



June 2022

Starlings Community INC

Substance Use Stigma is Harming Youth: A Child's Rights Issue

"Reducing stigma is key to effectively addressing problematic substance use, and is a critical step in recognizing the fundamental rights and dignity of all Canadians, including those who use substances. Dr. Theresa Tam, Chief Public Health Officer of Canada, Government of Canada, 2018

"Stigma has a perverse effect of silencing. It creates taboos and results in issues not being addressed. Stigma renders some people and their needs invisible in society." United Nations General Assembly, 2012

The Mission of Starlings Community is to: protect the health and promote the healing of children who are exposed to the stress and stigma of a parent's substance use. Why?

In Canada, it is estimated that 1 in 5 children are exposed to a parent's substance use disorder and literature states that impacted youth are at up to triple the risk for mental illness, suicide, and substance use disorder. Much of the evidence points to a parent's substance use as the root problem. However, this risk does not consider the root causes of substance use in a parent or the systemic barriers and discrimination parents and their children experience.

In today's society, evidence indicates that disclosing a parent's substance use can mean a child is removed from their home, a parent is criminalized, and families are marginalized. Furthermore, amidst a toxic and unregulated drug supply which is killing Canadians at high rates, with the age 30-49* being the most at risk, the number of youth bereaved to the crisis is not monotired, leaders have not acknowledged the impact this has on youth, and no additional funding or supports have been allocated to resources for impacted youth.

*average age of first time Canadian is 31.

As per the Convention on the Rights of a Child (OHCHR, 1989), children have a right to:

- Article 2: no discrimination
- Article 3: the best interests of the child be a primary consideration ***in all actions concerning children***
- Article 8: their identity
- Article 9: stay with their family
- Article 17: access information
- Article 18 and 19: have supports for their parents that could enable trauma healing and promote parenting practices



- Article 24 and 39: themselves access supports that would enable them to heal from harm

As per the voices of individuals with lived experience:

"It's not always safe to tell someone, especially when the systems can't always guarantee your safety." Anonymous, age 18-24, Canada.

"I want people to know the level of shame the entire family feels, the struggle of loving someone who hurts you but doesn't want to, how much criminalization hurts." Anonymous, Age 18-24, Canada

"The stigma surrounding addiction has affected me and my healing greatly. Whenever I share my story people have a changed view of me as if I chose to be in that situation as a child. And this makes it extremely difficult to open up to mental health professionals because of the fear of judgment." Anonymous, age 18-24, Toronto, ON

"I want people to have compassion. If my parents had community support, felt they could get help without losing us, maybe they would have gotten help." Anonymous, Age 24-35, Canada; Starlings Community Questionnaire: Impacts of Stigma on Canadians Exposed to Parental SUD, 2021

As such, Starling's Community believes that substance use stigma prevents our societies from protecting a child's fundamental rights, placing children whose parent's have unaddressed trauma and subsequent substance use disorder at a substantially increased risk for adverse health outcomes. More pressingly, we believe that children have a right to be protected from substance use stigma and its harmful effects on families.

Further documentation coming this fall leading up to Nation Child's Day.

Sources:

Starlings Community INC. (2022, February). A NEW PATH FORWARD: A Starlings Community Report Highlighting the Harm Imposed on Children Who are Exposed to the Stigma of a Parent's Drug or Alcohol Use, and Recommendations for a New Path Forward. Retrieved 2022 from https://www.starlings.ca/_files/ugd/990b28_45f1251e9890482a9e2152e614c7ea41.pdf

OHCHR. (1989). Convention on the Rights of the Child. Retrieved 2022, from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>



Substance Use Stigma and Children's Rights

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Starlings Community (SC) is a not-for-profit in Alberta, Canada whose mission is to protect the health and promote the healing of Canadian children who have been impacted by the stress and stigma of a parent's substance use. Through advocacy, knowledge mobilization, and programming, their focus is on dismantling the impacts of substance use **stigma** on children, while simultaneously increasing the community protection offered to impacted families.