



# CONNECT QUEST

ADULT ALLIES

## Introduction & Background



[connectquest.ca](https://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.

# Introduction and Background

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## What is Connect Quest about?

Ontario students are encountering increasingly complex issues related to substance use, device habits, and overall well-being.<sup>[1]</sup> These challenges can impact their mental health, relationships, and sense of belonging at school.

Navigating the pressures around personal devices and substance use can be difficult as young people juggle curiosity, peer dynamics, and media messages. Two key protective factors make a difference: trustworthy, factual information and meaningful social connections.

Connect Quest integrates both. It delivers clear, age-appropriate, reliable content that counters misinformation and pressure through interactive formats—approaches students report as effective. It centers relationships as a key aspect of building resilience and capacity.<sup>[2,3]</sup> Through cooperative learning, engaging activities, and guided discussions, learners practice empathy, communication, and belonging—skills that lower the risks associated with problematic substance use and digital overuse while fostering balance and well-being.

With supportive tools and guidance, students are better able to manage stress, build strong connections and friendships, make healthy choices, and strengthen their mental health, school success, and overall well-being.<sup>[4]</sup>

The resource is called Connect Quest to highlight the critical role that connection plays in protecting and promoting young people's mental health. Young people who feel connected to the people and institutions in their communities may be protected from other risk factors in their lives.<sup>[5]</sup> Increasing connectedness has been demonstrated as an effective prevention strategy for mental health and substance use health challenges.<sup>[6,7]</sup> “Quest” denotes the fun, choose-your-own adventure approach.



## Definitions

### 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](http://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 considers screen time in proportion to other priorities such as sleep, school, friends, family, and physical activity. [mediasmarts.ca](http://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. This can be 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.





## Why was it created?

The activities and approaches in **Connect Quest** are designed to provide school staff with resources to help young people in Grades 4-8 continue to build their understanding of themselves, connect with others, and build skills and confidence to make thoughtful choices about substance use and device use.

**Connect Quest** was created to help schools and school boards by providing accessible, student-informed tools to:

- support student leadership in fostering positive school climates
- engage students in conversations about substance use and balanced device use
- strengthen school connectedness and belonging





## How can Connect Quest help?

Connect Quest provides young people opportunities to:

- learn about their bodies, brains, and well-being
- build knowledge about healthy coping strategies
- reduce stigma through non-judgmental conversations about substance use health
- reflect on their own habits, emotions, and values, including how they use personal devices and connect with others
- combat misinformation about substance use
- understand the impacts of device use and how to find balance
- strengthen peer and school connections – key protective factors for well-being
- lead initiatives that amplify positive messages of resilience, balance, and belonging

The resources in the toolkit directly reflect the perspectives of Ontario students, which were intentionally gathered to inform its development. They also incorporate evidence from scientific literature and promising practices in promoting mental and substance use health literacy and balanced device use from Ontario and beyond.

Throughout this guide, we have included quotes from students and school staff who participated in the consultations. Their perspectives, combined with the research evidence, helped shape the development of these resources.





## How do I use it?

**Connect Quest** features flexible and responsive opportunities to promote addictions prevention literacy, substance use health and balanced device use. Input was gathered through extensive consultation with Ontario students in Grades 4-8 to inform the resources and ensure they incorporate and reflect:

- youth perspectives to help trusted adults understand the realities of students' lives
- learning approaches that students themselves identified as effective
- reliable evidence from a range of key sources

**The toolkit is designed to be flexible; it can be used in a variety of ways:**

- **individually**, by students for reflection and learning
- **in classrooms and school-wide** initiatives, led by students and supported by caring adults
- **at home**, by families and caregivers to support open conversations about substance use health and balanced device use

Additional information and guidance for school staff on implementing the tools and activities can be found on the [School Implementation Webpage and Guide](#).





## Background:

### What's the need?

Publicly funded schools across Ontario are facing increased challenges related to students' mental health and well-being, as highlighted in the 2022–23 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey.<sup>[8]</sup>

“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

School staff report needing resources that help students build skills to navigate these challenges, make healthier choices, and strengthen connections with themselves, their peers, their community, and the environment.<sup>[9]</sup>

Recent Canadian research reinforces this need, calling for evidence-based resources and school-based practices that can help prevent, reduce, and delay substance use harms,<sup>[10]</sup> 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 face increasing influences from peers, media, and online environments, all of which can shape their choices around substances and device use.<sup>[2]</sup>

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“It's not just about time spent online, it's about what that time might be replacing: sleep, connection, activity, support. This is an area that needs continued attention, collaboration, and care.”<sup>[11]</sup>

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The Ontario Ministry of Education provides guidance to school boards about addressing behaviours that can affect youth mental health and well-being, particularly personal device use at school and substance use (including vaping).

School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON), a provincial implementation support team that helps school districts enhance student mental health, partnered with I-Think Together and the Schizophrenia Society of Canada to create Connect Quest. This student-informed toolkit and campaign was developed to help young people build healthy habits, life skills, and informed decision-making related to substance use and device use.

## What Grades in 4–8 Students Told Us

As part of the development process, 459 Grade 4-8 students from across Ontario, along with their educators, 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.

“I used to think that avoiding all substances or limiting screen time was just about following rules, but now I see that it’s really about keeping our minds and bodies healthy.” Grade 8 student





## What we heard:

### 1. Make it relevant and useful

Students want learning that connects to their lives now, not just for the future.

*“Engaging learning happens best 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 - kind of a game or activity that everyone can make their own.”* Grade 8 student

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### 2. Help us feel a sense of accomplishment

Students want to see progress, build confidence, and apply what they learn.

*“I like that this model gives me the feeling of accomplishment.”*  
Grade 4/5 student

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### 3. Support our agency

Students want choice and independence, with trusted adults providing guidance.

*“Students felt comfortable knowing that an adult they trusted would be involved.”* Educator

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### 4. See us as changemakers

Students value opportunities to help others, build community, and create positive change.

*“Helping others in need is important and good to do.”* Grade 5 student

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### 5. Make it fun, active, and social

Hands-on, creative, and peer-connected activities make learning an engaging experience.

*“Being more hands-on, social, and creative makes it easier to learn.”*  
Grade 7 student

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### What students want adults to know:

- Youth brains are still developing; decision-making and emotions work differently.
- Adults’ experiences may not match today’s realities.
- Students want to be seen, heard, and understood.





“When adults were 9–13, times and problems were different than they are now.”  
Grade 8 student

## Engagement takeaways:

While knowledge and needs vary by grade and community, students consistently asked for:

- activities shaped by their interests and curiosity
- reliable information on how to stay safe
- trusted mentors and sources they can turn to
- visible progress and real-world impact
- open, supportive school staff

Students favoured approaches that provided choice and multiple ways to engage, including hands-on and interactive activities, while encouraging exploration, dialogue, and the use of reliable, trusted information.

## Introducing QUEST

**Quest** is the friendly guide who accompanies students as they explore Connect Quest. Quest helps students understand how each activity connects to balanced device use and substance use health. Through curiosity and encouragement, Quest helps students understand *why* these topics matter—how building connection, knowledge, and balance can support decision-making and overall well-being.



Research shows that stories and relatable guides help young people engage more deeply, remember what they learn, and feel more comfortable discussing sensitive topics like substance use and screen habits.<sup>[2]</sup> By modelling reflection, healthy choices, and social-emotional skills, Quest makes learning personal, positive, and fun.





## Why connection?

Fostering connection to oneself, to peers and family, to school, culture and community, and to the land—is an essential aspect of substance use health literacy and helping young people form balanced, healthy relationships with technology.

When students feel rooted in who they are (self-awareness, emotion regulation, values), supported by trusted people (peer buddies, family routines, mentorship), and engaged in belonging-rich spaces (clubs, teams, cultural celebrations, service projects, land-based learning), they are more likely to question misinformation, recognize pressure, and make safer choices about substances and device use.<sup>[2,3,8]</sup>

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### What “connection” means for students:

- having strong, healthy friendships.
- feeling included and valued in school, at home, and in their community
- engaging in fun, meaningful activities (sports, arts, games, cultural traditions)
- knowing where to go for help and support
- building positive routines that boost mental health (sleep, exercise, laughter, creativity)

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By intentionally cultivating connection, school staff, parents, and caregivers can coach youth to set personal boundaries, notice body/brain cues, and practice decision-making skills that keep screen time in balance and strengthen overall well-being.<sup>[4]</sup>





## Connect Quest is built around three key domains of connection:



### 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

Focusing on these key domains of connection gives youth a framework to develop self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and critical thinking. These are life skills that are essential for making informed decisions about substance use and balanced device use. By exploring how each domain connects to everyday life, students begin to see how health is shaped not only by individual choices, but also by relationships, environments, and communities.

Strengthening students' understanding and their connections—to themselves, their peers, school, community, and land—builds trust, belonging, and empathy while giving them opportunities to practice responsible decision-making and problem-solving. Together, these domains equip young people with practical ways to navigate social pressures, digital distractions, and health challenges, leading to safer choices, healthier habits, and positive outcomes that extend beyond the classroom.



## Domains of connection: evidence summary

### 1. Connection with self

Efforts to cultivate resilience in children and adolescents emphasize self-awareness as a pivotal skill.<sup>[13]</sup> Building self-awareness and emotional regulation helps young people understand, navigate and respond to emotions in ways that are helpful to them. These skills are strongly tied to both mental and substance use health.<sup>[14]</sup>

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“Connections to self are important to the majority of young people.”<sup>[12]</sup>

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Research shows that students who can regulate their emotions experience better mental health, lower stress, stronger decision-making skills, and healthier relationships.<sup>[15]</sup> There has also been increased recognition of the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) in schools. Ontario’s Health and Physical Education curriculum was updated in 2019–2020 to include SEL for students in Grades K–8, focusing on managing emotions, communication, stress management, and building healthy relationships.<sup>[16,17]</sup>

Supporting students to reflect on their thoughts and emotions can help them identify unhelpful patterns, regulate responses, and make conscious choices that support their well-being. As they strengthen these skills, youth develop more adaptive outlooks and healthier ways of handling life’s challenges.<sup>[18]</sup>





## Domains of connection: evidence summary



### 2. Connection with community

Community connectedness includes three reinforcing layers: family and friends, school, and broader community and culture. Connections with others shape young people's values, behaviours, and health habits, providing everyday modelling and emotional support. Schools extend this network by offering environments that build self-esteem, self-efficacy, and a sense of control.

Connection to community and culture strengthens well-being by reducing stress, fostering belonging, and widening access to resources and supportive networks. Together, these layers of connection help young people manage pressures, make healthy choices, and cultivate a strong sense of purpose and meaning.

#### a) Connecting with family and friends

During the developmental process, families and caregivers play a pivotal role in socialization and shaping the behaviours, values, and beliefs of young people. As behavioural role models, families and caregivers also play a key role in a variety of health-promoting behaviours and in supporting their children's psychological and emotional health and well-being.<sup>[12]</sup> Studies have shown that youth with strong attachments and supportive relationships with their parents and caregivers tend to have higher self-esteem.<sup>[19]</sup>

These positive connections may also help young people cope with challenges and struggles, including mental health struggles, and may contribute to preventing or delaying the onset of early or frequent substance use.

Strong connections with peers are important to young people, as peers can influence each other's school experiences and subsequent behaviours. As young people mature, the influence of peer relationships and the school environment on their mental well-being becomes more pronounced.<sup>[20]</sup> Fostering supportive peer connections and a positive school climate are crucial for promoting youths' development and mental health.

A national Canadian study shows that students who report strong relationships with family, friends, and school—key facets of community connectedness—also report better mental health and well-being.<sup>[4]</sup>





## Domains of connection: evidence summary

### b) Connecting at school

Schools are important environments for shaping students' self-esteem, self-efficacy, and sense of control.<sup>[5]</sup> Most youth spend a significant amount of time at school, which can impact their cognitive, physical, and mental development. As students progress through adolescence, schools and the support they provide, as well as peer relationships, become increasingly significant influences.<sup>[20]</sup>

The Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health defines school connectedness as *“the extent to which students perceive that they are accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the educational environment.”*<sup>[21]</sup>

Research demonstrates that strong connections with school, educators, and peers are linked to better emotional health, higher self-confidence, and reduced behaviours that may be potentially harmful.<sup>[5]</sup> Conversely, students disconnected from school are more likely to join peer groups that engage in higher-risk activities.<sup>[4]</sup>

“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 the students and the teacher. The conversations also allow the kids to learn stuff that may not be brought up at home.” Grade 7 student

Because school connectedness is a well-established protective factor for mental health, strengthening activities that build belonging and positive school climate should be seen as an important part of strategies to improve the well-being of young people.<sup>[4]</sup>

“A lot of students rely on school as a safe place.” Educator





## Domains of connection: evidence summary

### c) Connecting with culture and community

Community can mean different things for different young people. For some, it may be rooted in geography, identity or a common cause.<sup>[27]</sup> Connecting with culture and community can significantly support student mental health by reducing stress, fostering a sense of belonging, and improving overall well-being.<sup>[12]</sup> Community engagement offers healthy outlets for managing academic and social pressures, increases access to mental health resources, and builds supportive social networks that contribute to a sense of purpose and meaning.<sup>[22]</sup>

Culturally grounded and community-based experiences further strengthen belonging and identity—both important protective factors for mental health. Among Indigenous youth in central Canada, access to land and nature (e.g., ceremonies, time on the land, community gatherings) promotes cultural belonging, positive identity, and supportive relationships, all of which youth describe as vital to healing and resilience.<sup>[23]</sup>

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“Connection to community is knowing your neighbours and lending them a hand if needed; smiling and waving to your community members as you pass by.”

[Wise Practices Life Promotion Toolkit](#)

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Community engagement also offers practical, health-promoting routines that protect against stress and build social support. For example, participation in school extracurriculars and sports has been linked with lower anxiety and depressive symptoms among children and adolescents in Ontario, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>[24]</sup> Volunteering, whether in school, faith, or community groups, is associated with higher odds of flourishing and excellent or very good health, and with lower odds of anxiety among adolescents.<sup>[25]</sup>

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“Students want to be changemakers in their relationships and in the community.”  
Educator





## Domains of connection: evidence summary

Being connected to community can also improve access to mental health information and supports, as students interact with trusted adults, peers, faith leaders, Elders, and mentors in their everyday environments. When schools and communities intentionally create inclusive, culturally safe spaces, young people gain multiple pathways to belonging, emotion regulation, and help-seeking, which are core to good mental health.<sup>[26]</sup>

“Students who participated in the engagement consistently expressed wanting to contribute to the well-being and the success of others in their community. They are interested in not just learning information, but wanting to use it in a way that helps other people.” Educator



## Domains of connection: evidence summary

### 3. Connection with nature

Connecting with nature is a powerful protective factor for young people. It supports positive mental health, strengthens resilience, and fosters a sense of responsibility for the environment. Time outdoors also offers healthy ways to cope with stress (including climate-related worry), deepens cultural identity and belonging—especially through land-based activities—and supports overall well-being. Canadian data show that teens who spend more time being active outdoors report better mental health, higher life satisfaction and happiness, and less stress.<sup>[30]</sup>

Nature can also help young people handle tough times. Many Canadian youth report climate distress (strong emotions about climate change) and some say it affects their daily life, including school and relationships.<sup>[31]</sup> Time in nature and outdoor learning can offer healthy ways to cope, such as connecting with friends, lowering stress, and taking positive action through stewardship.

For Indigenous youth, connecting with the land in support of well-being ties to longstanding traditional practices. Research from central Canada shows that land-based and culture-based activities with Elders and community leaders build cultural identity, belonging, and strong support networks. These connections can protect against stress and support mental health.<sup>[23]</sup>

For many young people, climate distress is a natural response to a real, existential threat. For some, it can significantly affect their psychiatric, social, and educational functioning.<sup>[32]</sup> Research shows that regular access to green space benefits children's mental well-being and overall health, boosting memory, social support, self-discipline, and reducing stress. A 2025 study found that Canadian adolescents who engage in at least 14 hours of outdoor physical activity each week report the highest levels of positive mental health, high life satisfaction, and happiness.<sup>[31]</sup>





## Summary

**Connect Quest activities focus on strengthening these three domains of connection:**

- self
- community
- nature

Together, these domains provide young people with a framework for developing self-awareness, emotional regulation, and critical thinking — skills that support informed decision-making about substance and balanced device use.

Engaging in these areas also fosters supportive relationships, a sense of belonging, and responsible decision-making.

Collectively, the domains equip students with practical strategies to navigate social, digital, and health-related challenges, promoting safer choices, healthier habits, and positive developmental outcomes.





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