

RESULTS FROM
A FOCUS GROUP OF
LYNNFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS
MIDDLE SCHOOL
PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

CONDUCTED BY
A HEALTHY LYNNFIELD &
SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH AND EVALUATION, INC.
ON JANUARY 28, 2020



RESULTS

BACKGROUND

- A focus group was convened by *A Healthy Lynnfield* (AHL) on January 28, 2020 with 8 parents/caregivers of middle school students in Lynnfield to discuss health and well-being, substance use and related issues, and the potential roles that parents, caregivers, and others can play in supporting youth and preventing risky behaviors.
- Participants were encouraged to think broadly about substance use, including use of alcohol, tobacco or nicotine use (e.g., cigarettes, cigars, vaping, JUUL), marijuana, and other illegal drugs.
- This document summarizes the main themes and provides illustrative comments for each topic area discussed.

BENEFITS & CHALLENGES TO RAISING A FAMILY IN LYNNFIELD

What are some of the **benefits** to living here and raising a family? **Positive things** about the community.

Tight-knit sense of community

- Community, tight-knit, small-town
 - *I love my neighborhood. People are just friendly. I met more people the first month I lived in Lynnfield than in 35 years in my prior community.*

People who know and care about each other

- Knowing a lot of people (can be a positive and negative), knowing the people who my kids are with wherever they go, child knows familiar faces
 - *As a community, we step up for families in need both inside and outside of our community.*

Activities

- Sports, intergenerational activities (senior center, schools involving young and older kids together with older kids mentoring), kids going outside and playing (fresh air, not tied to TV)

Schools

- Good schools, closeness between educators and parents

Spirit of collaboration

- Ensuring that topics like this are brought up



What are some things that make it **challenging** for parents and caregivers here to raise a family?

Competition to "keep up"

- Keeping up with the Joneses, trying to explain to kids why they might not be able to do something that they see someone else doing or have what they see another child has

Lack of diversity

- Lack of diversity (ethnically, racially, economically), not much exposure to the real world

Lack of problem-solving and coping skills among youth

- Live in a bit of a bubble, challenged to get themselves out of difficult situations, lack of street smarts
 - *If we dropped our son off somewhere, he wouldn't be able to find his way home.*

Impact of exposure to intergenerational activities

- Young children exposed to things that older kids and adults are doing, struggle to understand age-appropriate behavior
 - *My boys are 11 and 13 and meet older brothers of their friends who might be doing different things than them.*

Lack of open discussion of issues

- Tendency to "sweep things under the rug" rather than using them as teachable moments for kids



HEALTH & WELL-BEING OF MIDDLE SCHOOL YOUTH IN LYNNFIELD

What do you feel are the one or two **most pressing challenges** facing the **health and well-being of middle school youth** in Lynnfield **right now**?

Social media

- Screen time, cell phones, apps where kids can see where all of their friends are in real-time and realize that they may not have been invited, fear of missing out ("FOMO"), worrying about what's being said on social media even when they're engaged in an activity

Exposure to influences

- Earlier exposure and easier access to activities and behaviors, largely through social media, access bypasses parents
 - *Social media and songs are more blatant, in terms of exposure early on without kids being equipped to handle it.*

Competition to "keep up"

- Keeping up with the Joneses pressure is especially strong among middle school youth, huge sports town and kids feel pressure to have all of the special equipment that other kids have
- Academic pressure combined with peer perception
 - *They want to do very well academically, but not too well. They want to do well to make their parents happy but don't want to be a nerd. They are at the age where they think about it but don't speak about it.*

Peer pressure and lack of problem-solving and coping skills

- Peer pressure (likely similar to other towns)
 - *Kids struggle with problem solving and coping skills to work things out without adult intervention, like trying to figure out rules of a game. They don't have those natural opportunities.*
- Ability to "be bold" in a group of peers and vocalize personal beliefs or preferences (e.g., refusal skills) to avoid risky behaviors or get out of a situation

Need for instant gratification

- Constantly needing something to do immediately, need direction to do anything (especially in own home)
 - *They want everything now and if they don't get it instantly, they fall apart emotionally*

YOUTH SUBSTANCE USE

When you think about **substance use in Lynnfield among middle school youth**, what immediately comes to mind? Specific **substances, incidents** or **stories**, things that you are **concerned about**?

Vaping

- Surprised that middle schoolers are using
 - *How do they get it?*
- There is a "mystique" to vaping
- Misinformation and lack of knowledge among parents to advise properly, challenging to answer questions about age-appropriate use (e.g., whether it is harmful or helpful)
 - *I'll have to look up what JUUL is. How do you even spell JUUL?*
- Impact of recent ban and media attention regarding sickness/deaths from vaping – kids are more afraid of it now; they are learning about it in health class and that has helped
 - *I didn't know that I needed to talk to my daughter that early. It would be helpful to know what they are learning about in school so I can follow up on those conversations*



Confusion and misperceptions – legal and illegal drug use, harmfulness of substances, age-appropriate behavior

- Legality of tobacco and vaping products, alcohol, and marijuana
 - *My daughter asked why drinking and vaping are legal but marijuana isn't. The lines were blurry in her eyes. She thought drinking was 'good' because it's legal. These are murky waters and trying to navigate her through that was very eye opening. We can't be black and white on this – it's all gray. Even though they're learning it that young, there are still misconceptions and confusion about what they're being taught.*
 - *Marijuana being legal is very confusing to me and my kids.*
- Perceived harm/safety of prescription drugs and illegal drugs
 - *I was picking up a prescription and my daughter said, 'That's considered a legal drug.' I was impressed that in 5th grade she knew the difference, but explained that even though it's prescribed, you can still be harmed by and abuse prescription drugs. It was a great opportunity to have an important discussion.*
- Concern over how age-appropriate alcohol use impacts youth perceptions
 - *When the kids were learning about alcohol abuse, they would ask things like why I could have a drink at dinner, whether I could drive after having a drink. The first time they asked me, I was very ashamed. They were young and curious. I had to work on explaining legality, control over own body, things like that.*
 - *My kids check on me all the time. They ask who is driving if/when both parents have a drink at dinner or how do I know when I can or can't drive.*
 - *My kids count my drinks. For the past year or so, my boys are interested in what alcohol tastes like (6/7th graders).*
 - *Being at family parties and having an adult drunk in those situations leads to many questions about what 'appropriate use' looks like. Kids didn't used to go to parties with their parents where alcohol was served. The intergenerational overlap is difficult to navigate.*

Fear of what substances are out there and their danger

- Need kids to know that there are dangers out there, don't take something from someone you don't know
 - *You could smoke a joint when we were younger, but now that could be deadly if it's laced with something.*

What are some **specific factors in Lynnfield** that you feel may **promote youth substance use** more than others among **middle school youth**?

Adults modeling behavior through alcohol use

- Lots of social drinking, parents bringing alcohol to sports events
 - *At night/indoor soccer in the winter, there are many parents who have strong alcohol in their thermos. That is shocking to see at 7pm.*

Impact of exposure to intergenerational activities

- Kids exposed to regular alcohol consumption during friend and family functions, need to have discussions with kids about responsible drinking [teachable moments]
 - *I was once at a family function and had to leave for a while. I had to specifically tell my kids not to go home with anyone until I returned out of fear of them getting in a car with people who had been drinking. It is difficult because I don't want to taint their thoughts about people that we know really well.*

Social media

- Kids post from parties and when other kids see those posts, they think it's cool
- Parents post from their own social events and kids see those posts, leading to confusion

Stress and anxiety

- High rates of anxiety and stress, kids turning to self-medication to manage stress, some parents providing vape pens for their kids to help them with their anxiety
 - *Definitely agree with the anxiety. My kids are too young to turn to drugs for that, but they are very anxious.*

Easier access to obtaining substances

- Kids have the financial means to obtain heavier drugs if they want to



PREVENTION

What are some of the **positive things** you think **parents and caregivers** of middle school youth in Lynnfield are **already doing to prevent substance use?**

Leveraging school/community-based education targeting both children and parents

- Children learning about substance use in health class, provides an opportunity for parents to further the discussion
 - *Hearing it from a teacher might make them more likely to believe it than if it came from Mom.*
- Would like more direct communication about what children are learning in health class to facilitate parent follow-up discussion
- Parent-focused events are generally not well-attended and have the same participants each time
 - *I go to all of those parent nights, like the slideshow on the physical impact of substance use and one on anxiety, and there is nobody there. It's the same 25 people every time. There is always a conflict. People don't realize how important it is.*
- Superintendent sends out links to various articles



Attending and leveraging community events

- Events like sponsored speakers and advocacy walks provide an opportunity for children and parents to increase knowledge and promote further discussion, visual reminders that promote further discussion
 - *The speakers that the community brings in have an impact on my kids. Chris Herren – my son talked to us about it after his presentation. Programs for the kids with follow-up for parents are important and give parents opportunities to talk more to their children.*
 - *After I go, I feel myself talking to parents about it all week. It ripples out. I'm impressed by what I'm hearing and I love the ones where I can talk to my kids if they had a presentation.*
 - *Opportunities that we have in town to get together about an issue that might not be easy to talk about separately, like the "A Night of Hope" walk in September. The kids' teams all walked together. They normally get it at school or home but talking about addiction in the open was very powerful and demystifying... magical for my family. It shows it can happen to anyone. After the walk my son said, "This could happen to anybody."*
 - *There is a ripple effect – things like t-shirts from the walk serve as reminders. Kids comment on them and promote the ripple effect. The mangled car outside the high school. It's all visual for them – visual reminders drive it home more for them and carries it forward.*

Looking for "teachable moments"

- Utilizing every-day occurrences and current events to promote discussion. Examples from entire discussion include: overdose of a professional baseball player that resonated with son's love of baseball, family party with heavy adult alcohol use, family dinner at a restaurant that provoked discussion of age-appropriate alcohol use, picking up a prescription with child and talking about the difference between prescription and illegal drugs, and driving by "mangled car" outside of the high school and talking about drinking and driving.

Engaging youth in activities

- Many activities for kids to do (sports, musicals, etc.)

What **attitudes or behaviors among adults** in Lynnfield related to youth substance use **need to change?**

Adults modeling behavior through alcohol use

- Social drinking, alcohol and sports (parents bringing alcohol to sports events, tailgating at football games, drinking at softball/baseball fields), intergenerational events (combined parents/kids parties)
 - *Everybody gets together, which is great, but the kids see alcohol use as normal.*
- Parents post their own party pictures, kids think drinking is normal



Home environment impacts

- Conditions in home that might increase access/exposure (e.g., refrigerator in finished basement that contains alcohol)
 - *When do I need to count the beers?*
- People having house parties and allowing drinking
 - *A parent I know said "I'd rather they get it from me than buy it from someone and not know what they're getting." I just started thinking that people have gotten in trouble for that. Arrested. These attitudes can trickle down. We need parents to be better role models.*

Lack of adequate mental health supports for youth

- Not enough mental health counselors in the schools, particularly for younger children
 - *There may be kids who see their parents pass out or overdose – kids at young ages are seeing these things – they can't go to the impaired parent for support.*

What are some topics or messages that you think would resonate with parents/caregivers?

Parental behavior influences children

- Remind parents that their kids see what they do
 - *Drug commercial we saw as kids – "I learned it from watching you."*

Importance of parental involvement in information sessions

- Strongly encourage and/or require parental participation in selected sessions, provide "perks"
 - *Any possibility of making certain events mandatory for parents? If not mandatory, at least give perks.*
 - *Ask for parental participation and let the kids know about it – use peer pressure from kids on parents.*



Looking for "teachable moments"

- Utilizing every-day occurrences and current events to promote discussion
 - *I had a teachable moment when I went out with friends and had one very strong drink. I realized that I couldn't drive and had to text my husband to have him come and pick me up. It led to a valuable discussion with my kids about getting out of difficult situations and using safety strategies like calling or texting for help.*

What types of things have you already discussed with your child or children?

It happens here

- Openly discussing addiction and overdoses
 - *We're a "not us" community.*
 - *Thankful to the Daltons for telling the truth about how Michael died. There have been other overdoses that weren't public. Honesty about cause of death moves us all to greater awareness.*
 - *I'm fairly new to Lynnfield and there have been a lot of overdoses swept under the rug. What do we do to get our kids to understand the risk right around the corner?*

Generational and hereditary issues that might impact them

- The role of family history and genetics in addiction
 - *My family culture has been "we don't discuss it." My husband and I have been honest with our kids about generational/hereditary issues that might impact them. We talk to them about family members who have struggled with addiction and explained they are good people. We need to be honest about family history.*

Looking for "teachable moments"

- Utilizing every-day occurrences and current events to promote discussion
 - *Social media romanticized the recent overdose of rapper Juice Wrld. The original rumor/word was that he died of an asthma attack. I was annoyed at the untrue attempt to sweep it under the rug and used it as a teachable moment.*
 - *When a professional baseball player overdosed, we put that in front of our son who loves baseball so he could see how an error could end your life and to understand how they can harm their body.*



- *I'm not always prepared for the discussions at such a young age. I have to get out of the shock phase. I need more time to process and then revisit information with him.*

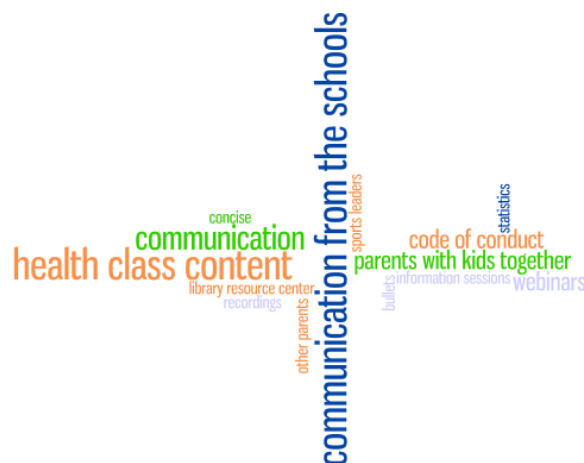
Safety strategies

- Ways to extricate themselves from dangerous situations, such as them calling or texting with a code word or phrase like "X" or "what's for dinner" to let you know that you need pick them up with no questions asked

What kinds of information, resources, or supports are Lynnfield parents/caregivers looking for?

Communication from schools about current health class content and related issues

- Provide parents with information about content being discussed in health class to allow parents to extend the discussion at home
 - *There should be more consistency between what the kids are receiving and what the parents are receiving around health information and what is being discussed in school. An email with a bulleted list of topics for parents. Just something to keep you thinking. A little reminder to extend the discussion at home.*
- School emails should be concise, bulleted, and contain important information within the email rather than in links



Communication with parents of kids in same age group

- Facilitated communication between parents to encourage information and resource sharing
 - *I would love to have access to other parents in the age group of my kids, like a Facebook page for parents of Lynnfield middle school students. In elementary school, you get a class list, but that goes away in middle school.*

Continuation of, expanded access to, and encouraged parental participation in information sessions

- Opportunities for kids and parents to attend together
- Record and post presentations online (if possible)
- Webinars
 - *I would love something like that because you can go to it when it's convenient and go back to it if you need to.*

Community prevention efforts

- Involvement of leaders of sports groups in prevention efforts
- Required code of conduct governing youth participation in sports and parent conduct at sporting events
- Healthy Lynnfield could host coffee hours or "manned office hours" on a regular schedule with resources and materials that parents can discuss and take away, for example at the Library, rather than large presentations
- Regularly report statistics from the Lynnfield Fire Department such as the number of responses involving naloxone/Narcan

SUMMARY POINTS

Benefits of living here	Challenges to living here	Challenges to youth health	Issues around youth substance use here	Factors promoting youth substance use
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tight-knit sense of community • People who know and care about each other • Activities • Schools • Spirit of collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competition to "keep up" • Lack of diversity • Lack of problem-solving and coping skills among youth • Impact of exposure to intergenerational activities • Lack of open discussion of issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media • Exposure to influences • Competition to "keep up" • Peer pressure and lack of problem-solving and coping skills • Need for instant gratification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vaping • Confusions and misperceptions – legal and illegal drug use, harmfulness of substances, age-appropriate behavior • Fear of what substances are out there and their danger 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adults modeling behavior through alcohol use • Impact of exposure to intergenerational activities • Social media • Stress and anxiety • Easy access to obtaining substances
Positive things parents are doing to prevent youth use	Adult behaviors that need to change	Messages that would resonate with parents	Parents are already discussing with children	Resources parents want
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leveraging school-based education targeting both children and parents • Attending and leveraging community events • Looking for "teachable moments" • Engaging youth in activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adults modeling behavior through alcohol use • Home environment impacts • Lack of adequate mental health supports for youth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental behavior influences children • Importance of parental involvement in information sessions • Looking for "teachable moments" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It happens here • Generational and hereditary issues that might impact them • Looking for "teachable moments" • Safety strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication from schools about current health class content and related issues • Communication with parents of kids in same age group • Continuation of, expanded access to, and encouraged parental participation in information sessions • Community prevention efforts: involvement from leaders in sports community; better public safety data • More youth mental health supports