

Substance Use and Substance Abuse Disorder in Adolescents



Substance use and abuse among adolescents ranges from experimentation to severe substance abuse disorders. Different substances (alcohol and other drugs) affect the brain in different ways. Individuals use substances because of the effect they cause. Some individuals use because it makes them feel good while others use because it relieves feelings of distress. Adolescents experiment with substances on varying degrees. Some use small amounts of substances once or twice during adolescence, while others may develop patterns of heavy use that can lead to dependence or addiction. All substance use, even experimental use, can put adolescents at risk of short-term problems, such as accidents, fights, unwanted sexual activity, high risk-taking behaviors, and/or driving while intoxicated and overdosing. Adolescents are vulnerable to the effects of substance use and are at increased risk of developing long-term consequences of continued use.

What are Substance Abuse and Substance Dependence?

Substance use is using drugs in a way that harms you or that leads you to harm others. You can abuse illegal drugs, prescription drugs, or over-the-counter drugs.

Substance abuse is indicated when you are not able to meet work, home, or school responsibilities. Your judgment is impaired and you engage in more risk-taking behaviors such as texting and driving while under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

Substance abuse can lead to substance dependence, where you are addicted to a drug. The drug controls your life. Any of the following can happen:

- You take more of the drug over longer periods of time and need more of the drug to feel "high."
- You try to quit using the drug, but you are not able to stop.
- You continue to use the drug even though it harms your relationships and causes you to develop physical problems.
- If you stop using the drug, you feel sick. This is known as withdrawal.

Drug dependence is a disease. It is not a weakness or a lack of willpower. It is your choice to begin using a drug; but as you use it more, your brain begins to change. This change can lead to a craving to use the drug and can influence how you act. The more you use and abuse substances the more likely you are to become substance dependent.

Sign and Symptoms of Adolescents Abusing Substances

- Changes in relationships with family members or friends
- Loss of inhibitions
- Changes in mood or emotional instability
- Exhibiting loud, obnoxious behavior
- Laughing for no reason
- Moving in seemingly unusually clumsy, stumbling, poorly coordinated manner;
- Sullen, withdrawn, depressed
- Unusually tired
- Silent, uncommunicative
- Displaying hostility, anger, uncooperative behavior
- Engaging in deceitful or secretive behaviors
- Making endless excuses
- Decreased motivation
- Lethargic movement
- Using incoherent, unintelligible, slurred, or rapid-fire speech
- Lack of focus
- Hyperactive
- Unusually elated
- Displaying periods of sleeplessness or high energy, followed by long periods of "catch up" sleep
- Disappearance for long periods of time

What Parents Can Do

- Be aware of troubling behaviors and note how long these behaviors have been going on, how often they occur, and how severe they seem.
- See a mental health professional or your child(ren)'s doctor for evaluation and treatment.
- Ask questions about treatments and services.
- Talk to school based psychologist or social worker.
- Find a family support group

Substance use and abuse in youth may be disguised in other ways such as truancy or running away, hostility, anger and uncooperative behavior. If you suspect substance use or abuse in your child get professional help early. Early diagnosis is essential for treating depressed children. For help, parents should talk to their child's school social worker or school psychologist for support and/or a referral to a mental health professional.

For more information or assistance, contact Arnecia Moody, LCSW-C, LICSW, LCSW, Lead School Social Worker at Alexandria City Public Schools at 703-619-8156 or talk to your child's school social worker. Your school social worker can provide support and, if needed, a referral to a mental health professional. Services can also be found through your insurance company or local community services board.