Substance Abuse Within Our Youth:

A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

The following thorough literature review focuses on the idea that substance abuse in adolescence can be battled with acknowledging the consequences of substance use; hypothesizing the root of what prompts youth to use; connecting the link between social media and its impact on substance abuse; and exploring the benefits of harm reduction methods in relation to our youth. This comprehensive synthesis of research will aim to provide definitive reason as to why adolescent substance abuse needs crucial attention and that harm reduction methods are the leading conducive treatment for our youth.

*Keywords:* youth substance abuse, youth drug addiction, adolescent drug abuse, adolescent prevention and treatment programs

INTRODUCTION

Substance addiction is defined as “a neuropsychiatric disorder characterized by a recurring desire to continue taking the drug despite harmful consequences” (Zou et al., 2017). We must ask ourselves why our children “desire” drugs, and if they know the “harmful consequences” that they risk when using (Zou et al., 2017). Youth substance abuse and use is slowly creeping up to be one of the world’s largest epidemics, and we must understand the implications of this growing issue, and what we can do to minimize the spread.

CONSEQUENCES

When children engage with substances early on, they risk severe consequences, and face dangers far greater than what adults do. In Broderick’s “The Adolescent Brain and Substance Abuse: Looking the Elephant In the Eye,” the author emphasizes on the fact that severity to addiction relies on the age that they begin using substances. The earlier you begin, the greater chance you have to rapidly progress chemical dependency (Broderick, 2013). In addition to this, our brains also undergo neuroplasticity, which as Nicholas Carr explains in his book “The Shallows,” is like a rubber band. When a habit is formed, our neural loops don’t snap back to their old, they hold onto their changed state. Any negative habit can be ingrained into our neurons, just as easily as positive habits do. In other words, any time an individual engages with drugs or alcohol, it negates any negative feelings and waivers the consequences - leaving them only caring about one thing: the substance they’re fiending for (Carr, 2010, p. 34).

In a research review conducted by Kevin Gray and Dr. Lindsay Squeglia, they discovered that exposure to neurotoxins during childhood through the usage of drugs and alcohol could pose the risk of cognitive problems in adulthood (Gray & Squeglia, 2017). As noted by a drug prevention organization named One Choice, our brains do not fully develop until about the age 25, making children and teenagers highly vulnerable when it comes to substance use (“ONE CHOICE FOR HEALTH: A DATA INFORMED, YOUTH-DRIVEN PREVENTION MESSAGE,” 2021). When parents think that their children are not ones to engage in paraphernalia, they are disregarding the truth that is riddled beneath human nature and the ways that their innocent children’s brains are wired.

INFLUENCE

There are hundreds of factors that could play into why adolescents fall slave to substance abuse, including from family, social, and personal risk factors (Broderick 2013). Most notably, however, is that youth who have alcoholic parents or a family history related to drugs are 3-5 times more likely to develop a substance addiction than youth who do not (Broderick 2013). Adolescents look to their family as an example, and if the example has been set that substance use is okay, then naturally they will follow suit.

In addition to the idea that family history plays a large role in substance use, it is also important to note social media’s impact on the issue. In Caitlin Costello and Dr. Danielle Ramo’s journal, “Social Media and Substance Abuse,” they specifically look at social media as a place where substance industries can market to youth, despite the illegality of marketing to minors (Costello & Ramo, 2017, p. 629). Not only does this pose an extremely vile and dangerous avenue for young people to engage in, but it also serves as a hub for peer pressure to exist in. In Jena Hilliard’s article, “The Influence of Social Media on Teen Drug Use,” the author provides recent study analytics, showing that 75% of teenagers who see content on social media from their friends or other young influencers smoking weed or drinking alcohol encourage them to experiment in the same way (Hilliard, 2019). Although peer pressure for drinking and smoking has been an age-old issue, social media has made it mutually exclusive for all young people to not only chip in the conversation of substance use, but also feel included within and encouraged to engage with drugs and alcohol purely based off the pictures they view through their screens. Looking at further statistics, Hilliard explains that “teenagers who come across [drug and alcohol related content] are four times more likely to have used marijuana and three times more likely to have consumed alcohol compared to the kids who have not.” The internet has quite literally become a universal network where youth can learn about a multitude of substances, where to find them, and how to use them. However, they fail to google one thing when searching for substance related information: the treatments they’ll need when they become chemically addicted to them.

TREATMENT AND PREVENTION PROGRAMS

Countless preventative methods have been utilized in schools for decades to combat adolescent substance abuse; however, one stands apart from the rest: Reconnected Youth, a peer group approach to building relationships and creating better lives. According to the official website, this organization specifically targets at-risk school districts for students who lack appropriate credits for their grade level, high absenteeism, and a rapid decline in grade point average. Compared to other preventative programs who incorporate scare tactics and a strict “NO” contract, Reconnected Youth incorporates support mechanisms, including extracurricular activities, community volunteer work, and an increase in parent involvement (“Reconnecting Youth and Cast LLC,” n.d.)

An active parent within a child’s academic and personal life plays a significant role in the accountability aspect of refraining from substance abuse. Parents play a major role in preventing substance youth and supporting them if they have engaged in such activities (“Prevention Education: The Role of Parents,” 2014). Talking to a child about the consequences of substance use are key to shaping their perspectives and behaviors in their futures.

In the instance that an adolescent has used substances, the best approach is to build their self-esteem and instill confidence within them, not a strict punishment method. Sending young people to the juvenile system for accessing treatment is not only inappropriate, but it also does not address the issue. An adolescent induction to the juvenile system is “a lost opportunity to affect the lives of these kids and their families in a positive way and to reduce reoffending as well” (Broderick 2013). When substance use is discovered, an intervention and a referral for treatment can positively impact the adolescent in their health and wellness trajectory (“ONE CHOICE FOR HEALTH: A DATA INFORMED, YOUTH-DRIVEN PREVENTION MESSAGE,” 2021). Instead of shipping off our youth - who have not only been uneducated by proper influences, but have also been engulfed within a network that has normalized the consumption of drugs and alcohol – we must take every measure to ensure they feel supported in whatever stage we find them in.

LIMITATIONS OF LITERATURE

Some literature chosen for this paper do not focus specifically on youth substance abuse and use, which could lack direct notes and feelings from adolescents, comparative to other sources. Another limitation is that some of the chosen literature root from secondary sources, which could present inaccurate information due to the train of interpretations from journalists and other writers.

CONCLUSION

Despite being a large and growing global issue, there is shockingly little conducted research that directly focuses on the reasoning behind youth substance abuse and use. As the eras change, the discussion for youth outside of schools have shifted from relatively supportive and safe prevention programs to harsh punishment programs, like juvenile enforcement interventions. It is crucial that we place our priorities into funding preventative programs like Reconnected Youth, who not only decrease drug and alcohol involvement, but also increase the self-esteem and overall livelihoods of our youth to later become upstanding members of our society. We must recognize the chokehold social media has on the impact of young people in their decisions and behaviors, and truly understand why our youth are engaging with substances.

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