

Alcohol and Drug Use During Adolescence: Problems and Solutions that Youth Professionals Need to Know ¹

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Introduction

Adolescents use and abuse of a variety of substances is an increasingly common concern for Extension agents. Youth professionals must be made aware of this problem and anticipate how the teens and their families they work with may be affected. In addition, the public needs to know that community and youth programs are useful deterrents to drug and alcohol abuse. Community and youth activities can provide opportunities for children and youth to engage in constructive activities and encourage norms that discourage drug/alcohol experimentation. By fostering such environments, Extension agents can actively involve youth in programs, while also directly contributing to their personal development. Statistics on the problem at a national and local level, solutions at the community and family levels, and implications for extension programming will be discussed.

Adolescent Substance Use in the US

- More than 25% of the 2.5 million teens who binge on alcohol consider themselves “heavy” drinkers (SAMHSA, 2004).

- Greater than 50% of 9th graders and two-thirds of 12th graders used alcohol and/or drugs over the past year, with alcohol as the most popular drug of choice, followed by marijuana, amphetamines, and illegally obtained prescription drugs (Harrison, Fulkerson, & Beebe, 1998).
- 60% of tenth graders report having consumed alcohol and greater than 40% report having used marijuana in the past month (Hibell, 2001).

Adolescent Substance Use and Community Risk in Florida

- 32.7% of Alachua County teens in 6th – 12th grade report using alcohol and 13.2% have used marijuana in the past 30 days (FL Youth Substance Abuse Survey, 2004).
- 29.7% of teens in Duval County report having consumed alcohol in the past 30 days and 15.2% consider themselves heavy drinkers. Reported teen marijuana use in the past month has declined in Duval County from 16.3% in 2000 to 13.6% in 2004.

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- 35.5% of Escambia County teens have consumed alcohol and 14.2% have used marijuana in the past month. Escambia County has a high level of community risk, meaning that youth are less likely to be involved in pro-social community organizations and less likely to be influenced by positive role models in the community.
- 35.1% of teens in Palm Beach County have used alcohol and 11.4% have used marijuana in the past month.
- Palm Beach County also has an increasing level of community risk in which youth have limited exposure to positive community organizations and role models.
- 35.5% of Volusia County teens have consumed alcohol and 12.5% have used marijuana in the past 30 days.

These findings suggest other problems. A strong dose of a drug that a teen has not built up tolerance for can result in injury, addiction, or even death (Berk, 2004). In addition, drug use is related to other problems and different types of risky behaviors. A teen may be driving recklessly or practicing unsafe sex at the same time he/she is using drugs or alcohol. Parents and other adults who interact with youth are alarmed by current rates of adolescent drug use. Therefore, the need to explore existing and alternate methods for discouraging youth drug use is obvious.

Experts in the field of adolescent risk behavior believe that the majority of drug and alcohol using teens are doing so experimentally, on a temporary basis (Moffitt, Caspi, Dickson, Silva, & Stanton, 1996). Teen drug and alcohol use may be motivated by a need to feel like an adult and obtain the privileges, but not responsibilities, of adulthood. Such factors speak to the important impact that youth-adult partnerships can have in shaping the decision of young people to experiment with drugs and alcohol. Through Extension programs, volunteer efforts, and youth-adult partnerships, opportunities for youth self-efficacy, skill enhancement, and leadership development are presented.

Solutions for Community and Youth Activities

The community is the first social contact that youth have beyond the family, and can, in fact, serve as support to youth who have limited family support and supervision. It is therefore vital that community attachment and connection to social life are created for and provided to youth. This connection to the community contributes to self-actualization and provides feedback as to what is acceptable and constructive behavior. By providing a clear linkage to the community and giving youth a voice in decisions made at the community level, youth will be less likely to perceive themselves as disconnected from local life. Such conditions can dramatically shape decisions to experiment, use, and abuse various substances.

Moreover, such activities provide a strong connection to the community, contribute to personal and community attachment, provide opportunities for self-actualization, and provide support structures that can discourage drug use and abuse (Wilkinson, 1991; Luloff & Bridger, 2003). For example, 12-17 year-old youths who are involved in some type of community-based activity (e.g., after school activities, faith-based activities, sports, or youth organizations), are more likely to be exposed to positive adult role models, and less likely to smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, or use illegal drugs (SAMHSA, 2004).

Solutions for Family Influences

Ultimately, a combination of community, family, and individual protective factors strengthen the ability of youth to abstain from drug and alcohol use. Notable family influences that reduce a youth's likelihood of drug use include:

- strong family support and communication (Wills & Yaeger, 2003),
- consistent parental discipline (Wills & Yaeger, 2003),
- parental monitoring of children's whereabouts (Wills & Yaeger, 2003), and

- strong limits set on underage drinking (Yu, 2003) and illicit drug use.

Implications for Extension Programming at the Community Level

Community-based programs that provide youth with opportunities to build responsibility and accountability can be highly effective. The most effective youth programs are those that build up a participant's assets and competencies (Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998). Assets develop through the active involvement that youth have when they work with positive adults in community efforts, youth leadership, and other character building programs. Such programs provide a concrete linkage between youth activities, the community, and youth self-actualization. The importance of these conditions stresses the need for programs to have a more measurable link to their impact within the community. Community-based teen programming provides a place for teens to voice their concerns and translate those concerns into community action.

In shaping community-based programs and education options against drug use for teens, agents should consider including the following:

- programs that promote a youth voice in decision making and program development;
- creating clear no-use drug rules and consequences;
- providing an atmosphere of open communication;
- creating a separate space with programs for teens to call their own; and
- programming that meets the specific and unique needs of teens (e.g., responsibility and positive adult privilege).

The outcomes for such efforts can include:

- increased youth connection with their communities;

- increased sense of self- and community identity of youth;

- gain in adult privileges *and* responsibility for youth (e.g., youth gain ownership of community initiatives and recognize the dependence of others on them); and

- new perspectives and insights through youth-adult relationships for youth and adults as they work in partnership.

Implications for Extension Programming at the Family Level

Similar measures to those taken in community-based programs that serve youth are needed in families to help prevent substance use among teens. The best options to suggest to parents are:

- setting firm no-use rules for alcohol and drug use, with consequences for breaking rules;
- encouraging open communication about drugs and alcohol, with parents (and parent educators) setting the example;
- spending weekly quality “together” time with their children like going on a walk;
- monitor the child's activities during the after school hours by getting them involved in a quality after school program;
- listening to children before lecturing; and
- providing advice for risky situations through role play.

Knowing that adolescents, at some point in their lives, will be exposed to drug and alcohol use by their peers, it is important that they have broad support and feedback from family, community, and others to help them make the right decisions. It is also vital that youth be provided with options for involvement and a clear identification of their role in the community. As much as adults and some youth believe that alcohol and drug use/abuse may not touch their lives directly, providing a more concrete system for youth support

will help communities, families, and organizations to cope effectively with teens drug and alcohol related incidents.

References and Suggested Reading

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Web sites and Sources of Additional Information

For Family, Youth, and Community

Champlin, S., Henderson, A.C., & Evashwick W. (Eds.). *Promoting teen health: linking schools, health organizations, and community*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol & Drug Information (U.S Department of Health and Human Services), <http://www.health.org/> (Offers resources related to drugs and alcohol for family, youth, and community providers)

Florida Youth Substance Abuse Survey (Florida Department of Childrens and Families), <http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/mentalhealth/publications/fysas/> (Results and reports of the 2000 to 2004 survey per county, includes community need risk factors)

For Parents and Family Members

Parents. The Anti-Drug. (National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign):

- <http://www.theantidrug.com/>

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<http://www.theantidrug.com/pdfs/version3General.pdf>

- 1-800-788-2800 to order a free copy

Marijuana: Facts Parents Need to Know.
National Institute of Drug Abuse (N.I.D.A.)
(National Institute of Health, U.S. Department of
Health and Human Services)
[http://www.nida.nih.gov/MarijBroch/
MarijparentsN.html](http://www.nida.nih.gov/MarijBroch/MarijparentsN.html) (brochure for parents on effects
of teen marijuana use)

For Teens

The Science Behind Drug Abuse. National
Institute of Drug Abuse (N.I.D.A.) for Teens
(National Institute of Health, U.S. Department of
Health and Human Services)
<http://www.teens.drugabuse.gov/> (Web site designed
to educate teens about drugs, by the National Institute
of Drug Abuse: NIDA)

Marijuana: Facts for Teens. (National Institute of
Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human
Services)
<http://www.nida.nih.gov/MarijBroch/Marijteens.html>
(brochure for teens on the effects of marijuana use
from NIDA)