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Substance Abuse in Teenagers: A life controlling problem

Using drugs and alcohol for experimentation is something that is frequently seen during the teenage years. At some point in all our lives, we are exposed to these substances, and it is up to us to decide whether or not we want to get involved with them. According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the average age that teenagers experience their first use of marijuana is 14 years old, and alcohol can be start before the age of 12 (2013). From a very young age, kids are exposed to publicity and real life situations where people are consuming alcohol, for example, and are enjoying life, which portrays the image to them that alcohol is harmless (Dowshen, 2013). But, the main problem regarding this subject is it's unfortunately hard to know which teens will eventually stop the experimentation, or will only use these substances in moderation without consequential problems, and which teenager's experimentation will enlarge into a bigger problem (AACAP, 2013). There are a variety of risk factors that can cause teenagers to have a greater chance of becoming a substance abuser or addict. For example, family and community problems, Individual problems, or peer influence. There are many consequences related to substance abuse in teens as well, these issues involve health, law, family, individual and community problems. But to help with this problem of substance abuse and addiction, protective factors and prevention programs are also present in the teenager's lives.

Risk Factors:Family

There are various reasons why teenager's families could be the cause of them getting involved with drugs and alcohol. For example, having parents who don't supervise their children, who aren't involved much in their lives, who are abusive or have poor communication with their kids (Matheson and McGrath, 2013). Also, having family history of drug and alcohol problems, having a home where there is constantly chaos, and having undesirable role models as parents to look up to (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2012).

Community

Some community risk factors are having easy drug access in your neighbourhood, having a high occurrence of alcohol and drug abuse in your area, and being touched by poverty, where drugs and alcohol are often used to help cope with the problem, or are the cause (Matheson and McGrath, 2013). Also, hanging out with people and having friends who are involved with drugs, and alcohol use, could increase the chances of teens following in their footsteps, since they become immune to the problems that others deal with and see it so often that they eventually consider it to be normal (AACAP, 2013).

Individual

There is a great deal of individual risk factors as well, that can increase the chance of teens getting involved with substance abuse or addiction. These include having aggressive behaviour, having insufficient self-control, or being easily tempered (National Institution on Drug Abuse, 2012). As well as low self-esteem, feeling the need to fit in, having mental health issues (for

example depression), poor grades in school, having weak social skills and having trouble dealing with difficult situations in life (Matheson and McGrath, 2013).

The more risks a teenager is exposed to, the more likely they are to get involved with drug and alcohol addiction or abuse. As well as this, there are certain risk factors that have a stronger impact on teenagers at certain stages of their lives, mainly when they are exposed to major transitions (Nation Institute on Drug Abuse, 2012). For example, leaving elementary school to middle school is the first big transition where kids first experience new educational and social circumstances, such as being exposed to a larger group of peers (Nation Institute on Drug Abuse, 2012). It is also a transition where early adolescents are likely to come across drugs and alcohol for the first time (Nation Institute on Drug Abuse, 2012). The second big transition is entering high school. During this period, teenagers are faced with greater social, psychological and academic troubles, and are more likely to encounter drugs, drug abusers and social activities including drugs and alcohol (Nation Institute on Drug Abuse, 2012). The last major transition is graduating high school and leaving home for college or work, because the fact teenagers are on their own for the first time without parental control, increases the risks of them becoming drug and alcohol abusers (National Drug Institute on Drug Abuse, 2012).

Protective Factors

Community/Relationships

Specialists believe that limiting teenager's access to drugs and alcohol, and keeping them away from people, who are drug and alcohol abusers or addicts, is one of the most effective protective factors for the long run (Matheson and McGrath, 2013). Living in a community where drugs and alcohol are not accepted can help kids be protected, as well as having friends who aren't into that

stuff (Matheson and McGrath, 2013). Schools have numerous ways of keeping their students from getting involved with drugs and alcohol, for example, having after school activities and clubs that they can join, having sports teams that are coached by people who portray good role models, and by offering high quality education (Matheson and McGrath, 2013).

Family

Certain family factors that will lower the chances of their kids becoming drug and alcohol abusers or addicts are: having responsible parents who are positive role models, who have open and good communication skills with their children, who set limits and expectations, and who supervise and are beneficially involved with their teen's lives (AACAP, 2013).

Prevention Programs

Prevention programs are present in children's lives from the time they start understanding the concept of drug and alcohol abuse, and many of them are provided in schools, neighbourhoods and by community agencies (Matheson and McGrath, 2013). Because there are so many risks that are present in teenager's lives, it is important for these prevention planners to choose programs that will have the greatest impact at each stage of development, since it is these programs that are giving kids the education that they will carry on with them, and will think about, when faced with drugs and alcohol (Nation Institute on Drug Abuse, 2012).

Consequences

Health

Although we may not always think about the health issues relating to alcohol and drug abuse, these substances can have severe consequences. For example, they can cause poor brain function, concentration issues and can impact other areas of the brain's development (Matheson and McGrath, 2013). The reason for this is the brain is still developing during the teenage years, so consuming drugs and alcohol during this period can result in permanent intellectual and psychological damage, as well as cause harm to the endocrine development (which regulates mood and the reproductive system), and can cause memory loss (Greenwood, 2013). Mental health problems such as depression, apathy, withdrawal and other psychosocial dysfunctions can be caused by abusing these substances, as well as diseases, physical disabilities and weight gain (Dowshen, 2013). Also, overdose and injuries, (for example car accidents), are more likely to occur (Drug Identification and Testing in the Juvenile justice system, 2005).

Individual

Being known as a substance abuser or addict obviously doesn't portray a very good image. It can cause teens to get in serious trouble with the law, since the substances being used are illegal, which can have a big impact on them later on in life (Dowshen, 2013). This problem acts as a distraction when it comes to school work, which is why we often see a decline in grades, an increase in absenteeism and an increased possibility for dropping out of school (Drug Identification and Testing in the Juvenile justice system, 2005). Athletic performance may be affected as well, and although people often portray alcohol and drug use as something cool, it can make you do stupid or embarrassing things which are often regretted, since it messes with the nervous system (Dowshen, 2013). Teenagers who use drugs have an increased chance of being sexually active and practicing unsafe sex, causing pregnancy and sexually transmitted

diseases (Dowshen, 2013). Teenage substance abusers and addicts often develop risky behaviour, poor judgement and have difficulty understanding what's right and wrong (Greenwood, 2013).

Family and Relationships

When teenagers are involved with substance abuse, it not only impacts them, but the people who are close to them as well. For example, having someone who doesn't care about their academic success and who is a substance abuser as a classmate can cause learning barriers for their peers (Drug Identification and Testing in the Juvenile justice system, 2005). Teenage Substance abuse can lead to conflicts with friends, and can ruin friendships (Matheson and McGrath, 2013). It can also cause family catastrophes and can threaten many features of family life, sometimes developing family dysfunction (Drug Identification and Testing in the Juvenile justice system, 2005).

Programs in place

Alcohol and Drug intervention programs are used to help teens who are involved with these substances stop (Matheson and McGrath, 2013). To decide which type of program a teen should pursue, a doctor or therapist should be met with (Matheson and McGrath, 2013). During this meeting, the trained professional will determine the quantity and type of adolescent alcohol and drug abuse misuse the teen is involved with, allowing the patient and his or her family to get the right type of care whether it be outpatient or inpatient counselling (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2012).

Outpatient Care

Most teenagers that have been involved with alcohol and drug abuse for a short period of time are recommended to outpatient care, which involves group therapy, individual therapy and drug education (Matheson and McGrath, 2013). Because the substance abuse problem has just started, and the services the patient is advised to go to are often offered in their community, teens normally live at home, since experts believe that having family support and involvement gives the best results (Matheson and McGrath, 2013).

Inpatient Care

Teenagers who have been involved with drugs and alcohol for a long time, and who are found to be addicted or dependent of them, will be referred to inpatient care (Matheson and McGrath, 2013). The first step to the treatment may be medical detoxification, which involves clearing all drugs and alcohol out of the teenagers system, to prevent medical complications (Matheson and McGrath, 2013). The next step will be attending daily individual and group therapy sessions and academic tutoring (Matheson and McGrath, 2013). During approximately 30 days, the teenager lives in a drug and alcohol treatment center, and after those 30 days are done, they are often sent to outpatient programs to make sure they are able to live a drug and alcohol free life (AACAP, 2013).

Other programs

Other helpful programs include family therapy, self-help groups, such as alcoholic anonymous (AA) or Narcotics anonymous, which are known as 12 step groups, and are provided and organised by people who are also recuperating from addictions and are supporting those who wants to live drug free lives (National Institute on Drug Abuse).

According to the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, almost 80% of high school students by their graduating year, have tried alcohol (2013). As well as almost 50% of high school students have tried marijuana (Youth Risk Behaviour Surveillance, 2011). Although these statistics only show the percentage of experimentation by teenagers, certain risks factors which include having a bad family life, a community where drugs and alcohol are frequently seen, and personal problems, can lead these experimentations to turn into addiction. Being addicted to drugs and alcohol can then lead to health problems, individual problems with the law and school for example, and this can rub off on friends and family and cause problems with them. It may seem like a never ending issue that takes over your life, but with the help of the protective factors that are used to prevent teens from getting involved with this problem, or the different programs in place that are used to help teens who are involved with the problem recover, substance abuse and addiction in teenagers can be controlled, and will hopefully one day be non-existing.

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