



NEWSLETTER

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MARCH 2026

GROWING PROTECTION, PREVENTION, AND CONNECTION THIS SPRING

March marks a transition season. In Northwest Kansas, we start to see longer days, changing weather, and signs of growth that have been forming quietly beneath the surface.

That image of slow, unseen growth is an important one when we think about youth mental health and prevention. The strongest protective factors in a young person's life are not built in a single program, presentation, or conversation. They are built gradually – through consistent relationships, clear expectations, accurate information, and daily connection.

This month, we highlight three important themes:

- World Teen Mental Wellness Day (March 2)
- National Drug & Alcohol Facts Week (March 22-28)
- Spring Break as an Opportunity for Intentional Family Connection

Each of these connects back to the same core truth:
Relationships are prevention.



WORLD TEEN MENTAL WELLNESS DAY - MARCH 2

World Teen Mental Wellness Day serves as a reminder that adolescence is one of the most critical developmental windows in a person's life. During the teen years, the brain is still under construction – especially the areas responsible for decision-making, impulse control, emotional regulation, and long-term planning.

Research consistently shows:

- Approximately 1 in 5 teens experiences a mental health condition each year.
- Nearly half of all lifetime mental health conditions begin before age 14.
- Suicide remains one of the leading causes of death among adolescents.

However, statistics only tell part of the story. The deeper “why” behind this day is not to create alarm – it is to increase awareness of how protective factors shape outcomes.

Teens thrive when they experience:

- A strong sense of belonging
- At least one trusted adult they can go to
- Predictable and safe environments
- Opportunities to build competence
- Emotional validation paired with clear expectations

When young people feel connected, their nervous systems are more regulated. When their nervous systems are regulated, they are more capable of learning, problem-solving, and making healthy decisions. Mental wellness is not separate from academic success – it is foundational to it.

Project FRONTIER has programs and presentations that support this. Our BrainWise presentations, restorative practices training, and caregiver education efforts are all rooted in this science: when adults understand how the brain works and how stress impacts behavior, we respond differently – and more effectively. Prevention begins with understanding.



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NATIONAL DRUG & ALCOHOL FACTS WEEK - MARCH 22–28

National Drug & Alcohol Facts Week is a national health observance designed to connect youth with science-based, accurate information about substance use.

In rural communities like ours, conversations about substance use can sometimes feel uncomfortable or unnecessary – especially if we assume “it’s not happening here.” But prevention science tells us that accurate information paired with strong relationships reduces risk significantly.

Here are several important facts:

- Alcohol remains the most commonly used substance among youth.
- Early initiation (before age 15) significantly increases the likelihood of long-term substance misuse.
- Youth who perceive substance use as low-risk are more likely to experiment.
- Youth who report strong parental and school connectedness are significantly less likely to engage in substance use.

National Drug & Alcohol Facts Week is about shifting from myths to facts – and from fear-based messaging to relationship-based prevention. Scare tactics do not change long-term behavior. Connection does.

Young people are more likely to delay or avoid substance use when adults:

- Communicate clear expectations
- Talk early and often about substance use
- Stay calm and curious in conversations
- Model healthy coping strategies

Prevention is not a one-time assembly. It is an environment. It is the daily message a student receives about belonging, mattering, and accountability.

Project FRONTIER continues to support districts and communities by strengthening protective factors such as:

- School connectedness
- Caregiver education
- Youth skill-building (emotional regulation, problem-solving)
- Community partnerships that align messaging

Substance use prevention is strongest when families, schools, and communities work together with consistent messaging.





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SPRING BREAK: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR INTENTIONAL CONNECTION

Spring break is often viewed as a pause — a break from school routines and responsibilities. For many families, it may not involve travel or large plans. And that is more than okay. In fact, prevention research highlights something powerful: Unstructured time paired with strong adult connection builds resilience.

What **increases risk** during breaks from routine?

- Increased unsupervised time
- Isolation
- Lack of structure
- Reduced adult interaction

What **decreases risk**?

- Meaningful conversations
- Shared activities
- Predictable expectations
- Warmth paired with boundaries



The goal is not perfection. The goal is presence. Even 20-30 minutes of uninterrupted connection can strengthen emotional security and reduce risky behaviors long-term.

LOW-PREP, LOW-COST (OR NO-COST) SPRING BREAK IDEAS

Centered on relationship building, these activities are simple — but the impact lies in the interaction.

- **Sunrise or Sunset Walk** - Nature helps regulate the nervous system. Walking side by side often makes conversations easier for kids and teens.
- **Cook or Bake Together** - Working toward a shared goal builds cooperation and communication. It also provides organic space for conversation without pressure.
- **Device-Free Game Night** - Board games, card games, dice games, or even made-up family games encourage laughter and positive interaction. Shared laughter increases bonding and reduces stress hormones.
- **Story Night** - Look through old photos or share family stories. A strong sense of identity and belonging is protective against risky behaviors.
- **Teach Me Something** - Invite your child to teach you something they enjoy — a skill, hobby, or interest. This builds confidence and reinforces that their voice matters.
- **Backyard or Living Room Adventure** - Obstacle courses, scavenger hunts, stargazing, or indoor forts may seem simple — but novelty and play strengthen connection.

The key is not the activity itself. The key is eye contact, listening, and presence.



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WHY THIS ALL CONNECTS



Project FRONTIER remains committed to strengthening the protective factors that allow youth in Northwest Kansas to thrive – academically, emotionally, and socially. If your district, organization, or family would like additional support, resources, or programming, we would love to connect. We would love to work together to build environments where prevention is not an event – it is a culture.

Mental wellness, substance use prevention, and family connection are interconnected conversations.

When a young person:

- Feels known
- Feels valued
- Has consistent adults
- Understands expectations
- Has accurate information
- Has tools for emotional regulation

... their likelihood of engaging in risky behavior decreases.



Spring is a reminder that growth happens below the surface long before we see visible change. The same is true for prevention work.



Project FRONTIER is offering a **Restorative Practices** Hybrid Training this April for educators and school staff who want to strengthen school climate, increase student accountability, and build stronger relationships.

Restorative practices focus on building community proactively and responding to conflict in ways that promote responsibility, repair harm, and restore relationships – rather than relying solely on punishment or exclusion.

How it works:

- **April 1** – Online coursework opens (self-paced and required prior to in-person session)
- **April 22** – One-day, in-person training focused on application and practice
- Following the training, our team will be available to support implementation in your school or classroom

Participants will learn practical strategies for:

- Building community through circles
- Using restorative conversations and questioning
- Strengthening student ownership and accountability
- Repairing harm while maintaining clear expectations

If you are interested in creating more connected, accountable, and relational learning environments, this training is for you. To sign up, email: projectfrontier@nkesc.org

Sources:

- National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), 2023
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Youth Risk Behavior Survey National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)
- Search Institute, Developmental Assets Framework SAMHSA, Risk and Protective Factors Framework
- CDC, Parent Engagement & School Connectedness Research
- National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), Monitoring the Future Survey
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), National Survey on Drug Use and Health
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Youth Risk Behavior Survey

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