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COMMON PRESENTING PROBLEMS AMONG YOUTH EXPOSED TO SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN THEIR HOUSEHOLD

EVIDENCE-BASED GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS

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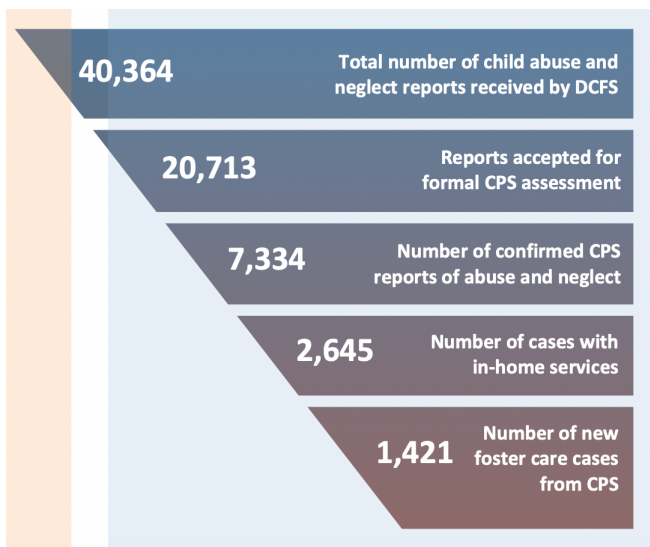
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Introduction

There have been several reports that show the increased use of alcohol and drugs in the United States along with associated problems. According to the study *Protecting Children in Substance-Abusing Families* “As the use of alcohol and drugs becomes more problematic in the United States, parental substance abuse is increasingly recognized as one of the main factors of child maltreatment in a household.” (Kropenske & Howard, 1994).

According to the Utah Department of Human Services, Child and Family Services in the annual report in the fiscal year 2020 there were 40,364 child abuse and neglect reports received by DCFS. (Utah Department of Human Services, Child and Family Services, 2020). See the chart below:



Infants and children who live in households where alcohol and other substances are abused may be harmed in a variety of ways throughout their developmental stages, including adolescence and early adulthood.

Some of those problems include neglect and self-worth issues, oppositional behaviors, attachment issues (especially with parental figures), health issues (caused by deprivation of the basic needs for the children in the household), and exposure to substances that can influence the child’s own substance abuse issues.

In many cases, parents who abuse substances do not have an idea of the harm an incident can cause to their children. That is why when professionals identify a problem of substance abuse in a household it is important to have an immediate intervention, to understand the dynamics of the abuse, the abusers, the family member, and the cultural environment. Using Evidence-Based Research will help professionals to intervene in an effective manner.

Often as we get to know adolescents who have a history of substance abuse, we find their use comes from a long journey of youth who carry a set of complex issues that influence their current drug use. The main idea of this Evidence-Based guide is to focus on youth between 11 and 15 years old that have been exposed to substances by their parents or caretakers during their childhood or part of it, and identify the five most common presenting problems, and create a research-informed guide for practitioners in the field of mental health.

Presenting problems

When adolescents present with substance abuse problems practitioners have been trained to target the problem and to help the client find a solution at the moment. However, they often miss out on underlying issues that contribute to substance abuse and have developed over time. In other words, professionals tend to target the obvious problem of drug use and miss the important treatment of the problems that developed early on in the client's life that are influencing the behavior.



1. Neglect and self-worth issues

Childhood is an important stage of development and it is when connections between parents and children are created to develop skills for independence. Usually when there is substance abuse in a household children suffer emotional neglect, which is described as the failure to give children an emotional environment that allows adequate psychological, cognitive, and physical development to achieve competent adulthood.

There are different ways practitioners could help with these issues; first of all, do not minimize the issue and listen, be empathetic, and look for support systems that could help the child. Furthermore, it is important for the child to start learning gratitude, self-worth, and positive affirmation skills.

2. Oppositional Behaviors

According to Healthline, oppositional behaviors could develop in different ways, and through different theories, “one theory suggests it develops since early infancy. Another theory suggests it can develop as a struggle to be independent of parental figures. And the third theory suggests that defiant personality develops as a result of learned behaviors, reflecting negative reinforcement methods some authority figures and parents use which could be the result of neglect, or in some cases parents who use substances and lecture their children for their behaviors” (Healthline, 2005-2021).

Social workers and therapists need to gather developmental and behavioral history to see where the oppositional behavior started. Often, this behavior is a sign of pain and attention-seeking. As practitioners, compassion and work with the family are very important. Furthermore, it is important to remember behaviors are a way of communication.

3. Attachment issues

The attachment theory focuses on the exchange between the infant and the primary caregivers and the relationship created from the interaction between children and caregivers. (Cherry K, 2019).

John Bowlby was one of the first psychologists to develop the attachment theory. Bowlby observed “that even feedings did not diminish the anxiety experienced by children when they were separated from their primary caregivers. Instead, he found that attachment was characterized by clear behavioral and motivation patterns. When children are frightened, they will seek proximity from their primary caregiver in order to receive both comfort and care.” (Cherry K, 2019). His observations explained how attachment was not about learned behaviors and in fact, was about the emotional bond between the infant and the caregiver.



Furthermore, “...Bowlby believed that the earliest bonds formed by children with their caregivers have a tremendous impact that continues throughout life. He suggested that attachment also serves to keep the infant close to the mother, thus improving the child's chances of survival. (Cherry K, 2019).

When we see cases where the mother was not present and was not able to create that bond with the child, we often find that the child later developed feelings of rejection and defiant behaviors when the parent tries to impose rules.

Attachment issues require family work, a lot of patience, and love. It also requires honesty from the parents and the desire to build a sincere relationship with the child. On the other hand, the practitioner needs to be someone who the child can trust, and someone who is going to hold boundaries and support them in times of need.

4. Health issues

When substance use becomes a problem in the household it can develop into health issues for the children. The study *Protecting Children in Substance-Abusing Families* shows that “usually when there is a problem of substance abuse there is a deprivation of the basic needs of the children in the household, mainly because the parent may spend the household budget on alcohol and/or other drugs, depriving the child and the family of adequate food, clothing, housing, and health care, and health issues can develop.” (Kropenske, V, and Howard J, 1994).

Practitioners need to make sure they are ready to report any kind of abuse and neglect. And if parents are not being responsible, there are different steps to follow; to provide support to the parents and follow up for changes, and to report to the DCFS.





5. Child's own substance abuse

Everyone is prone to experimentation, however, there are risk factors and environments that can more easily influence youth. Willingway mentions the environmental factors that could influence the abuse of drugs “early childhood interactions within the home and with family contribute a great deal to increasing a person’s risk for substance abuse. Children exposed to harmful situations and family members misuse drugs or alcohol experience more behavioral problems, which often leads to experimentation.” (The Willingway, 2018).

Furthermore, when a person develops in an environment surrounded by substances, substance use becomes the norm.

In this case, practitioners would intervene helping children with substance abuse by conducting therapy, substance abuse groups, connecting the client with support systems; such as sport teams, study groups, hobbies groups, and showing empathy, and not judging anyone’s choices and decisions.

Conclusion

When working with a client with substance abuse, it is important to look beyond the client's behaviors of drug use and investigate what happened during the early stages of development of that person. By investigating the family history and knowing what happened during early childhood we can find the roots of the problems to start working with that person in a way that will create more lasting change.



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