

# Supporting Coalitions in Harm Reduction Services & Approaches for Youth

National Harm Reduction Coalition worked with California Overdose Prevention Network (COPN) funded multi-sector coalitions throughout the state in 2022 and focused on supporting coalitions in harm reduction services and approaches for youth.

## Lessons Learned

In multiple communities, overdose deaths of young people ages 12-20 were motivating factors to seek out harm reduction education.

### Lack of Understanding

In multiple communities, coalition members did not have a true understanding or grasp on youth drug use, so involving youth or youth-led organizations could provide key stakeholders and experts to enhance and expand this work.

### Punishment vs. Education

Drug education for young people has historically been punitive and relied on strict, unexplained prohibition of drugs which only stigmatizes students and denies them access to honest lifesaving information.

### Include Parents & Teachers

Harm reduction for youth inherently involves working with parents, teachers, and other adults that engage with young people.

### Build Relationships with Schools

Coalitions that built relationships with schools were able to embed more into sustainable structures of education. Coalitions were successful in implementing naloxone training for teachers and bringing in consultants to create curricula.

## Key Takeaway

Drug use and experimentation is developmentally normal for young people, and with an unregulated and unsafe drug supply, harm reduction is essential to ensuring young people do not die.

## Best Practices

There are some best practices that are very similar to how we support adults around substance use, but our own fears can trip us up in implementing them with young people.

### Understand the Why

If someone is using drugs on a regular basis, especially a young person, understand why they want to alter their reality and try to understand what needs the drugs may be filling; stay curious and avoid using shame because that often pushes young people further from accurate information, connection, and safety.

### Provide Accurate Information

If someone is curious about drugs, especially a young person, give them accurate information about the effects (both positive and negative), potential risks, and ways to stay safe and reduce harm if they do decide to use drugs.

### Don't Use Fear

Be careful not to perpetuate fear-based messaging or misinformation about fentanyl or any other drug. We want young people to feel safe and empowered when talking about drug use with parents and other adults.

### Give Naloxone

It is essential to give naloxone directly to people who are at risk for overdose, including young people.

**Get more resources on harm reduction and approaches for youth**

[harmreduction.org](https://harmreduction.org)  
[nopn.org/library](https://nopn.org/library)