

How to Address the Impacts of Addiction on Youth: The Role of Teachers and Administrators



Addiction [does not discriminate](#), and society is becoming increasingly aware of the detrimental effects of substance abuse among age groups such as youth and senior citizens. Sadly, alcohol and drugs are easily obtained by youth today, whether at school or through other friends in the community, and addiction is a prevalent concern among high school students and, perhaps to a lesser extent, even elementary school students.

Impacts of Substance Abuse and Addiction in Grade School and High School Students

Even occasional substance abuse in grade school and high school students can have detrimental effects on their education. Marijuana use, for instance, is not only correlated with reduced [educational attainment](#) but can also increase a student's risk of abusing other substances, developing a dependence, and even attempting suicide.

Youth with substance abuse disorder may even resort to stealing prescription medications from their parents, grandparents, other relatives, or even friends' parents. These actions are often the catalyst to substance abuse being discovered when adults realize that their prescription medications are missing or the child or teen otherwise gets caught.

Unfortunately, depending on the circumstances, these situations may result in criminal charges, which can open the door to a whole host of other consequences. In forward-thinking juvenile justice systems, addiction treatment and recovery are the top priorities in such proceedings. However, it's not a universal approach; some communities still emphasize punishment, sending youth to juvenile detention centers or implementing other consequences that ultimately do more harm than good.

The Multi-Prong Approach to Addiction Treatment in Youth

Addressing addiction among children and youth is a multi-faceted approach with the best outcomes arising from cooperative efforts between parents, guardians, or mentors; the justice system; and teachers and administrators. Education professionals are in a unique position and can play an active role in changing the system by advocating for a treatment-oriented approach both in and outside of the school system.

Additionally, teachers often serve as positive role models for students, particularly for disadvantaged youth who otherwise lack a solid adult role model in their home environment. Teachers can [talk openly](#) about drug abuse in the classroom, reiterating the lessons conveyed in formal settings such as assemblies. When teachers have bridged relationships with at-risk students and gained their trust, these students may be more likely to confide in them or reach out for help.

Identifying Warning Signs and Acting on Suspicions

It's also critical for all educators and administrators to know and be able to identify the [warning signs](#) that indicate potential substance abuse among students. Signs such as a decreased interest in class activities, lower class participation, drowsiness, weight loss, unexplained personality changes, sudden social isolation from their peers, [self-harm](#), and other changes may indicate that a student is abusing drugs or alcohol.

However, be aware that these same signs may also indicate trouble at home, such as a divorce, physical abuse, absentee parent, or even a parent or guardian suffering from addiction. Knowing how to approach the situation to identify the underlying cause of changes in your students is just as important as knowing the signs. The last thing you want to do is accuse a student – whether directly or via a referral to the school counseling office based on inaccuracies – of abusing drugs when they're actually suffering abuse at the hands of a parent or other adult.

In fact, making an abusive parent or guardian aware of suspicions can trigger further violence at home if not handled with extreme caution. Always enlist the aid of your school counselors and other professionals as appropriate and per your school's policies and procedures.

What Administrators Can Do to Help

Administrators must create a culture of open communication, empowering teachers to openly discuss drug abuse in the classroom, facilitating ongoing training for educators on handling suspected substance abuse and implementing [evidence-based programming](#) for educating students and coping with identified substance abuse in students.

Like the juvenile justice system, administrators can play a role in facilitating a rehabilitation- and treatment-focused approach to dealing with identified substance abuse, making recovery a priority for all students found to be abusing substances and fostering a supportive environment. Partnering with community-based organizations and cultivating relationships with law enforcement, child protective services, and other entities creates a functional, multi-faceted approach that puts students at the forefront of prevention and treatment efforts.

The collaboration of teachers, administrators, third-party agencies and organizations, and parents or guardians when appropriate is the key to successfully addressing substance abuse issues in schools.

When students feel supported rather than attacked and believe that their recovery is the goal, successful outcomes are within reach.

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