UNDER CONSTRUCTION

Helping Adolescents Navigate the Mixed Messages of Psychedelics



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Washington State Public Health Conference • October 15, 2026

A little about me

WISCONSIN
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Student
MS candidate, Psychoactive Pharmaceutical Investigation, UW–Madison School of Pharmacy

VARSA

Community
Board member and volunteer with VARSA on Vashon Island



Parent
Mom to two teenagers

After this talk, you will be able to...

The big idea: education is harm reduction for adolescents

1. Describe the gap in teen psychedelic education and where teens turn instead
2. Understand that the adolescent brain is “under construction”
3. Compare psychedelic risks with other substances
4. Describe VARSA’s plan for this school year and how we will check what teens learn
5. See where Washington policy is heading, and know where to find resources and help

Vashon Island: our community

Community

About 11,000

year-round residents (2020 Census)

A small, rural island reached by ferry



Photo: Chelsea Booker via Travel Lemming

Schools

Vashon High School: 511

McMurray Middle: 355

Harbor School (private)



Photo: Robert Iwamoto

Island access

Ferry only

Care and services often mean a boat ride



Image courtesy of the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT).

A new resource on Vashon: Thunderbird



Image courtesy of Karen Ducey / The Seattle Times

Thunderbird Treatment Center

Seattle Indian Health Board

92-bed inpatient treatment for substance use

Serves Native and non-Native adults

Wing for pregnant and parenting residents

Largest inpatient drug and alcohol facility in King County

VARSA in a nutshell

We serve families, youth, professionals, and the wider community.

VARSA
Vashon Advocacy Resources Supports Action

Guiding Good Choices
for parents, English and Spanish

Youth Mental Health First Aid
for adults who work with kids

Teen Mental Health First Aid
for high school students

Sources of Strength
middle school program

LEVEL UP! @ THE RECESS LAB
for middle schoolers

Teens Leading Change
high school program

Safe Grad Night
parent-organized celebration for all Vashon seniors

Book groups
currently reading Accountable by Dashka Slater

Key leader talks
fentanyl education night, Screenagers screening, and more

Where our youth education work focuses

Vashon students, 2025 Healthy Youth Survey (grades 9 to 11, past 30 days) and school screening

Fentanyl

1,000+

King County residents died of fentanyl-related overdoses in 2023 (adults)

No public Vashon data: counts are too small to report

Tobacco and nicotine

5.5%

of students vaped

Small districts: 10.0%

Alcohol

8.9%

of students used alcohol

Small districts: 11.9%

Cannabis

18.1%

of students used cannabis

Small districts: 9.4%

Mental health

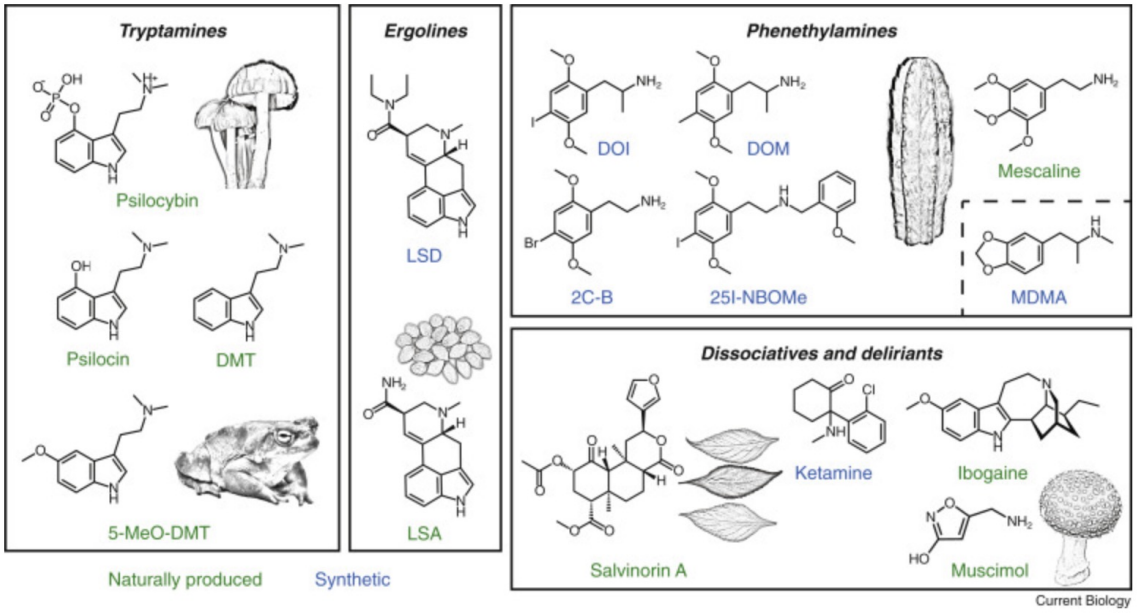
18%

of students in grades 6 to 9 screened positive for anxiety

12% for depression

Sources: Vashon Island School District, Youth Health & Wellbeing Report (fall 2025 Healthy Youth Survey, grades 9 to 11, n=329, grade 12 not included; screening of grades 6 to 9, n=488), compiled by Celia Cugudda and Lisa Bruce. Benchmark: small Washington districts. King County overdose figure: Public Health, Seattle & King County, as reported by KIRO 7 (2025).

What teens are hearing about



Source: Kelmendi B, Kaye AP, Pittenger C, Kwan AC. Psychedelics. Current Biology. 2022;32(2):R63–R67. Figure 1.

Psychedelics and dissociatives

- Psilocybin (mushrooms)
- LSD (acid)
- DMT (ayahuasca)
- Mescaline (peyote)
- Ketamine (special K)
- Ibogaine
- MDMA (Molly, ecstasy)

Over-the-counter

- Benadryl
- DXM (cough syrup)

What psychedelics are

Psychedelics are psychoactive compounds that alter perception.

Classic psychedelics

Mushrooms (psilocybin), acid (LSD), ayahuasca (DMT), peyote (mescaline)

Mainly act on the serotonin 5-HT2A receptor. Effects can include vivid visions and a changed sense of self.

Dissociatives

Ketamine (special K), DXM (cough syrup), PCP

Mainly block NMDA receptors, which work with the brain chemical glutamate. Can make people feel disconnected from their body and surroundings.

Others that work differently

MDMA (molly, ecstasy): raises serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine. A stimulant that can mildly alter perception.

Ibogaine: from a plant, acts on several brain systems. Studied for addiction; research is early.

Benadryl: not a psychedelic, but misused. Very high doses can cause seizures, coma, even death.

Sources: National Institute on Drug Abuse, Psychedelic and Dissociative Drugs and MDMA (Ecstasy/Molly); NCCIH, Psilocybin for Mental Health and Addiction (2024); Calvey T, Howells FM. Prog Brain Res. 2018;242:1-23; DEA Diversion Control Division, Dextromethorphan (Sept 2025); FDA safety communication on Benadryl (2020).

How they compare



Classic psychedelics

Low addiction potential: Psilocybin and LSD do not typically produce compulsive use or physical dependence, based primarily on adult evidence.

Risks: bad trips, risky behavior, and possible psychosis-like illness in people with predisposing factors.

NIDA; Johnson et al., 2018 (psilocybin)



Cannabis

22% to 30% of people who use cannabis have cannabis use disorder.

Starting young raises the risk. Withdrawal can include irritability, anxiety, and trouble sleeping.

NIDA, 2024



Alcohol

A medical condition: trouble stopping or controlling use despite harm. Withdrawal can be life-threatening.

Starting before age 15 raises the risk. UK experts ranked it the most harmful drug overall.

NIAAA; Nutt et al., 2010



Fentanyl

50 to 100 times more potent than morphine. A very small amount can be lethal.

Often hidden in counterfeit pills. King County: 1,087 fentanyl-related deaths in 2023.

NIDA; Public Health Seattle & King County

Sources: National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA): Cannabis (2024), Psychedelic and Dissociative Drugs, Fentanyl. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA): Understanding Alcohol Use Disorder. Johnson MW et al. Neuropharmacology. 2018;142:143-166. Nutt DJ, King LA, Phillips LD. Lancet. 2010;376:1558-1565. KUOW (June 2024), citing Public Health Seattle & King County.

How I got here

1

Guiding Good Choices
I took the class

2

The VARSA board
Then I was asked to join

3

2024/25
Heavily involved in fentanyl education

4

2025/26
An educator asked me to write about psychedelics for the parent newsletter

5

No clue
She and the teacher did not know how to answer student questions

6

The PSA
An alternative to fear-based prevention

THE GAP

Curious teens. Very few credible resources made for them.

What fear of asking does

72.5%

never discussed their psychedelic use with their primary care provider

Glynos et al., 2023

56%

of those who stayed quiet cited stigma

Glynos et al., 2023

23%

took psychiatric medications on the same day as a psychedelic

Boehnke et al., 2023

Adult surveys show what can happen when people do not feel safe discussing psychedelic use. We should not teach teens to stay silent.

Sources: Glynos NG et al. (2023). J Psychoactive Drugs, 55(4):379-388 (n=1,435). Boehnke KF et al. (2023). Front Psychiatry, 14:1224551 (n=1,221). U.S. adults who use psychedelics; convenience samples.