



Center for Behavioral Health Studies

Exploring the Why's of Adolescent Drug Abuse

Adolescence and early adulthood are periods of growth and exploration. For some teens and young adults, however, this is also the time for their involvement in drugs and addiction. Data shows that **64 percent of patients entering treatment for drug abuse had started abusing drugs between the ages of 13 and 20 years old.**

National Survey on Drug Use

Each day approximately 3,000 teens smoke their first cigarette. Among 30,000 teenagers recently polled by the National Survey on Drug Use and Health in 2004. It was found that 4.2% of the 12 to 13 year olds reported using an illicit drug in the past month. Also of major concern was the 11.2 percent use rate reported in the 14 to 15 year old age group.

Teen smoking illustrates the risks of early exposure to addictive drugs. Over 30% of high school students who try smoking for the first time eventually become daily smokers.

Young smokers appear to be more vulnerable to nicotine addiction than are older smokers. Teen users report symptoms of dependence after smoking fewer cigarettes than adults. Also, they have more difficulty quitting and experience more severe withdrawal symptoms than adults who smoke similar amounts.

Recent studies with animals provide ample evidence that drugs affect the developing adolescent brain differently than they do the mature brain. In one study, rats exposed to nicotine in adolescence self-administered

more nicotine as adolescents and as adults, than rats first exposed to nicotine in adulthood.

Strengthening Prevention

To strengthen prevention and treatment of drug abuse and addiction during the crucial adolescent period, further research efforts are needed. Studies must better define the successive steps in adolescent brain development and how they differ with initiation of drug abuse, escalation to uncontrollable abuse, and relapse.

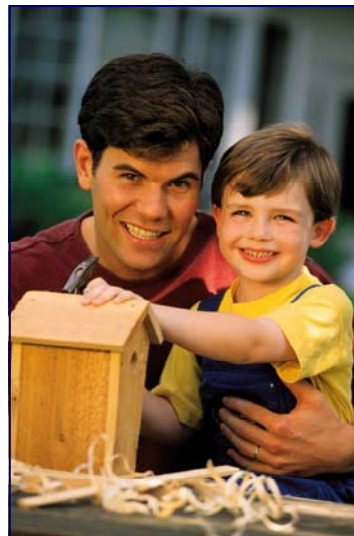
New drug prevention initiatives must be aimed at increasing our ability to prevent teens from abusing drugs. We should be focusing on the cognitive decision making that influences choices to abuse or to avoid drugs.

More studies will help us understand how teens perceive risk and make decisions on matters that involve risk.

Focusing on the period of emerging adulthood, spanning the years from 18 to 25, is also critical. This is a time of continued brain development and represents the opportunity for new personal and social choices and challenges. There is an emergence of personal beliefs and values, exploration of career roles, and transitions involving increasing independence

and shifts in relationships with parents and peers.

Overall rates of drug use peak and usually begin subsiding during these years. **Most youths who abuse drugs in their teens or early twenties stop voluntarily as they mature into full adults, but some do not.**



Summary

About 25 percent of all smoking, 33 percent of marijuana use, and roughly 70 percent of cocaine abuse begins after age 17. Personal, social, and demographic factors such as education, employment, and home environment all appear to influence the patterns of abuse in this period.

A sharpened focus on emerging adults will support development and testing of

interventions to prevent initiation or escalation of drug abuse during this life transition. **The choices adolescents make have a profound long-term impact in successfully growing into positive healthy adults.**

Intensified research on the interaction of drugs and adolescent development will sharpen our understanding of those crucial choices.

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