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NEXT MONTH:

Building Family Strategies



Elaine Schram MPH
 1305 W. Oswego Rd
 Naperville, IL 60560
 630-961-2992 x1122
 eschram@360youthservices.org



The Importance of Substance Abuse Prevention in Adolescents

David Lott, MD, FASAM, FAPA

Substance abuse remains one of the greatest societal problems of our time. Annual costs are in the billions, and substance use causes more deaths, illness, and injury than other causes. The highest rates of substance use start during the teen years, so it is especially important to focus research and treatment efforts on this critical time period.

Several scientific advances have furthered our understanding of drug use in the adolescent. Family and twin studies have shown for years that there is a strong genetic component to the development of addictions. Consensus estimates are that approximately 50 percent of each person's risk for developing an addiction comes from their genetic makeup.

While this shows the important role of genetics, these results also highlight the importance of non-genetic contributors (the other 50%), all the various aspects of one's environment. For instance, while someone may have a high genetic predisposition for addiction, the illness can only occur once there has been an exposure to the substance of abuse.

Therefore we can see that one vital way to prevent addiction is to limit exposures to drugs. Most initial exposures occur in adolescence, so now again this seems to be a crucial time period to focus on in order to protect people from the hazards of drugs. What's more, studies have shown that earlier onset of substance use is associated with worse outcomes, so preventing a teen's initial exposure to drugs, even if it is only a temporary delay, can improve their outcome.

But this turns out to be another case of "easier said than done." Teens have at least three strikes against them - they have stronger inherent drive toward risk-taking, they have an underdeveloped inhibitory control system, and they are more susceptible to peer influence. On top of all that, any drug exposures pose greater risk for the teen because of the continuing brain development going on.

So how do we prevent teen drug use? Prevention can take many forms. Primary intervention involves early education and other efforts to help teens avoid initial exposures. Teens are most influenced by "the 3 P's" - **parents, peers, and pop culture**. So focusing on these is a good way to start.

The role of parents is critical in guiding teens' attitudes about drug use. The family's role in a child's development cannot be overstated - nothing else really even compares. However, it should be no surprise that most of the formal education about drugs occurs in schools. And since families vary in their approach to drug education, schools will continue to be a critical resource for prevention through education.

The second "P" is peers. Peer influence is also huge, so it is helpful for our youth to be around others who are avoiding drug use. Of course it is hard to insist on this, and doing so may backfire for the parent, triggering anger and resentment in their child. So the best strategy is to help children from an early age to cultivate peer groups and interests that promote positive peer groups and interactions.

The third "P" is pop culture. Public policy efforts to reduce positive media depictions of substance use are a key front in this battle. This includes all types of advertisements as well as TV, movies, and even billboards and print depictions. Finding ways to get celebrities to promote healthy living and avoid depictions of drugs in their work and in their own lives also goes a long way to help.

As substance abuse trends change over time, try to remember that early action in schools and at home can help kids avoid problems later on. We hope that prevention at every level will remain a major goal for all of us.

Linden Oaks at Edward is a Power of Choice Partner. Guest Author is David C. Lott, MD, FASAM, FAPA Dr. Lott is the Medical Director of Addiction Services at Linden Oaks Hospital at Edward and Clinical Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at UIC. A graduate of Duke University and The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Dr. Lott completed his post-graduate training at University of Chicago and UIC. He is board certified in General Psychiatry, Addiction Psychiatry, and Addiction Medicine.

Next Month we will focus on Building Family Strategies to limit access to drugs and alcohol

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