



Do Adolescents Need Substance Abuse Treatment?



SAMHSA



nc department
of health and
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NC Division of Mental Health,
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Center for
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Partnerships

says who?

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What is an adolescent?

Adolescents are not quite children, not quite adults. There are several definitions related to this period of rapid growth in a human's life. Most experts on adolescence divide this stage in life into three parts: early adolescence (11-14), middle adolescence (15-18), and late adolescence (18-21)¹⁻². The term adolescent in this fact sheet means people between the ages of 11 and 21.

Are adolescents using drugs?

Yes. Adolescents in this country use substances at a high rate compared to adolescents from other countries and compared to adolescents in this country before 1960³. If a person starts using substances in adolescence, he or she is likely to still be using substances up to 27 years later.⁴ In 2005, almost 30% (27.7%) of 12-17 year olds and 59.2% of 18-25 year olds had tried illicit drugs in their lifetime⁵. In 2005, 10.6% of 12-17 year olds and 19.4% of 18-25 year olds had used illicit drugs in the past month⁵. Alcohol use among 12-20 year olds was even higher than illicit drug use. Almost 55% had used alcohol in their lifetimes and 28.2% had used alcohol in the past month⁵. In 1997, drug use among 8th graders began a gradual decline that continued until 2005³. Use among 10th graders began to drop in 1998, but was not consistent until 2002-2003 when there was also a slight decrease in use among 12th graders³. North Carolina has higher rates of adolescent substance abuse than does the nation.⁶

Why is it important to treat adolescents for substance abuse?

It seems obvious that adolescents who are using substances need help stopping. Research suggests that adolescents who receive treatment as adolescents are less likely to become chronic substance users as adults even if their initial experience with treatment is not successful⁴. Other studies suggest that substance users have more chronic health problems and need more public assistance (like Medicaid or Medicare) than adults who don't use drugs⁷. Spending money on treatment for adolescents saves money. Also, adolescents who use substances are much more likely to die from accidents (including car crashes, overdoses, etc.) and suicide⁸. Treatment saves lives. The most compelling evidence, however, may be that substance abuse assessment and treatment can help identify an underlying illness or other challenge in the adolescent who is using drugs to help them feel better from symptoms of depression, anxiety, or other mental health illness⁹⁻¹⁰. When substance abuse and mental health issues are treated together, the adolescent is more likely to grow up well adjusted and mentally healthy.

Do substance abuse treatment programs that work for adults work for adolescents?

No. Adolescents have different brains than adults. It is important to note that treatment experts realized the need for treating the adolescent for addiction long before they understood the differences between adolescent brains and adult brains. Treatment experts now agree that treatment programs should incorporate specific techniques, activities, and settings responsive to an adolescent's emotional, physical, and psychosocial context¹¹. Professionals working with adolescents should have training specific to adolescents so they can develop their treatment skills in this context.

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What type of treatment works best for adolescents?

Treatment should address the developmental needs of adolescents and should be based on evidence that it is effective with adolescents in many different settings and under many different conditions. To determine this, researchers set up clinical trials or tests on the effectiveness of the treatment. Treatments that do well in clinical trials are called evidence based practices. Some include, but are not limited to, cognitive behavioral therapy, motivational interviewing, and multisystemic therapy¹². For a list of more treatments that are evidence based, go to www.samsha.gov. Additionally, the field of children's mental health has adopted a philosophy for working with children and families receiving mental health services called System of Care. Evaluation shows that System of Care can and has improved the quality services provided to consumers in care¹³. For more information on this philosophy, visit <http://rtckids.fmhi.usf.edu/default.cfm>.

What else needs to be done?

- Providers who work with adolescents should receive training in evidence based practices in adolescent substance abuse.
- Providers can use client case notes and their agency's data to evaluate the success of their programming and use this information to adjust their treatment practices to suit the needs of their consumers.
- Providers should work closely with their clients' caregivers and involve their clients in treatment planning.
- Adolescent substance abuse providers need training in the System of Care Philosophy.
- Currently, professionals providing substance abuse services must be certified. The field may want to consider having a separate certification process for providers wanting to work with adolescents.

ADOLESCENT SUBSTANCE ABUSE FACT SHEETS

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Adolescent Substance Abuse Fact Sheets are designed to provide answers at a glance to common questions about adolescent substance abuse. They are by no means a complete summary of available literature on the subject. For further information on each topic, we recommend you start with the "says who" section of each fact sheet. Reproduction of the text is encouraged; however, copies may not be sold.