

## Substance Use, Abuse, and Dependency in Adolescence

Addressing substance use and abuse among students requires long-term programs and coordination with families.

By Jon Lasser and  
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**T**he first half of Ramona's sophomore year gave her parents little cause for concern. She earned good grades, maintained positive relationships with her peers, and got along well with everyone at home. Over the first few weeks following the winter break, however, her parents became increasingly concerned. Ramona came home smelling of cigarettes and alcohol several times, seemed to have quickly switched her longtime friends for a new peer group, and her first report card of the second semester showed declining grades and an increase in absences.

Drug and alcohol use among adolescents is a significant and serious problem. In fact, an alarmingly high number of students report that they have used drugs or alcohol. The 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance, a survey of U.S. students in grades 9–12, provides self-report data on a wide range of health-risk behaviors. The results of this survey showed that over 25% of the students reported that they drink heavily (more than five drinks within a few hours) and almost 40% reported that they have used marijuana at least once (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008).

Such statistics are alarming because adolescent substance use is not only associated with a number of significant health and safety concerns but also can lead to social, emotional, and academic difficulties. Substance use and abuse is societal problem that schools alone cannot fix, but they can play an important role in education, prevention, and intervention. School leaders can help students, parents, and staff members be aware of the risks associated with substance use and abuse, the ways of preventing students from using and abusing substances, and the treatment resources that are available for students who may need help. Principals also can collaborate with commu-

nity service providers to ensure that school policies and programs are supported by community services. Their commitment to addressing substance use and abuse is integral to creating safe and productive learning environments for all students.

### Characteristics

Drug and alcohol use among adolescents varies in terms of frequency and severity. Just because a student has used alcohol or drugs does not mean that he or she needs treatment, and just because a student has not used alcohol or drugs does not mean that prevention isn't warranted. One way of thinking about the seriousness of a student's experiences with alcohol or drugs is to consider the terms *use*, *abuse*, and *dependency*.

**Use.** Sometimes the use of drugs or alcohol is limited to one episode, perhaps out of curiosity or experimentation. The effects may be short-term and relatively insignificant, resulting in little or no serious physical or psychological consequences. Other students may use substances occasionally without displaying serious problems, although they are still at risk for consequences, such as getting arrested and displaying diminished academic performance. It is important to note, however, that students who use drugs or alcohol once may be more likely to use them in the future.

**Abuse.** Drug and alcohol use that is more frequent than occasional use (such as binge drinking or using marijuana regularly) and interferes with a person's functioning, relationships, or education is considered to be abuse. Abuse of a substance often results in adverse consequences (e.g., sickness, inability to perform academically, and arrest). It is important to note that students who abuse substances

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Student Services is produced in collaboration with the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). Articles and related handouts can be downloaded from [www.nasponline.org/resources/principals](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals).



Figure 1

may be at greater risk to become physically or psychologically dependent on those substances.

**Dependency.** Individuals who become dependent (either physically or psychologically) on substances feel like they “need” the substance, require greater amounts of the substance to feel “high,” and experience physical or psychological withdrawal symptoms in the absence of the substance. Often, these students are best served by comprehensive treatment, including outpatient counseling and, possibly, inpatient detoxification.

**Informal assessment.** Given the wide range of adolescent experiences, schools should regard each case as unique. When principals become concerned about a student’s drug or alcohol consumption, however, an informal assessment of the student’s patterns of behavior serves as a good starting point. This assessment could be conducted by the school psychologist, counselor, or social worker and should never be punitive. Its purpose is to assess risk and help determine the type and intensity of intervention needed, as well as the most appropriate referral to community services. Informal assessment can take the form of a student-and-parent interview.

### Developmental Considerations

Adolescence is a time when students seek and explore greater levels of independence, try new roles and identities, and transition into adulthood. It is not surprising that many students begin to develop a curiosity or interest in drugs and alcohol as a means of expression, especially when some of their peers have used such substances. Schools and families must find ways to balance an adolescent’s need for greater independence with firm boundaries and limits. For example, perhaps a teen is

## Responding to Parents’ Questions

**Q:** What should I do if my child comes home and I think he or she has been drinking?

**A:** This probably isn’t a good time to confront your child. It may be more beneficial to discuss the issue with a spouse, a teacher, or a clergy member and develop a strategy for confronting your child the following day.

**Q:** Should I do something if I learn that my child’s friends have used drugs or alcohol?

**A:** Your child’s friends certainly have an influence on your child. It would benefit not only your child’s friend but your child as well if you talked with the friend’s parents. If you feel uncomfortable speaking to the friend’s parents, you can ask school personnel and others to help. Failing to act may result in a missed opportunity that could affect both your child and his or her friend.

**Q:** What should I do if I find cans or bottles of alcohol or drug paraphernalia in my child’s room, car, or backpack?

**A:** Again, before confronting your child, consult with another adult who can provide you with support and help. Remember, being excessively angry when you confront your child will probably make you less likely to be successful.

**Q:** How can I confront my child about drugs or alcohol when I used them when I was underage?

**A:** Our society is much more aware of the dangers of drugs or alcohol in adolescents now than compared to previous generations. Even though you may have used drugs or alcohol when you were young, it is probably not worth the risk to assume that your child will know when and how to stop, even though you managed to.

## Questions for Parents and Adolescents

To better understand the extent of the problem, ask parents and adolescents questions in a nonjudgmental way to determine:

- When the drug or alcohol use started
- How often the student uses drugs or alcohol
- Whether the student views the use as a problem
- Whether the parents view the use as a problem
- The impact of the use on the student's schooling, work, and social life
- The need for intervention, supports, and school and community resources.

allowed to ride with a friend to a party but may not ride in a car being driven by someone who has been drinking.

Also, though defying authority (including parental authority and school authority) is often expected of adolescents, it is important to remember that defying authority can also be a sign of drug or alcohol use. Sometimes parents and educators dismiss important indicators of drug or alcohol use by rationalizing them as being "typical" adolescent behavior. Thus it is important to consider the frequency, severity, and context of defiance of individual students. After all, no one knows the adolescent as well as his or her parents and teachers.

### Warning Signs and Possible Indicators

Some signs may be related to drug and alcohol use, but they do not necessarily indicate that a child or adolescent is using substances. These behaviors may also be signs of other problems, such as depression. If a student exhibits these signs, an adult (e.g., a parent or a teacher) should try to talk to the student about their concerns or refer the student to another adult who can help. Indicators of drug and alcohol use include:

- Secrecy about activities and possessions
- Excessive mood swings or violent outbursts
- Declines in grades and schoolwork
- Use of products, such as incense, that mask odors
- Increase in borrowing or stealing.

### Intervention

**Parent communication.** Health educators often encourage parent-child communication as a means of preventing substance abuse, responding to the substance use, and fostering enhanced relationships. Public health campaigns refer to parenting as "the antidrug." Given the importance of parent-child communication, many principals encourage parents to talk to their children about drugs and alcohol. This approach has its limitations, however. Although communication is certainly important, many parents are uncomfortable discussing sensitive subjects with their children.

**Community resources.** Parents who want to intervene but feel that talking about drugs and alcohol with their children is challenging or impossible could consider other resources in the community. For example, parents can enlist the help of a relative, a friend, a pastor, a school psychologist, or a school counselor. Many communities also have clinics or agencies that work specifically with children who are struggling with issues that are related to substance use, abuse, or dependence. State and county health departments may also have information and programs available. Principals should understand that there are others in the community and school who are willing and available to help and should be able to refer families to such resources.

**Evidence-based programs.** Not surprisingly, many of the effective programs that address drug and alcohol abuse incorporate family, school, and community components to address the problem. Many school leaders are leery of programs that make big promises about successful outcomes. Such skepticism is

healthy! But the Office of National Drug Control Policy (n.d.) has developed a Web page that provides useful information for evaluating programs to determine whether they are appropriate and also includes Web sites for four programs that have good research supporting their efficacy.

**Enhancing knowledge, attitudes, and skills.** Principals will be better prepared to prevent and respond to adolescent substance problems if they have the proper resources. Developing effective knowledge, attitudes, and skills can help address the challenges of student substance use, abuse, and dependency:

- **Knowledge:** Understanding and recognizing warning signs; definitions of use, abuse and dependence; normal development; and community resources.
- **Attitudes:** Support students and guide their healthy development, promote effective communication, and clearly communicate high expectations for success. Always be willing and eager to involve parents and accept help from other adults and professionals.
- **Skills:** Set appropriate limits and boundaries, respectfully listen to and talk with adolescents, and encourage families to take an active part in their children's daily lives.

**Responding to parent concerns.** Many parents feel unprepared to address drug and alcohol concerns with their adolescents and may come to the school for help and guidance. (See figure 1 for answers to commonly asked questions.)

## Actions for Principals

School leaders who are committed to directly addressing the problem of adolescent alcohol and substance use have many options.

**Assess the scope substance use and abuse among students.** A hard reality for many principals is that substance use, if not abuse, is often systemic and based on the population of their schools. Students exist in a

culture of use that shapes individual decision making, so principals are wise to assess the drug and alcohol culture among their student population. Information collected can inform principals on the extent of drug and alcohol use, the sources of substances (students or others), and the places and times that such behavior occurs on and off campus. Such assessments provide important knowledge about student behavior, attitudes, and influences that affect the school environment. This in turn informs decisions about potential schoolwide prevention and intervention programs as well as helps provide a structure for identifying and intervening with individual at-risk students.

It is essential that population-based assessments be conducted by a trained professional, such as a school psychologist, using proven behavior assessment processes. The process should maintain trust with students and parents, include their input, and provide for reporting back to the school community.

**Involve parents.** School leaders must also enlist the help of parents. To what extent are

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## Intervention

### Evidence-Based Principles

[www.ncjrs.gov/ondcppubs/publications/prevent/evidence\\_based\\_eng.html](http://www.ncjrs.gov/ondcppubs/publications/prevent/evidence_based_eng.html)

### The Strengthening Families Program: For Families and Youth

[www.strengtheningfamilies.org/html/programs\\_1999/14\\_SFP10-14.html](http://www.strengtheningfamilies.org/html/programs_1999/14_SFP10-14.html)

### Creating Lasting Family Connections

[www.strengtheningfamilies.org/html/programs\\_1999/16\\_CLFC.html](http://www.strengtheningfamilies.org/html/programs_1999/16_CLFC.html)

### Start Taking Alcohol Risks Seriously (STARS)

[casat.unr.edu/bestpractices/view.php?program=113](http://casat.unr.edu/bestpractices/view.php?program=113)

### Positive Action

[http://nrepp.samhsa.gov/programfulldetails.asp?program\\_id=110](http://nrepp.samhsa.gov/programfulldetails.asp?program_id=110)



## Resources for Parents

[www.theantidrug.com](http://www.theantidrug.com)

*Drug and Alcohol Abuse: The Authoritative Guide for Parents, Teachers, and Counselors.* J. T. Milhorn. 2003. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Books.

*Instruments for Evaluation of Prevention: Adolescents and Teenagers.* Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. n.d. Retrieved from [www.preventionpathways.samhsa.gov/eval/pdfs/AdolescentInstruments.PDF](http://www.preventionpathways.samhsa.gov/eval/pdfs/AdolescentInstruments.PDF)

*Raising Drug-Free Kids: 100 Tips for Parents.* A. Solter. 2006. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Books.

*When to Worry: How to Tell If Your Teen Needs Help—and What to Do About It.* L. Boesky. 2007. New York: AMACOM.

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parents aware of adolescent drug and alcohol problems, and are their perceptions accurate? Conducting a parent awareness survey can help answer these questions and help establish family-school partnerships.

**Prepare for ongoing drug education and intervention.** Unfortunately, many schools try the one-shot approach to addressing adolescent drug and alcohol use: a beginning-of-the-year assembly or a brief unit in a health class. These interventions are not supported by research and do not provide the kind of comprehensive, meaningful effort that is needed. More effective approaches reflect students' needs; engage students; are integrated into school policies, culture and curriculum; and involve universal, group, and individual prevention and intervention components.

**Establish effective school policies.** Finally, school leaders should examine school policies, codes of conduct, and discipline with respect to drug and alcohol use. Such policies should support students and direct them to

school and community resources, rather than merely punish them.

## Conclusion

School leaders know that adolescent substance problems don't go away by themselves and that effective solutions require strong leadership and collaboration across school, family, and community systems. Principals will be most effective if they take a proactive approach to drinking and substance use, empower faculty and staff members to implement evidence-based programs, and provide the resources necessary to support such programs. **PL**

## REFERENCE

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- Office of National Drug Control Policy. (n.d.). *Evidence-based principles for substance abuse prevention*. Retrieved from [www.ncjrs.gov/ondcppubs/publications/prevent/evidence\\_based\\_eng.html](http://www.ncjrs.gov/ondcppubs/publications/prevent/evidence_based_eng.html)