

Beyond just say no

**A harm reduction approach to
adolescent substance use**

Introduction

A 16-year-old comes into your clinic. She's vaping regularly, sometimes uses pills she buys from friends, and her parents don't know. Do you shut it down? Refer her to treatment? Call her parents? Or do you try to understand why?

Introduction

Shared Goals:

- Keeping Youth Safe
- Keeping Youth Alive
- Keeping Youth Healthy
- Keeping Youth Connected



Learning Objectives

1. Define the concept of harm reduction.
2. Explain the importance of a harm reduction approach for adolescents.
3. Apply harm reduction strategies in practice.

Harm Reduction

What It Is:

- A public health strategy rooted in compassion and evidence
- A way to meet young people where they are and reduce the risk of harm, no matter their choices

What It Isn't:

- Encouraging drug use
- Anti-Abstinence
- Giving up on youth

Harm Reduction

Harm Reduction refers to strategies and ideas aimed at minimizing negative consequences of drug use and other high-risk behaviors

Seatbelts, bike helmets, safe sex, nicotine gum, are all harm reduction. We don't say, "Just don't crash your car."

Core Values

- Dignity
- Autonomy
- Non-judgmental support
- Success = Any Positive Change
- Reality-Based

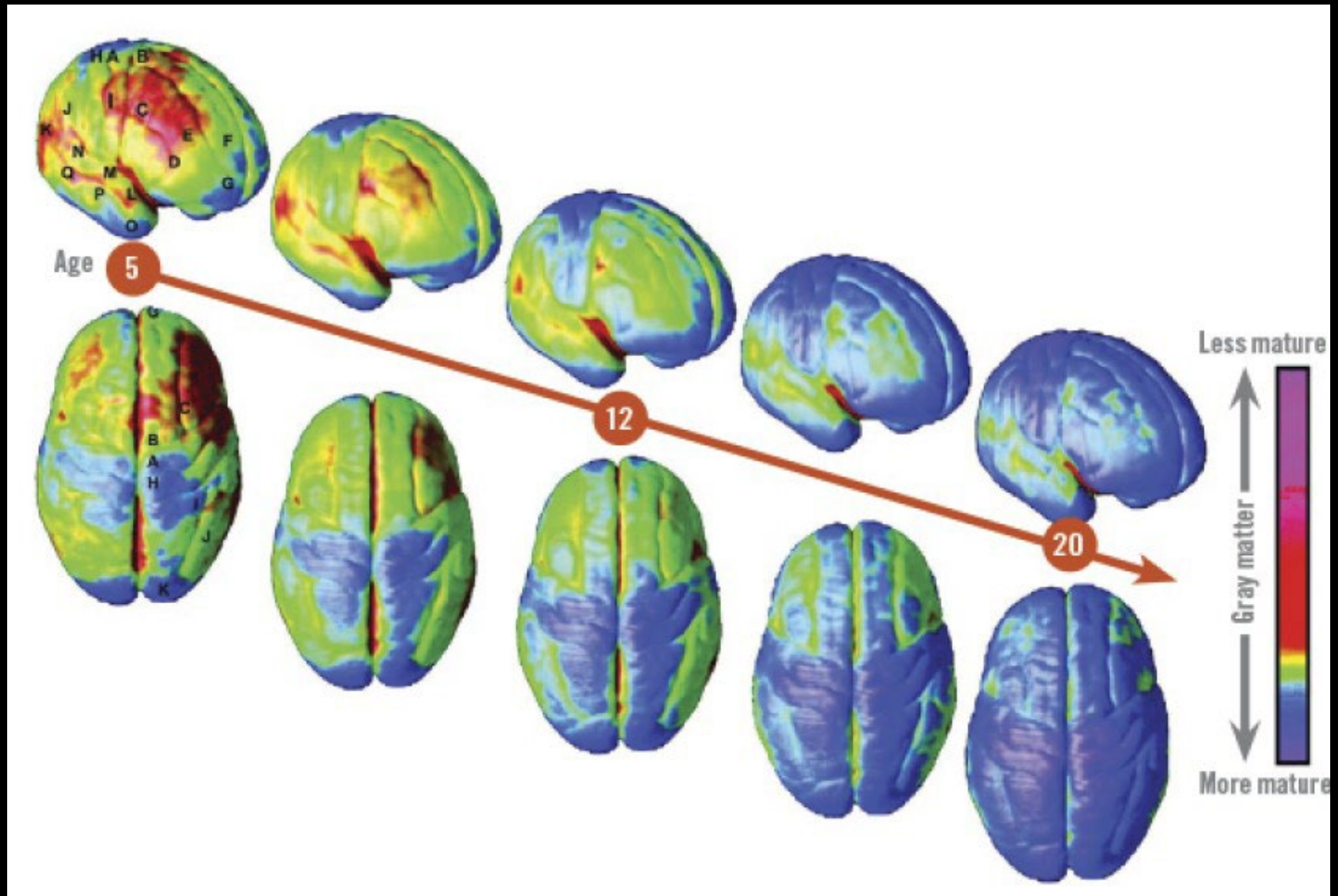
HR Accepts:

- Substance use may occur
- Relationships and trust matter more than lectures
- Fear-based messaging often fails

Why harm reduction for adolescents?

Developmentally Appropriate

Adolescents are wired to take risks. The prefrontal cortex (decision-making) isn't fully developed until mid-20s



Why harm reduction for adolescents?

Reality-Based Approach

- Used alcohol
- Tried cannabis, nicotine, or prescription pills
- Most don't develop a SUD – but harm can still occur

Why harm reduction for adolescents?

Prevention

- Teaching safer practices is prevention
 - Prevents death
 - Prevents disease
 - Prevents harm

Harm Reduction

- Builds trust
- Keeps youth engaged in care
- Encourages gradual behavior change
- Reduces stigma and shame

What Does Harm Reduction Look Like For Youth

Practical Examples:

- Encouraging youth to avoid using alone (especially with opioids)
- Teaching them how to spot and respond to an overdose
- Providing fentanyl test strips and naloxone (and teaching how to use them)
- Teaching them to wait longer between doses and start low/go slow
- Encouraging safer modes of use (e.g., oral over injection)

Social Harm Reduction

- Helping them navigate peer pressure
- Supporting healthy relationships and boundaries
- Providing honest info on effects, mixing drugs, and mental health risks

Systemic Harm Reduction

- Advocating for safe spaces, non-punitive policies, and youth-friendly healthcare

Questions & Answers

Thank You!