

Maryland School Mental Health Alliance*

Substance Abuse in Children and Adolescents Information for Teachers and School Staff

In 2005, the National Institute on Drug Abuse found that approximately 21% of all 8th graders, 38% of all 10th graders, and 50% of all twelfth graders have tried an illegal drug. Younger students are also at risk; surveys have shown that 30% of 4th through 6th graders feel pressured by their peers to drink beer, 31% to try marijuana, and 34% to smoke cigarettes. Alcohol use often begins by age 13, and studies show that 80 % of high school seniors have used alcohol. The younger kids start using drugs and alcohol, the more likely they are to develop serious problems with abuse and addiction later on. As a teacher who spends a lot of time with kids, you can play a critical role in helping to identify and get help for those students at risk for or engaged in alcohol or drug abuse.

Why do we care?

Drugs and alcohol contribute to a host of problems for our students, including:

- Poor academic performance;
- Memory and learning problems;
- Truancy and absenteeism;
- Problems with family and peer relationships, and a lack of empathy for others;
- A tendency to engage in other risky activities, and to feel invulnerable;
- An increased risk for moving on to more dangerous drugs, and developing dependency or addiction.

While all children are at risk of using drugs and alcohol, the following risk factors significantly increase the chance that a child will develop a serious alcohol or drug problem:

- Having a family history of substance abuse, dependency, or addiction;
- Depression or low self-esteem;
- Social isolation; inability to fit in to the mainstream.

What can you do about it?

- **Watch for signs of abuse:**
 - Moodiness; irritability
 - Argumentative, disruptive, rule-breaking behavior
 - Sudden mood or personality changes
 - Low self esteem or depression
 - Poor judgment; irresponsible behavior
 - Social withdrawal; pulling away from family, teachers, other trusted adults
 - Change in former activities or friends; general lack of interest
- **Notify the appropriate school staff** (e.g., school counselor or mental health provider, school principal) if you suspect a student is using drugs or alcohol.
- **Let your students know that you do not approve of drug or alcohol use;** develop a personal relationship with your students, and share your concerns about their safety and well being.
- **Create a positive classroom environment** where students feel comfortable talking with you and sharing feelings; listen carefully to what they are telling you, and let them know that you are a resource of support if they should need it.
- **Encourage students to develop different ways to refuse substance use,** examples include:
 - Switching topic (“hey, did you hear about the game last night?”)

- Using an excuse (“I can’t, I’m meeting a friend in 10 minutes)
- Put the “blame” on others/parents (“my mom would kill me if she found out”)
- Walk away
- State the facts (“No thanks, I’ve read about what drugs can do to your body”)
- **Educate yourself.** Seek out resources that give current information regarding what drugs are out there and specific signs of use. Children are beginning to use at younger ages and teachers often spend more time with students than their parents, it is important to be up to date to ensure the safety of your students.
- **Educate your students.** Give them factual information about drugs and alcohol; it is important to challenge myths and to give them accurate information about the dangers of substance use.
- **Remind your students that they will be reported** if they come to school in possession of drugs or alcohol, or under their influence.
- **Let your students know that you will contact their parents** if you suspect drug or alcohol use. Follow through on parent contact should the need arise, but let students know that you will be contacting their parents so as not to violate their trust.
- **Discuss your concerns**, and possible responses, with your principal or other school administrators.

Key Resources/Links

1. **American Council for Drug Education** is an excellent website for teachers who want suggestions for talking with their students about drugs and alcohol, information about signs and symptoms of specific drugs, and classroom prevention lesson plans: <http://www.acde.org/educate/Default.htm>
2. **The AntiDrug.com**, a website of the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign, provides educators with information about what to do if you suspect that a student is using drugs or alcohol: http://theantidrug.mondosearch.com/cgi-bin/MsmGo.exe?grab_id=0&EXTRA_ARG=&CFGNAME=MssFind.cfg&host_id=42&page_id=629&query=teacher&hiword=TEACH%20TEACHABLE%20teacher%20TEACHERS%20TEACHES%20TEACHING%20
3. **Building Blocks for a Healthy Future** is a website developed by the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Here you will find practical information about helping your pre-school and elementary school-aged children make good choices and develop a healthy lifestyle: <http://www.bblocks.samhsa.gov/Educators/>
4. **National Council on Alcohol and Drug Dependence** is particularly focused on alcohol use and abuse. For a list of specific signs that a student may be in trouble with alcohol: <http://www.ncadd.org/facts/parent2.html>
5. **Partnership for a Drug Free America:** The testimonials, graphics, and information on current trends (such as the use of methamphetamines and performance-enhancing drugs) make this an excellent website for teachers, parents, and teens: <http://www.drugfree.org/Teen/>
6. **National Institute on Drug Abuse:** This website provides links to facts on specific drugs for parents and teachers as well as age appropriate curriculum regarding drug education. <http://www.nida.nih.gov/parent-teacher.html>

*Developed by the Center for School Mental Health (<http://csmh.umaryland.edu>) in collaboration with the Maryland School Mental Health Alliance.