

Child & Adolescent Health Issues

Substance Use Disorders

Adolescence is a time when the brain is vulnerable to substance use disorders. The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) has a helpful analogy, stating “The adolescent brain is often likened to a car with a fully functioning gas pedal (the reward system) but weak brakes (the prefrontal cortex).” And we know that the use of alcohol, tobacco, and illegal and prescription drugs by teenagers is not uncommon. The Youth Risk Behavior Survey, conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and given to public and private high school students in the United States every two years, provides a good overview of the scope of the problem. Because all of the questions are answered anonymously, this survey is considered a reliable way to determine rates of adolescent substance use. In 2015, 63 percent of high school students reported having tried at least one drink of alcohol, and 33 percent were currently drinking alcohol at the time of the survey. Thirty-two percent of students had tried a cigarette, although only 11 percent were smoking at the time of the survey. Thirty-nine percent of students had tried marijuana, and 22 percent of students admitted to smoking marijuana at the time of the survey. The opioid issue is also impacting adolescents as well, with 7.8 percent of high school seniors reporting nonmedical opioid use. It also has been found that only 1 in 12 adolescents and young adults who need care for any type of addiction receive treatment. These are troubling numbers and illustrate why this is such an important issue to address within our communities.

Only 1 in 12 adolescents and young adults who need care for any type of addiction receive treatment.

There is no one intervention to prevent or stop substance use in adolescence, but good communication and positive social support are key parts of most strategies. It is especially helpful to have family-centered discussions about substance abuse start in childhood. Because many parents find this difficult to do, group settings are often preferable. These group settings also can help parents work with their children to develop the confidence and skills they need to negotiate peer pressure. Additionally, congregational leaders and family members can work toward creating an environment that promotes avoiding use of alcohol, tobacco, and illegal and prescription drugs. It is interesting to note that studies have found that adolescents who are involved in religious institutions are less likely to use substances (alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana, and other drugs) in adolescence, but this should not be interpreted as meaning that adolescents in religious organizations are immune to substance use. They still face many of the same situations and pressures as their peers who are not involved in a religious congregation.

One of the most important objectives with respect to adolescent substance use is to identify and address the problem as soon as possible so that the adolescent can obtain professional help and the family can get the education and support needed. Having open conversations with adolescents in which the subject is approached seriously yet calmly can help identify problems before they become more serious. To use the analogy from NIDA, slowing down a car going 10 mph is a lot easier than slowing down a car going 70 mph.