

Maryland School Mental Health Alliance*

Substance Abuse in Children and Adolescents Information for School Clinicians

In 2005, the National Institute on Drug Abuse found that approximately 21% of all 8th graders, 38% of all 10th graders, and 50% of all twelfth graders have tried an illegal drug. Younger students are also at risk; surveys have shown that 30% of 4th through 6th graders feel pressured by their peers to drink beer, 31% to try marijuana, and 34% to smoke cigarettes. Alcohol use often begins by age 13, and studies show that 80% of high school seniors have used alcohol. The younger kids start using drugs and alcohol, the more likely they are to develop serious problems with abuse and addiction later on. As a mental health provider for children and/or adolescents, you can play a critical role in helping to identify and get help for those students whose alcohol and drug use is starting to interfere with their academic, social, and emotional development.

Why do we care?

Research has documented that family involvement and classroom-based prevention programs are the most effective means of addressing substance abuse among youth. School-based health professionals can effectively act as an intermediary between the student and other important players such as parents, extended family, school, community.

Drugs and alcohol contribute to a host of problems for our students, including:

- Poor academic performance;
- Memory and learning problems;
- Truancy and absenteeism;
- Problems with family and peer relationships, and a lack of empathy for others;
- A tendency to engage in other risky activities, and to feel invulnerable;
- An increased risk for moving on to more dangerous drugs, and developing dependency or addiction.
- Often, youth with substance problems are also suffering from another mental disorder such as depression or anxiety.

While all children are at risk of using drugs and alcohol, the following risk factors significantly increase the chance that a child will develop a serious alcohol or drug problem:

- Having a family history of substance abuse, dependency, or addiction;
- Depression or low self-esteem;
- Social isolation; inability to fit in to the mainstream.

What can you do about it?

- **Watch for signs and educate other school personnel about them:**
 - Moodiness; irritability;
 - Argumentative, disruptive, rule-breaking behavior
 - Sudden mood or personality changes;
 - Low self esteem or depression;
 - Poor judgment; irresponsible behavior;
 - Social withdrawal; pulling away from family, teachers, other trusted adults;
 - Change in former activities or friends; general lack of interest;

- **Educate yourself.** Remain up to date on substance use; know which drugs are the most popular, their effects while under the influence, and long-term consequences of continued use. It is also a good idea to learn how to conduct/participate in an intervention.
- **Be aware** of your own biases and beliefs. It is important to check your personal feelings at the door in order to provide equal services for all students.
- **Establish yourself as a resource.** Often school clinicians are only familiar with youth in need of help. Make your presence known to all youth and keep an open door policy for anyone who has problems or concerns.
- **Encourage students to develop different ways to refuse substance use**, examples include:
 - Switching topic (“hey, did you hear about the game last night?”)
 - Using an excuse (“I can’t, I’m meeting a friend in 10 minutes”)
 - Put the “blame” on others/parents (“my mom would kill me if she found out”)
 - Walk away
 - State the facts (“No thanks, I’ve read about what drugs can do to your body”)
- **Teach skills to enhance self-esteem and awareness.** Children with low self-esteem and self-awareness are more likely to engage in substance abuse.
- **When screening for substance abuse:**
 - Use a **private setting** without parents present
 - Display related **pamphlets**, with multiple copies to give away
 - Discuss **confidentiality**
 - Introduce the topic of alcohol/drugs in a **nonjudgmental** way: “I know that some kids your age use alcohol, or smoke, or use other drugs...”
 - Introduce the topic in the context of **concern for the student’s health**: “I’d like to know a little bit of what you do in this regard and how you feel about it, because it’s important to your health.”
 - Administer a **screening instrument** (examples in manual)
- **Motivational Interviewing** is one of the best ways to approach substance abuse with children and adolescents, use this technique in your counseling practices.
- **Refer** to services outside of school for on-going care. Know your community and establish relationships with other clinicians working with youth to build a list of trusted referral options.
- **Information sessions** for parents and their children are a good way to convey facts about substance abuse and will establish you as a resource within the school system. Share specific statistics about your school to enforce the need for substance abuse education.
- **Get involved** with your school’s administration to ensure your school is provided with the resources it needs to combat drug use.

Key Resources/Links

- <http://www.intervention.com/index.html> gives basic information about conducting a substance use intervention, includes specifics for intervention training across the country.
- *Adolescent Substance Abuse: Counseling Issues* is a brief write up that contains information on treatment, family problems, and informative statistics. Also contains specific resources for further information. <http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-922/abuse.htm>
- <http://www.mentalhealthchannel.net/alcohol/diagnosis.shtml> Provides specific DSM-IV criteria for diagnosing substance abuse and dependence.
- <http://www.nida.nih.gov/DrugPages/DrugsofAbuse.html> gives an informative chart citing commonly used drugs, route of administration, street names, effects while under the influence, and potential health consequences. Concludes with a section: Principles of Drug Addiction Treatment.

**Developed by the Center for School Mental Health (<http://csmh.umaryland.edu>) in collaboration with the Maryland School Mental Health Alliance.*