Substance Abuse Among Adolescents

Substance abuse among adolescents can range from experimentation to serious substance use disorders. All substance use, including experimental use, puts adolescents at risk for short-term to long-term problems. Short-term problems may include accidents, fights, reckless or unwanted sexual activity, and overdoses. Because adolescents are so vulnerable to the effects of substance use, they are at greater risk of developing long-term consequences. These include mental health disorders, poor school performance and substance use disorders. In society, substance use is an easy way for teens to meet the normal need for development that inclines them to take risks and look for emotions. It is not surprising that substance use is frequent when adolescents grow up, and most teens try alcohol before they even graduate from high school. It is very important for parents to be involved in the lives of their adolescents in order to prevent any of these behaviors. The way parents decide to present themselves and their rules regarding substances can contribute to the decisions their children make in their lives, so it is vital for it to not go ignored.

According to Pediatrics Publications, “alcohol and tobacco—pose perhaps the greatest danger to children and teenagers. Both represent significant gateway drugs and are among the earliest drugs used by children or teenagers.” Society and the media have showed the consumption of alcohol as acceptable or even as a habit integrated into the normal social relationship. On the other hand, adolescents whose family members drink excessively think that this behavior is acceptable. Some of these adolescents who try alcohol end up developing a disorder related to their consumption. Among the risk factors for this are the fact of starting to drink at an early age and genetic factors. Care must be taken that adolescents with a family experience of alcoholism are aware that they are exposed to a greater risk. The American Addiction Center concludes that, “Around 72% of seniors in high school (around 18 years of age) report having tried alcohol, although only 55% say they have been drunk at some time. About 50% of students in the last year of high school have consumed alcohol in the last month and are considered current drinkers.” Alcohol intoxication is usually considered drunken when more than 4 alcoholic beverages are consumed during a period of 2 hours or less. Drunkenness puts teenagers at risk of accidents, injuries, reckless or unwanted sexual activity and other unfortunate situations. For these reasons, teens should be discouraged from drinking.

Another popular substance, one that is seen so commonly now is marihuana. Minors are the most vulnerable to the consumption of marijuana due to the effects it causes in their central nervous system, which at this stage of life is still in development. Next Generation Village states, “ This drug, which is known for providing a relaxing high to users, has undergone significant changes in its consumption methods. Today, teens use marijuana not only by smoking it but also through edibles, pills and vaporizers; 34.9% of high school seniors use this drug at least once per year.” Marijuana has become much accessible to adolescents, where their own classmates or relatives could provide it. Unlike alcohol, marihuana can be classified as a depressant, which means many who seek to use the drug look for it’s relaxing effect, which some may claim is an escape from reality for them. Still the consumption of these substances among adolescents remains a serious problem. The nationwide survey of risk behavior of young people, conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance nationwide survey of high school students, by the CDC) at the level

of high school students reported that, in 2015, 21.7% of high school students were current users of marijuana (percentage that is below 25.3% in 1995). Around 39% reported having used marijuana one or more times throughout their lives. In 2010, the current rate of marijuana consumption exceeded the current tobacco consumption rate for the first time.

This leads us to all the effects that come with substance abuse in those who are underage. The Mayo Clinic states that one may notice that a teen may abusing one of these forms of substances if there is, “sudden or extreme change in friends, eating habits, sleeping patterns, physical appearance, coordination or school performance, irresponsible behavior, poor judgment and general lack of interest, breaking rules or withdrawing from the family, or the presence of medicine containers, despite a lack of illness, or drug paraphernalia in your teen's room.” Young people who consume this type of substance can present a series of changes in their behavior and habits that could give certain clues to their environment to detect this phenomenon, although it is convenient to bear in mind that caution should be exercised with this, since adolescence It is a period where young people can experience many of these behavioral changes.

Apart from the damage that substances can create in decision making and relationships, it can create major health issues. Drug Rehab shares that, “drugs carry a series of harmful consequences for the physical and mental health of consumers; nevertheless, when being in a stage of development and of formation of the adult man, these consequences are more serious in the adolescents.” This could lead to Damage to the respiratory system, with diseases like bronchitis, pulmonary emphysema, which are mostly associated with the consumption of cannabis. There is also liver failure for those who consume too much alcohol, because your liver can not work efficiently to get rid of the alcohol anymore when it is being consumed on a regular basis. And of course, just as importantly, there are psychological damages, including memory disorders, concentration and learning (which results in school failure), psychomotor disorders and in the performance of complex tasks, anxiety and panic reactions, increased depression, development of schizophrenia (in people with predisposition), psychotic outbreaks.

There are a variety of reasons or contributors to why adolescents end up partaking in some sort of drug use. For starters, one of the factors that increase the risk of drug use are the easy accessibility to many substances such as alcohol and tobacco. Today in day, it has become incredibly simple for minors to find a way to gain access to different sorts of drugs. In addition, according to Next Generation Village, among the main causes of drug use is the feeling of invulnerability. Adolescents experience physical and hormonal changes, like growth, development of muscle mass. These changes create in them a certain sensation of invulnerability and strength, which leads them to develop behaviors and habits such as the consumption of drugs and other risk behaviors. They continue to then mention the importance of curiosity, which in adolescence represents a major stage of changes and learning. This can awaken the curiosity in young people and the desire to experience what it feels like to be under the influence of different drugs. Imitation of parents or family members is also a factor, where teens have gone their whole lives seeing or living with adults who drink or do drugs. Subconsciously, these adolescents do not know that by witnessing it only made it made it more normalized in their brains, hence not being seen as a major problem when beginning to partake in them.

Another major factor or cause to substance abuse by those who are underage, according to The Recovery Village, is peer pressure. The pressure of wanting to feel accepted in a group of

friends or peers can sometimes lead adolescents to do things they would normally not agree with. Sometimes the groups of friends we wish to be part of consume alcohol or drugs and to be a part of them they must also consume them. The need for belonging to something or feeling accepted is seen to be a desire more than anything else. Not only this, but the media has made doing drugs and alcohol normalized and a key part of middle or high school experiences. Drug Rehab states, “Research shows that teens consider risks and rewards when making a decision, but they’re much more likely than adults to ignore the risks. So in choices related to drug or alcohol use, adolescents are more likely to think about looking cool or fitting in than they are to consider becoming addicted or getting into an accident”.

When it comes to solutions to underage substance abuse, one must actually think even way before that is prevention and taking all the possible measures that can be articulated against drugs. But to promote prevention requires great efforts and will to remember the objective, of providing truthful and rigorous information on this complexity that comes with substances. When experts on National Institute on Drug Abuse responded to the question if prevention was key in adolescence they responded, “As noted previously, early use of drugs increases a person's chances of becoming addicted. Remember, drugs change the brain—and this can lead to addiction and other serious problems. So, preventing early use of drugs or alcohol may go a long way in reducing these risks”. The biggest form of a solution to this problem would be the prevention, and providing all the information to our adolescents about the consequences that come with substance abuse.

Unfortunately, not all is inevitable. So what is there to do once an adolescent begins to engage in different forms of substances, and the prevention is too late? Recovery Village states, “if you learn your teen has a substance problem, you can still help prevent the disease from escalating and doing more harm. Reach out for support and prepare to tackle the problem through counseling, detox or some form of rehab”. Having to come to terms with that your adolescent is involved in such activities may difficult as it is, but it is important to put it aside and realize that getting them help is the most important thing. There are so many negative consequences to substance abuse, especially when it is happening at a younger age, which is why measure need to be taken as quickly as possible. The American Addiction Center explains that, “In addition to all of these facts, underage drinking impairs judgment and increases the likelihood that young people will engage in a variety of risky behaviors, including driving after drinking, having unprotected sex, or displaying violent or aggressive behaviors. Underage drinking also increases the likelihood of being the perpetrator or the victim of a physical or sexual assault.”

Coming from a small town, I definitely saw the normalization of substance abuse in my own high school. It was probably also going on during middle school, but I think I was too innocent and naive to even imagine it or see it. When you live in a small town, where there is nothing to see or do, I believe it leads teenagers to resort to drinking and doing drugs. Especially for those who were not involved in school or sports, doing these things seemed like the only pastime for them. I was always considered boring or weird myself because I didn’t smoke weed or drank. I am lucky enough to have such a well-rounded family and have grown into a substance free environment that I didn’t seem to care about or even think of partaking in those things. I strongly believe that it was because of my family and the people I surrounded myself with that I was able to stay away from those negative aspects that have now become normal in high school. I will not sit here and say I have not tried those substances now, but being honest they still don’t interest me and they aren’t things I think should not be allowed to consume people’s lives, or even ruin them.