of extra-curricular activities, addictive design of digital technology and modeling behaviours from adults at home. Choices Rewired aims to provide parents and caregivers with tips to help identify when youth may be engaging in problematic screen time and help address the behaviours. Supporting youth with the development of healthy coping strategies, prioritizing offline activities and family time and establishing boundaries around screen use are strategies that can empower families and youth in making healthier choices around screens.

Choices Rewired

Choices Rewired focuses on a three-step strategy for parents and caregivers: observe, engage and lead. The campaign provides tips and examples to explain each of these steps.

Step 1: Observe

Adults may notice signs and signals that could indicate youth are engaging in substance or excessive screen use including changes in behaviour, mood or interests. Teaching parents and caregivers how to recognize common signs and changes in behaviours can help detect and address youth substance and screen use early.

Parents and caregivers should watch for physical signs of potential substance use such as coughing, drowsiness or changes in mood. There may also be noticeable sweet or chemical scents on clothing or in rooms. Other social, emotional or mental health changes to pay special attention to include changes in their friend groups, inability to focus and declines in school attendance or grades.

Screen use may be seen as problematic when young people are spending more time on screens than on other in-person activities or hobbies they may have once enjoyed. Physical effects of excessive screen use may include sleep disruptions, mood changes and irritability. It is also important to watch for signs of cyberbullying such as secretive online activity (e.g. hiding screens, fake/secondary accounts), social withdrawal or emotional distress during or after screen use.

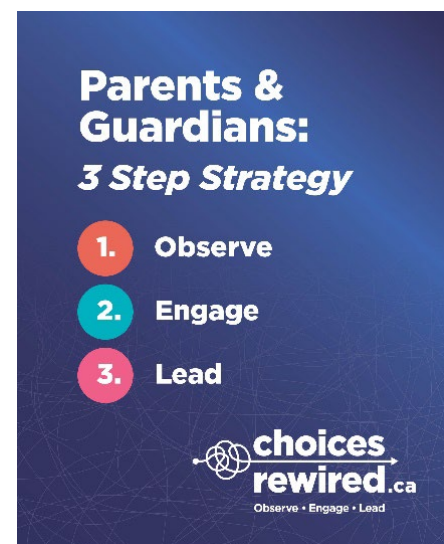


Figure 3. Sample social media asset on three step strategy.

Step 2: Engage

Parents and caregivers are encouraged to have non-judgemental, open and honest conversations with youth about the facts and risks around substance use. Asking questions, listening intently and learning more together helps youth understand that they have support from adults when it comes to talking about substance use.

In terms of screen use, it's important for parents and caregivers to show interest and ask questions about the online activities youth are engaging in. This can facilitate conversations about online safety, cyberbullying and exposures to gambling through video games and gaming apps. These conversations can also be used to agree on screen time limits and boundaries as well as explore replacement activities and interests.

Step 3 Lead:

Modeling behaviours and demonstrating the use of healthy coping strategies for stress and other challenges is another key strategy for parents and caregivers. Setting rules and boundaries around substance and screen use can be something parents and caregivers discuss with their youth and act on together.

Storing medications and other substances (like alcohol and cannabis) in locked cabinets and returning any unused prescriptions to a pharmacy are great ways to prevent access and availability in the home. Adults should avoid talking about the use of substances as rewards or coping tools and model healthier options like family activities, hobbies and outdoor time.

Limiting use and setting boundaries also applies to screen use. Parents and caregivers can model this for youth and practice unplugging together. It is important to also demonstrate respectful online behaviours and seeking support or professional help if there is a problem such as concerns about online gambling.

Community Engagement and Campaign Reach

Collaborative Partnerships:

Choices Rewired was developed as a collaborative partnership between UGDSB, WCDSB and WDG Public Health in the Spring of 2025. Choices Rewired is a multi-media campaign comprised of a web-based platform hosting a series of eight short videos, social media posts, visual infographic posters and local supportive resources. While promotion of the campaign is ongoing, preliminary results are outlined below.

The initial launch of the Choices Rewired campaign on October 23, 2025 involved a media release and outreach to parents through schoolwide communication channels. The campaign launch resulted in additional media attention including an interview with WDG Public Health for an online news article. Pickup extended across more than ten media sources within WDG (Guelph Today, Orangeville Citizen etc.) plus media outlets with a wider provincial reach including the Welland Tribune, Windsor News Today, The Hamilton Spectator and Sarnia News Today. The Wellington Advertiser also printed a letter to the editor written by a grade twelve student from the city of Guelph, who expressed their appreciation of the Choices Rewired initiative and recommended key messages about substance and screen use also be shared with students directly. Potential media reach from all sources totaled 1,932,525 readers/viewers.

Sharing the campaign with community partners continues to be an essential promotion strategy. Choices Rewired was shared via community partner listservs, at agency networking meetings and in partner newsletter updates. Printed infographics were also distributed at community partner network meetings, public education events and school-specific parent events.

The Wellington Guelph Drug Strategy's Youth Substance Use work group is comprised of several community partner agencies including Toward Common Ground, Homewood Health, Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario, Canadian Mental Health Association, WCDSB, UGDSB, WDG Public Health, Wellington Guelph Drug Strategy, Wyndham House, and the Community Resilience Coalition of Guelph & Wellington. They collaboratively planned and hosted a parent education event on May 6, 2026. Approximately 60 parents/guardians attended the event titled "Understanding Youth Today: Substance Use & Digital Life." The event focused presentations and discussions around youth substance and screen use, including the Choices Rewired campaign. Feedback from the event indicated participants found the session relevant, engaging and informative. Parents and guardians reported it was helpful to learn about the local data trends from the WHY survey and valued the collective presence and connections to relevant community resources and service providers.

Targeting parents and guardians through a combination of website content, social media promotion and blog distribution, the campaign has already attracted over 3,800 new website users, reached more than 22,500 people on social media and generated strong engagement through the educational resources, videos, and blog content. A snapshot of digital campaign reach from October 2025 to June 2026 is outlined below.

Website Performance:

The campaign website serves as the primary destination for campaign resources, educational content, videos, and practical guidance for parents and caregivers. Table 1 provides preliminary results of website traffic to ChoicesRewired.ca. The website attracted approximately 3,803 new users and generating 4,369 sessions as of June 16, 2026. Most website traffic during this timeframe came from direct campaign promotion rather than search engines, suggesting that social media, partner promotion, email communications, and other campaign activities were effective at directing audiences to the website.

Content about screen use significantly outperformed substance use content with more than double the webpage views, indicating there is a strong interest among parents and caregivers in managing screen use.

Table 1: ChoicesRewired.ca website metrics.

Metric	Result
New Users	3,803
Sessions	4,369
Page Views	5,001
Downloads	87
Click Events	143
Scroll Events	2,555
Blog Email Open Rate	31%
Blog Article Clicks	67

Social Media Performance:

The campaign has maintained a consistent social media presence using organic posts (i.e. unpaid promotion) shared across WDG Public Health and school board platforms from October 2025 to June 2026. Instagram accounted for approximately two-thirds of all campaign impressions and was the strongest platform for awareness and video engagement. Facebook served as an important channel for website referrals and engagement among parents and caregivers. A summary of WDG Public Health social media metrics is highlighted in Table 2.

Preliminary results from the social media reach echoes the benefits of short-form video content as these generated the strongest engagement and contributed to more than 1,000 video views from October 2025 to June 2026 compared to static image posts. The social media posts averaged 8.6 engagements per post and had 52 shares by users.

Engagement during this time frame exceeded the social media benchmarks from the hospital and healthcare industry which averages only four engagements per post, indicating the Choices Rewired content resonated well with the audience and was worthy of sharing with their social networks⁶. UGDSB, WCDSB and other community partners also promoted the campaign through their social media channels, thereby expanding the reach of messaging throughout the community and contributing to the website metrics above.

Table 2: Summary of WDG Public Health social media metrics.

Metric	Result
Organic Posts Published	24
Impressions	22,522
Engagements	207
Engagement Rate	0.92%
Video Views	1,071
Shares	52

Overall, the Choices Rewired campaign has translated local youth survey data into practical and actionable guidance for parents and caregivers related to youth substance use, screen use and mental well-being. Post engagement across media channels indicates that practical, parent-focused content grounded in local data is both relevant and valuable to the community. As promotion of the campaign is ongoing, website traffic and social media reach will continue to be monitored. Considerations for community engagement in the future may include paid social media promotion for a broader reach outside of existing networks.

Next Steps:

Updating the Choices Rewired campaign materials to reflect changes in the 2026 WHY survey data will be a key next step. This will also include sharing WHY data with youth and engaging them in conversations around concerns, priorities and suggestions for action.

WDG Public Health is exploring additional research regarding best practice guidance around screen and social media use. This content is the strongest performing topic based on campaign evaluation, parent event feedback and the significant attention received in provincial and national media. Similarly, WDG Public Health will continue to measure the trends in youth gaming and online gambling and work with community partners to explore strategies to address these emerging behaviours.

Partnerships with community organizations and networks has been essential regarding campaign credibility and reach. The Wellington Guelph Drug Strategy and member agencies continue to promote the Choices Rewired campaign and have expressed interest in ongoing collaborative knowledge mobilization efforts including the potential for additional in-person parent events.

Choices Rewired is just one of many WDG Public Health interventions targeting youth health and well-being. For example, the Youth Empowering Students for Mental Health (YES4MH) program allows students to identify priorities related to mental health and wellness within their school and develop peer-led initiatives that educate, engage and promote the mental health and well-being of youth. Another example is a research project led by the regional Central West Tobacco Control Area Network (CW-TCAN) that WDG Public Health is a collaborative partner in. This work is exploring the social identities of youth that are prone to nicotine use in order to tailor messages and prevention strategies that resonate with various peer crowds.

Health Equity Implications

The youth population can be disproportionately impacted by the harmful effects of substance use and screen use. WDG Public Health prioritizes strategies that support the health and well-being of youth populations.

The Choices Rewired initiative utilizes facts and data from the WHY surveys which allows for further assessment of health outcomes and behaviours by sociodemographic sub-groups including: gender, sexual orientation, racialized group, language(s) spoken at home, Canadian-born status, persons with a disability(ies), and urban/rural geographic location. This information can further assist WDG Public Health and community partners identify inequities that may exist in the WHY data to further target and prioritize efforts to support marginalized populations.

Parent and guardian outreach strategies that address population inequities will also be considered, particularly translation of campaign materials into additional languages. Hosting in-person promotional events in Wellington County and Dufferin County to ensure equitable access to rural populations are also being explored. Additional campaign distribution opportunities throughout the community is another strategy to consider to support outreach to families who may not have online access.

Conclusion

Choices Rewired is a strong example of community collaboration and a shared commitment to supporting the health and well-being of youth across Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph. The initiative empowers families with the knowledge and tools to recognize, connect with and support youth in navigating substance use and screen use behaviours. WDG Public Health along with the support of community partners, will continue the promotion of Choices Rewired, meeting families where they are at and offering practical strategies to help support the young people in their lives every day.

Ontario Public Health Standards

Foundational Standards

- ☐ Population Health Assessment
- ☐ Health Equity
- ☒ Effective Public Health Practice
- ☐ Emergency Management

Program Standards

- ☒ Chronic Disease Prevention and Well-Being
- ☐ Food Safety
- ☐ Healthy Environments
- ☒ Healthy Growth and Development
- ☐ Immunization
- ☐ Infectious and Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control
- ☐ Safe Water
- ☒ School Health
- ☒ Substance Use and Injury Prevention

2024-2028 WDGPH Strategic Goals

More details about these strategic goals can be found in [WDGPH's 2024-2028 Strategic Plan](#).

- ☒ Improve health outcomes
- ☒ Focus on children's health
- ☒ Build strong partnerships
- ☐ Innovate our programs and services
- ☐ Lead the way toward a sustainable Public Health system

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