

# Four pillars help youths stay away from drugs and booze

*School reports find children using drugs, but more options are available as deterrents*

by Samantha Stokell  
Northern News Services  
NWT

The battle against addictions starts early, even before children start experimenting with drugs. And that's where one organization is setting its sights.

The Hay River Drug Strategy provides healthy options to youth in the hopes they will build resiliency and learn how to develop healthy relationships, not drug habits.

"People get passionate about it. No one doesn't want to give their kids a better life," said Jill Taylor, an inclusive schooling co-ordinator with the South Slave Divisional Education Council and a member of the Hay River Drug Strategy. "Even if adults have an addiction, it doesn't mean they want it for their child."

Little information is available about children and drug and alcohol abuse. Studies completed by the NWT Bur-

eau of Statistics start at age 15 and older, well after youth have started experimenting.

Schools within the NWT have taken the initiative to study when and why students under the age of 15 start using drugs and how often. A study done earlier this year by the Yellowknife Committee for the Prevention of Youth Substance Abuse surveyed 436 students in Grades 6 to 9. It found that students started doing drugs as early as age 11.

The Hay River Drug Strategy has conducted a drug-use survey each November since 2008 of students in Grades 8 to 12. Over the past three years, since the strategy formed, marijuana and alcohol use has dropped, while use of speed and ecstasy has risen slightly.

During the 2009/10 school year, 1,700 NWT students participated in an international survey done by Queens University that looked at health behaviours of school-aged children aged 11 to 13. Those results are expected before the end of 2011 and should show how the NWT compares to the rest of Canada and 43 other countries.

The GNWT's view on addictions is to start prevention early, through the Healthy Choices framework, which involves the departments of Health and Social Services, Municipal and Commu-

ity Affairs, Justice and Education, Culture and Employment. The programs include Don't Be a Butthead and the Not Us campaign. Through extracurricular activities, diet,

awareness of risky behaviours and active living, the departments hope an interagency approach will have an impact.

"I look at in the way of seatbelts. Everyone learns at a young age to be aware of things and the risks of certain lifestyles and they'll take certain steps to be safe," said Dan Daniels, deputy minister for the Department of Education, Culture and Employment. "Everyone should wear a seatbelt and if children start wearing seatbelts it could have spill over effects onto parents and families who might have lifestyle issues of their own."

Taylor, too, believes to win the battle against drugs with children, the entire community must get involved.

The Hay River Drug Strategy meetings have participants from the RCMP, Public Health, the schools, justice, probation, recreation department, Town of Hay River and community churches.



photo courtesy of Heidi Bender

Richard Stewart, left, Nicole Collison, Kyla Hvatum, Jeremy Cockney and Liam Laroque play board games at Samuel Hearne Secondary School in Inuvik while taking part in the Lights On program, first initiated in Hay River. The program provides a safe place for students to hang out on Saturday nights.

**"We give them options and ask them to make good decisions."**

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The strategy focuses on four pillars to reduce drug use: prevention, treatment and intervention, harm reduction and enforcement. It's these four pillars that have been so effective in creating change in Hay River.

"If your community decides to address just with enforcement, it won't have as much as an impact," Taylor said. "That's where the interagency is so critical. No one agency can tackle this on their own. It comes from individuals working together."

The Hay River Drug Strategy has seen the use of marijuana drop to 48 per cent from 58 per cent of all students, as well as a decrease in alcohol consumption. There has, however, been a very slight increase in the use of speed, to 4.2 per cent from zero per cent, as well as the use of ecstasy.

The biggest result has been a cultural shift in the schools, with Monday morning conversations changing from who was drunk and where the parties were to healthy activities of what people did on the weekends.

"The kids report that they don't feel as self-conscious talking about non-partying activities. It's okay to not party or use drugs," Taylor said. "If a community can offer activ-

ities, they will feel more supported and have strong mentors who can teach them to build more positive relationships and to build resiliency. It helps to give youth the tools to be healthy."

Delaying first experimentation with drugs and alcohol is a major goal of the drug strategy. They hope that by providing different options, youth will choose a healthy lifestyle. Through studies, the strategy has found that drug experimentation spikes at two ages in Hay River - 13 and 16.

"Friends become extremely important at that age and that's when adults tend to disengage," Taylor said.

Other communities have started following Hay River's lead. Fort Smith and Inuvik have both started Lights On programs in their schools to provide safe places for youth to go on weekend nights. The program, originally started in Hay River, opens the schools and gives students a place to hang out in a drug-free, supervised place. Activities include sports, as well as video games, board games, cooking and other classes.

"We don't tell them don't drink, don't do drugs," Taylor said. "We give them options and ask them to make good decisions."

**DEHCHO**  
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