CONNECT QUEST

ADULT ALLIES

School Implementation Guide

connectquest.ca

School Mental Health Ontario

Santé mentale en milieu scolaire Ontario

Land Acknowledgement

School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON) is based in the City of Hamilton, and is situated on the ancestral lands of the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee Confederacy. This land is covered by the Dish with One Spoon treaty, which calls all nations to share the land with care and respect, now and for future generations.

As treaty partners, we have a duty to uphold Truth and Reconciliation by learning and unlearning the truth about the history of Canada, and through efforts to address the present day impacts of colonization. Reconciliation calls for sustained learning, reflection and action. Identity, culture and community are inextricably linked to mental health and well-being. Authentic Truth and Reconciliation efforts address the impacts of colonialism by supporting practices and policies that amplify the ways of knowing and being of Indigenous communities.

As we continue to live and work on this land, we commit to deepening our understanding of its histories and acting as responsible residents, neighbours, partners and caretakers. We remain dedicated to co-creating and developing mental health resources that foster mentally healthy learning environments informed by, and rooted in Truth and Reconciliation.

Acknowledgement of the Enslavement of Africans, Anti-Black Racism and Black Excellence in Canada

School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON) recognizes the present-day anti-Black racism that persists in schools and society as a legacy of colonial systems and enslavement. We acknowledge that it is our shared responsibility to dismantle anti-Black racism, both individually and institutionally in support of student, family and community wellbeing and mental health.

Enslavement, colonialism, and systemic oppression have deeply shaped the experiences of Black people, including within mental health services and supports in education systems. To address these impacts systems, schools and individuals require a shared commitment to co-creating spaces that foster healing, understanding and belonging that are responsive and relevant to members of the Black community.

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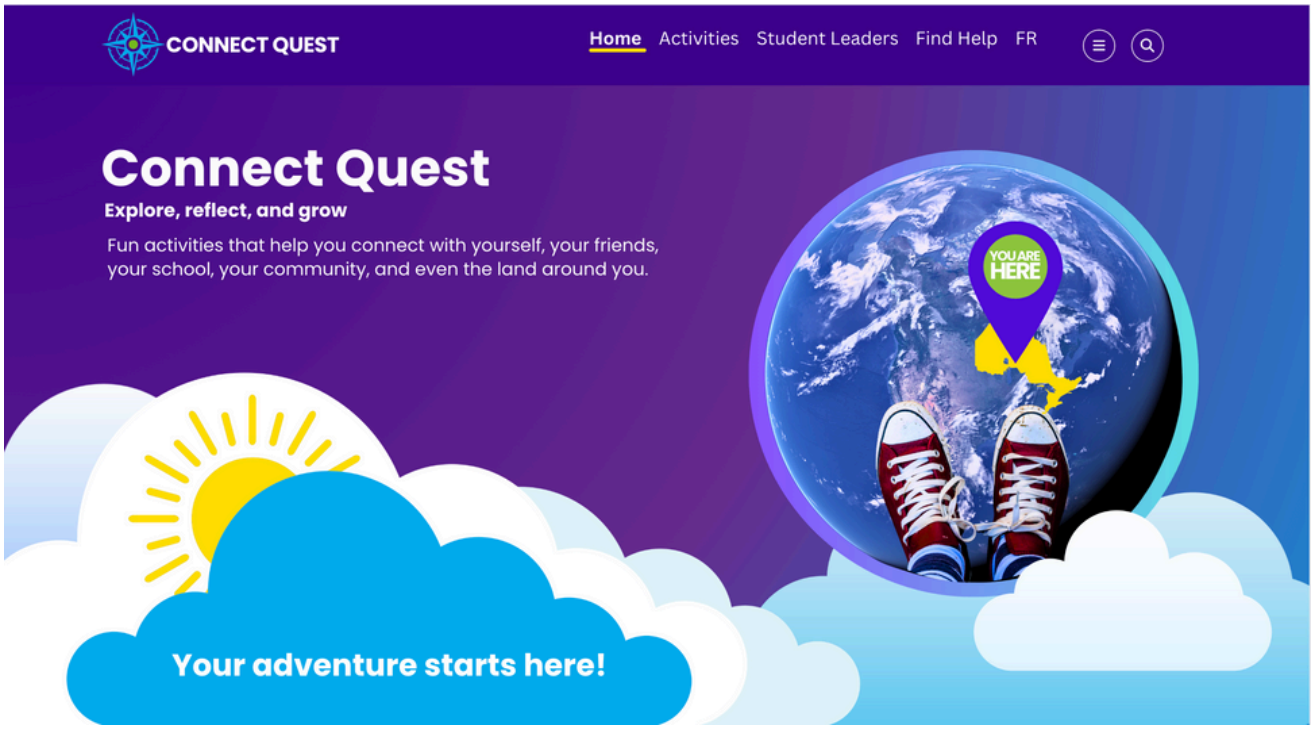
Overview

Welcome, and thank you for your commitment to supporting student well-being and leadership. This resource helps students build addictions prevention literacy about substance use health and balanced device use, supporting informed choices and strengthening the connections that help them thrive.

Connect Quest was developed with student voices at the center, and your role as an adult ally is key to bringing this learning to life in meaningful, engaging ways.

This guide provides a quick, practical tour of **Connect Quest -** what it is, how it works, and why it was created - plus, what students want you to know and why connection matters. You'll also get clear, ready-to-use tips to kickstart implementation, including where to begin and how to facilitate and support activities confidently.



What is Connect Quest?

Connect Quest is a student-informed toolkit and campaign designed to spark curiosity, strengthen connections and build community. Developed for students in Grades 4–8, the toolkit features hands-on, interactive activities designed to:

- match students' interests and preferences
- spark curiosity and encourage exploration
- provide accurate information to students to support conversations about substance use health and balanced device use
- strengthen connectedness and belonging
- encourage and empower student leadership to foster positive school climates

The name **Connect Quest** was chosen very intentionally. **Connect** highlights the importance of connection in supporting student mental health. Research shows that strong connections to people and community can protect youth from various risk factors and serve as an effective prevention strategy for mental health and substance use challenges.[1,2,3]

Quest came from student consultations where they told us they want learning to be fun, active, and engaging. They suggested a scavenger hunt or 'choose your own adventure' theme that offered choice.

How does it work?

Activities from Connect Quest can be used in a variety of ways:

- students explore them individually
- student leaders use them for group, classroom and school-wide campaigns
- educators incorporate them into classroom learning (for modelling and to inspire leadership)
- families and youth use them to engage in balanced and open conversations about substance use health, and balanced device use

Why was it created?

- Ontario students are facing complex challenges related to substance use, device use, and overall well-being.[4] These challenges can impact their mental health, relationships, and sense of belonging at school.
- School staff have said that they need resources that help students build skills to navigate these pressures, make healthier choices, and strengthen connections with themselves, their peers, their community, and the environment.[5]
- Recent Canadian research underscores the need for evidence-based resources and school-based practices that can help prevent, reduce, and delay substance use harms,[6] while also promoting healthier, more balanced use of digital devices.
- Adolescence is a critical period of brain development, decision-making, and identity formation. During this time, young people are exposed to increasing pressures—from peers, media, and online environments—that can influence their choices around substances and device use.[7]

Connect Quest provides opportunities for students to:

- **strengthen connections** to different domains that were identified by students as critical to their well-being (self, community—such as friends, family and schools—and nature)
- **build knowledge** about healthy coping strategies
- **reduce stigma** by fostering non-judgmental discussions about substance use health
- **reflect on their habits and values**, including how they use personal devices and connect with others
- **lead** campaigns within their communities, amplifying messages of resilience, balance, and belonging

Defining key terms

Establishing a shared vocabulary helps school staff lead consistent, inclusive, evidence-informed discussions. Clear, age-appropriate definitions of **substance use health**, **balanced device use**, and **stigma** reduce ambiguity and support psychologically safe, informed student engagement.

Substance use health

A de-stigmatizing framework that views substance use on a health spectrum. It recognizes that everyone falls on the spectrum, from no use through to higher risk use and substance use disorder. This approach acknowledges the use of substances for a variety of purposes (e.g., cultural, medicinal, non-medicinal) and shifts the focus from illness to overall wellness by supporting people's health at every point on the spectrum through compassionate, person-centred care. capsa.ca

Balanced device use

Using devices, such as phones, tablets, and games, in ways that are mindful, manageable, and meaningful. It means making intentional choices, setting healthy limits, and noticing why and how we use devices. Balanced use keeps screen time in proportion to other priorities such as sleep, school, friends, family, and physical activity. mediasmarts.ca

Stigma

Stigma is an umbrella term used to describe the prejudice and discrimination that people experience, including being labelled, blamed, or the target of negative attitudes, related to mental health, substance use, or device usage. Stigma can make people feel ashamed or afraid to ask for help. Reducing stigma means using compassionate, person-centred language, listening without judgment, and focusing on facts and support.

What students want you to know

In Spring 2025, 459 grade 4-8 students from across Ontario shared their perspectives on substance use health and balanced device use. They identified **five key attributes of effective and engaging learning.** Connect Quest was designed to be responsive to this advice from students.

1. Make learning relevant and useful.
Students want learning that connects to their current situation, not just for their future.

2. Help us feel a sense of accomplishment.
Students want to see progress, build their confidence, and apply what they learn.

3. Support our agency.
Students want choice and independence, with trusted adults providing guidance.

4. See us as changemakers.
Students value opportunities to help others, build community, and create positive change.

5. Make it fun, active, and social.
Hands-on, creative, and peer-connected activities make learning engaging.

"Engaging learning happens when it's active, social, and meaningful – like solving real problems, playing games, or telling stories...the best idea would be something that brings kids together, is easy to use, and works for lots of different interests." Grade 8 student

What students want you to know

Students also shared valuable advice specific to learning about substance use health and balanced device use:

- Please be patient with us—our decision-making and emotional skills are still developing and work differently from yours.

> *"Our brains aren't fully developed, so we experience more impactful emotions that cannot be explained yet. Adults need to realize the brain is still growing and we need resources to cope." Grade 8 student*

- Adults' experiences may be outdated compared to today's reality.

> *"When adults were 9-13, times and problems were different than they are now."* Grade 8 student

Take a moment to consider and reflect:

- What does it mean to truly listen to students' perspectives—and how can I make sure they feel heard, valued and supported?
- How do my personal beliefs and experiences around substance use and device habits influence the way I engage with students on these topics—and how might I need to adapt to better align with the realities, needs, and voices of today's youth?

The importance of connection

> "The best prevention measures often have nothing to do with substance use at all."[5]

For students in grades 4–8, building addictions prevention literacy about substance use health and balanced device use is most effective when rooted in connection. At this age, they are shaping their identities, independence, and sense of belonging.

Building connections among students—to friends, family, community, nature, and themselves—helps them see that support and engagement can encourage healthy coping strategies and reduce the risk of substance use or device use that is not balanced.[8]

What "connection" means for students:

- having supportive friendships with peers and relationships with caring adults
- feeling included and valued in the spaces they spend time (e.g., school, home/dwelling, community spaces)
- engaging in activities that they find fun and meaningful (e.g., sports, arts, volunteering, games, cultural traditions)
- building positive routines that boost mental health (e.g., sleep, physical activity, laughter, creative activity)
- knowing where to go for help and support when needed (e.g., a trusted adult, educator, One Stop Talk)

Connection can prevent substance use and promote balanced device use by:

- strengthening protective factors such as belonging, fun, and supportive relationships
- encouraging alternative strategies for coping with stress and challenges helping students understand why people might use substances (e.g., loneliness, stress, curiosity)

Take a moment to consider and reflect:

- What does it look like, sound like, when students feel connected at school?
- How do you, or could you, set up spaces at school that foster a sense of connection and belonging? Check out Connection, Community, Calm for ideas.

Tips to support implementation

Where do I begin?

Connect Quest activities focus on strengthening connections across three domains:

Self
- understanding one's thoughts, emotions, strengths, and values

Community
- Family and friends – building supportive, caring, and respectful relationships
- School – fostering inclusion, teamwork, and a sense of belonging in learning environments
- Culture and community – recognizing shared traditions, diversity, and collective well-being

Nature
- connection to nature, relationship to the land, sustainability, and environmental responsibility.

There are several ways to dive into the resources.
The following pages provide a few suggestions to help guide you as you explore.

Tips to support implementation

1. Get familiar with the student activities

You can do this in two ways:

- Browse this at-a-glance Implementation Map, which includes a link to all of the student activities, a brief content summary, implementation tips, and connection domain.
- Browse the individual Activities that students will use.
  Take note of:

Connection Domain: Self, Community or Nature.

Time: Estimated time required to complete activity.

Grade: Recommended level. Some activities suit all Grades 4–8; others are tailored to Grades 4–6 or 7–8, depending on topic and approach.

Helping hand: Level of adult support required to implement the activity, in terms of set up and guidance.

Supplies: List of required and optional materials, including activity sheets.

Tips to support implementation

2. Explore the Student Leaders Guide

The Student Leaders Webpage and Guide provides tools to help student leaders map out their own campaigns using the activities. The guide includes:

- ideas and tips to promote substance use health and balanced device use in the classroom or school
- examples of school-based campaigns, called “Quests”
- tools to help students plan and action their Quest
- examples of materials to support their campaign to promote substance use health and balanced device use, including posters, social media messages, and more!

Tips to support implementation

3. Connect with students

As an adult ally, connecting with students is probably something that comes naturally, and it is especially important in building addictions prevention literacy about substance use health and balanced device use.

Did you know research demonstrates that making these strong connections is linked to better emotional health, higher self-confidence, and reduced risky behaviours?[1] There are a number of ways to engage and connect with students. It can be as simple as having a conversation, as one student said:

> *"Having more 'real life' conversations, including different struggles or topics that may come up as we grow up. It makes the teachers appear more human and less strict, while also creating a bond between students and the teacher."*
> *Grade 7 student*

You may wish to try the 2x10 strategy. It is a simple, daily approach to building relationships with individual students. Spend two minutes a day for ten consecutive days talking with a student about anything they want to discuss. The goal is to build trust and learn more about what matters to the student.

As an adult ally, you also have the opportunity to reflect on what parents and caregivers tell you about areas of need and strength for their children. Students thrive in environments where they, and the supportive adults around them, build and sustain strong connections.

Ways to help facilitate and guide

Encourage students to consider and share all their leadership ideas

As an ally, you can create spaces and build relationships where the feelings and thoughts of students are validated and respected. In the early stages of planning, students are often enthusiastic, and many ideas may come forward. Rather than saying “no” or discouraging any of the ideas, embrace them all and then offer students strategies to sort the ideas.

This will help them decide which ideas to action first and which may require more time and planning.

- The NOW! WOW! HOW? Framework is one way to do this.
  - NOW! Ideas are simple and easy to implement (aka – tried and true).
  - WOW! Ideas are creative/original and can be implemented (may require a little more work than a NOW idea).
  - HOW? Ideas are innovative but are more difficult to implement. They will take more time and planning to action.

Take a backseat

Leave space for students to shine and lead. They are capable and creative leaders and changemakers! Be an active listener and support students only as needed.

Provide space and time

Organize a room or space where students can gather to explore Connect Quest activities and plan how they might bring them to life at their school. Have some basic supplies on hand to help with planning and preparing for events. Suggest appropriate times and opportunities for students to gather and connect.

Model the activities

Find opportunities where you might include Connect Quest activities during the school day as a way to model their use. This could be part of classroom learning, during a team or club meeting, at recess, etc.

Ways to help facilitate and guide

Highlight existing opportunities

Consider community connections that may amplify and support the efforts of students. Identify opportunities and connections within the school to incorporate quests. These could include student clubs, school events, celebrations, assemblies, and special days/weeks (e.g., Mental Health Week, Education Week).

Embedding Connect Quest into ongoing initiatives allows the activities to complement and strengthen the work your school has underway to promote substance use health and balanced device use.

Encourage inclusion

Help ensure that every student can contribute or participate. Support students in adapting activities so that they meet the needs of their school community. There are many considerations to keep in mind in this regard (e.g., online learning students, students with special education needs, multilingual learners, cultural and faith perspectives, etc.) When you guide students to think about ways to meaningfully engage every student in a respectful and strength-based way, you are modelling and fostering belonging for all.

When building a Quest Team, support students with recruitment and outreach. Encourage and guide them to think intentionally about who is represented in the group, whose voices are included, and whose may be missing. Invite students to consider diverse perspectives, including those from historically and presently marginalized or underrepresented groups, and to identify ways to amplify those voices within their Quest Team.

By encouraging and modelling inclusive recruitment practices, you can ensure that Connect Quest reflects the diverse experiences and strengths of all learners. For more information on recruiting, please see Recruitment for Student Engagement Initiatives Related to Mental Health.

Ways to help facilitate and guide

Know where to go for help

During these activities and conversations, you may notice students who are in need of additional mental health support. Ensure you are aware of school and board support and service pathways. Your school administrator(s) can provide assistance or visit the ONE-CALL Desk Reference.

As you move forward with **Connect Quest,** remember that your presence, curiosity, and care make a lasting impact. By fostering connection, encouraging exploration, and truly listening to students, you're helping to build a school culture rooted in belonging, balance, and resilience.

Thank you for being a trusted guide and champion for student well-being!

Additional Resources

For additional resources, please see the following at School Mental Health Ontario: www.smho-smso.ca

Connection, Community and Calm
https://smho-smso.ca/online-resources/starting-the-school-year-with-connection-community-and-calm/

Educators and student support staff
https://smho-smso.ca/educators-and-student-support-staff/

Everyday Mental Health Classroom Resource
https://smho-smso.ca/emhc/

Mental health literacy course for educators
https://smho-smso.ca/educators-and-student-support-staff/mh-lit-online-course/

Student Engagement Toolkit
https://smho-smso.ca/online-resources/student-engagement-toolkit/

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