

SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Why is Substance Use a Problem?

When a child or adolescent uses substances, their brain is negatively impacted in numerous ways, including altered chemistry, diminished brain activity, decreased blood flow, and brain cell damage. Even a single dose of a substance can affect the brain, and can result in poor school performance, social problems, accidents, violence, risky behavior, and the possibility of an overdose. It can lead to repeated drug use which is associated with a complexity of escalating problems. *The misuse of any substance that impacts brain chemistry and interferes with one's ability to cope with the demands of home, school, and/or relationships can be considered **Problem Substance Use**.* The amount of substance a person uses does not define substance use problems, as substances vary in potency and react differently in different people.

Substance Abuse and Substance Dependence

When people develop a pattern of using substances over time, despite the interference with their responsibilities, daily functioning, relationships and well being, they may have a Substance Abuse Disorder.

Substance Dependence occurs when a user develops a tolerance to a substance that results in the need for increased quantity or potency to achieve a desired effect. Many substance dependent people, youth included, spend much of their time obtaining, using, or recovering from the use of substances even if they are aware that a problem has developed.

Prevalent Signs & Symptoms of Substance Use

If you notice a student with any of the symptoms below or a significant change in mood or behavior that lasts for more than a week, share your observations with the student's parent and/or guardian and with your school's nurse and/or adjustment counselor.

Biological/Physical Symptoms

Changes in body's ability to self-regulate: may include changes in heart rate, blood pressure, appetite and weight; muscle twitching, weakness or tremors; seizures, lack of coordination, dizziness, blurred vision, dilated or constricted pupils; red, glassy eyes, sweating, nausea, vomiting, respiratory distress, chills

Psycho-motor agitation: may include pacing, hand wringing, picking at skin, fidgeting, and restlessness

Psycho-motor retardation: may include listlessness, slowed speech, thinking or body movements and deterioration of handwriting

Emotional/Cognitive Symptoms

Changes in emotional functioning: may include depressed, irritable mood, nervousness, over-excitability, euphoria, and apathy

Changes in cognitive functioning: may include poor concentration, sensation of slowed time, confusion, rambling flow of thoughts and speech, poor memory and attention

Social/Behavioral Symptoms

Changes in behavioral functioning: may include increased combativeness and competitiveness, lethargy, discontinuation of previously enjoyed activities, becoming more secretive, and engaging in lying behavior

Changes in social functioning: may include involvement in a sudden new peer group or marked isolation from peers



Co-Occurring Disorders

A person is said to have a co-occurring disorder when they have a substance abuse disorder and a mental health disorder at the same time. Youth struggling with mental health issues are particularly vulnerable to substance use. Nearly 43% of youth who receive mental health services in the US have been diagnosed with co-occurring disorders (CMHS, 2001). Early identification and intervention with mental health problems and youth substance abuse may prevent either substance dependence or mental health issues from progressing to more serious levels.

Getting Linked

Massachusetts 2-1-1 is a statewide health and human services information and referral program where you can get person to person assistance to find Substance Abuse resources in your community or visit www.mass211.org or dial 2-1-1.

Additional Resources

Massachusetts Substance Abuse Information & Education 800-327-5050 or www.helpline-online.com

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) www.samhsa.gov

Buzzed: The Straight Facts About the Most Used and Abused Drugs, Cynthia Kuhn, Scott Swartzwelder, Wilkie Wilson

School Psychiatry Program
Massachusetts General Hospital
www.schoolpsychiatry.org

American Academy of Child/Adolescent Psychiatry www.aacap.org

Highpoint Treatment Centers
508-584-9210 or www.hptc.org

Gosnold – outpatient & residential substance abuse treatment
800-444-1554 or www.gosnold.org

The Castle—Residential treatment in Brockton for 13-17 year olds
508-638-6000

National Institute on Drug Abuse
www.nida.nih.gov/parent-teacher.html

Alcoholics Anonymous www.aa.org

Narcotics Anonymous www.na.org

Developmental Variations

Early Childhood (3-7 years old)

This age group is not likely to use substances on their own, but may accidentally ingest alcohol or drugs if they are in circumstances with easy or unrestricted access.

Middle Childhood (8-12 years old)

This age group is most likely to access substances from liquor or medicine cabinets at their or their friends' homes. Additionally, this age group is at high risk for use of inhalants because of easy accessibility.

Pre-Adolescence/Adolescence (12-18 years old)

Pre-adolescent and adolescent youth are most likely to seek drugs and alcohol on their own and as a result have access to a wider range of substances. This age group is also the most likely to engage in high risk behavior when under the influence of substances (i.e. driving, unprotected sex) and are often more sophisticated at hiding substance use than their younger peers.

Educational Implications

Research shows that the brain continues to grow and develop into the mid-twenties. As such, children and youth of all ages are at high risk for disruption to healthy brain development when using substances.

Substance use can have a seriously negative impact on a student's learning and ability to be successful in a learning environment. Not only are students unavailable for learning when they are under the influence of substances, but they also won't function well when recovering from use or are craving to use again.

Other possible effects, whether a student is using substances themselves or growing up in a substance abusing home are: fatigue, irritability, anxiety, health problems, tardiness, and truancy. These problems contribute to poor work completion, interpersonal problems with peers or teachers, poor attention and/ or poor follow through in school.

Cultural Considerations

Substance use issues are "equal opportunity" problems. Regardless of age, race, or socioeconomic status, individuals can succumb to the devastating effects of substance use, abuse, or dependence. There are some risk factors, however, that increase the likelihood that a student will use substances. Some of these risk factors include lack of parental supervision, peer culture of substance use, easy access to substances, and/or a family or community tolerance or acceptance of substance use.

Strategies for Students with Substance Abuse Issues

These strategies are designed to address potential symptoms of student Substance Abuse and should be used as part of a larger intervention approach. The suggestions below contain only a portion of many possible strategies available to address symptoms of Substance Abuse in the classroom. Strategies should always be implemented with careful consideration of the differences of each child and the context of their individual circumstances.

If you notice a significant change in mood in any child that lasts for more than a week or two, share your observations with the child's parent and/or guardian and with your school's Adjustment Counselor.

- Make certain that your school has a substance abuse prevention and intervention policy that is focused on improving the health and well-being of students
- Integrate substance abuse prevention, including teaching evidence based prevention classes starting in early grades
- Provide substance abuse training to parents/families to increase awareness and skill to prevent, identify, and get treatment for child and youth substance abuse issues
- Develop positive relationships with all students, with specific outreach to students who are at risk of or who may be abusing substances
- Maintain clear expectations of students with substance abuse issues, and be flexible where needed
- Use an open, non-judging, educational, fact-based approach in talking and working with students with substance abuse issues
- Offer descriptive feedback to students in a concerned and supportive way, "you look very drowsy, what's up?"
- Respond consistently and calmly to unacceptable behavior
- Pay attention to any patterns a student may develop, such as leaving the building at a certain time every day, skipping certain classes, or arriving late to school or class
- If there are any suspicions of a student being actively under the influence, send him or her to the school nurse immediately and/or follow school protocols for immediate referral
- Do not try to problem solve or plan with a student when you suspect they are actively under the influence of substances
- Listen to the concerns of peers. Friends may disclose to a trusted adult that they believe their peer is in trouble
- As soon as you suspect substance use in a student, consult with your school adjustment counselor or school nurse
- Involve the student's family early and throughout any intervention, as research suggests optimal outcomes when families are involved