



Drug addiction is a self-punishing disease that ruins mental, psychological, and physical health.
www.LiveDrugFree.org

DrugFree@WorkPlace

Substance Abuse and Youth

Did you know that behavioral health problems are the leading cause of death among young people aged 15 to 24? This includes violence, dangerous driving, mental health issues, and unsafe sexual encounters—all of which are subject to increased risk due to alcohol and drug use.

Substance abuse negatively impacts a young person's growth and development, especially brain development. Drug and alcohol abuse also results in health problems later in life, like heart disease, high blood pressure, and sleep disorders.

Mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders made worse by substance abuse, incur high psychosocial and economic costs for the young people who experience them, for their families, and for the society in which they live, study, and work.

Teenage and young adult substance abuse can have an enormous negative impact on the health and well-being of America's youth, and on the U.S. economy.

Economic burdens in the United States are caused by drug and alcohol misuse and binge drinking. As an example, alcohol abuse alone costs America more than \$249 billion annually and more than three quarters of the cost is due to binge drinking, primarily by young people.

When individuals begin drinking and/or using drugs at an early age, they increase the chance of becoming addicted to, or continuing to abuse substances later in life. It is important then, that we all do our part to help reduce drug and alcohol use by youth.

Prevention and Treatment

Young people develop and grow in the contexts of their family, their school, their community, their job, and the larger culture. This offers multiple opportunities to support healthy development and prevent drug and alcohol addiction.

America's leaders, mental health agencies, schools, businesses, primary care medical systems, community-based organizations, and criminal justice systems must make the prevention of youth mental health and substance abuse disorders a top priority.

Consistent, pervasive substance abuse prevention messages delivered to young people can play a major role in preventing drug and alcohol abuse. But effective prevention requires that the same messages about alcohol, drugs, and tobacco be delivered by multiple messengers—schools, businesses, parents, peers, and the community—repeatedly.

Youth-focused substance abuse prevention and treatment programs are critically important; but trying to implement programs and deliver prevention messages to youth in different stages of their life, especially in the peak age group (around 20 years old), can be very difficult. Working on these programs and messaging as well as developing laws at the federal, state, and community level for underage drinking, alcohol-impaired driving, reducing drug and alcohol availability, and more, requires truly understanding the underlying behavioral health issues.

Youth Substance Abuse and the Workplace

One proven method of helping to reduce substance abuse by young people is the implementation of drug free workplace programs.

Drug free workplace policies play a vital role in helping to protect all age groups from drug and alcohol misuse, but they are especially important in safeguarding young workers.

When implemented correctly, and enforced properly, drug free workplace programs can help to mitigate teen and young adult risky behaviors that lead to increased risk of developing substance use disorders. Young workers employed at companies with drug free workplace programs in place can experience improved relationships, valuable mentorship, self-awareness, and decision-making skills, all of which are protective factors against substance abuse.

This month's *Supervisor Training Newsletter* covers the topic of managing young workers in the context of a drug free workplace.



Supervisor Newsletter

Substance Abuse and Young Workers

Research has shown that young people who work are more likely to smoke, drink, and use illegal drugs than those without jobs. Does this mean then, that work causes substance abuse? A closer look at the research is needed to answer this question.

The U.S. National Household Survey on Drug Abuse compared a national sample of students who did not work, to students who worked full time. The study found that 24% of teens who worked full time had engaged in binge drinking in the past month compared to 12% who worked part time and 6% who were unemployed. The percentage differences were similar for heavy tobacco use and drug use.

Youth beginning the transition into adulthood already have some of the highest rates of alcohol and substance misuse, and when a young employee is exposed to coworkers who drink, smoke, and use drugs, the chances of that young person engaging in substance use increases even more.

What can employers and supervisors do to help reduce substance abuse among young workers? Implementing and maintaining a drug free workplace program is the first step.

Supervisors should be aware that jobs can present certain risks for young workers and steps must be taken to minimize those risks. Making sure that teenaged employees are familiar with the company substance abuse policy and that they will be subject to drug testing (with parental consent) can be deterrents to substance use. If an underage worker is suspected of drug or alcohol use, and/or fails a drug test, the parents should be notified immediately, and the appropriate employment action taken.

Providing drug education (a requirement of a company's drug free certification) to young employees can also be an effective drug use prevention measure. A young person's belief that using substances will cause them harm, together with their belief that abstaining or reducing their use will lead to improved health, is known to prevent substance use. Employee drug education is designed to increase the perception of harm of abusing alcohol and drugs.

Monitoring and controlling a teen employee's amount of time spent at work is also extremely important from a prevention standpoint.

Amount of Time at Work Impacts Young Workers' Substance Abuse Levels

Numerous national school-based studies have found that teenagers who work 20 hours or more during the school year engage in heavier alcohol, tobacco, and drug use.

Teens who work more than 20 hours per week have more income to spend on alcohol and drugs. They also have greater access to other teens who use drugs and alcohol, and to older coworkers who might provide them with alcohol and/or drugs. Also, by being away at work for longer periods, they are subject to less parental monitoring, all of which puts them at greater risk of substance abuse.

However, along with some increased risk, there are prevention factors that can help to protect teenagers who work *the appropriate number of hours*. Research has shown that teens who worked most months during high school (*but worked fewer than 20 hours per week*) had greater rates of college attendance than teens who worked more than 20 hours per week or had sporadic employment.

We know that youth who are given opportunities—like attending college, that they otherwise might not have been able to afford without a job—can experience a positive change in their life course and avoid continuing on a risky trajectory. The key (according to research) however, is in the number of hours teens work. Because young people who work a greater number of hours per week are more likely to spend time around drug users and to have more disposable income with which to purchase drugs, employers should consider limiting the number of hours teens are allowed to work.

Of course, parents also have a responsibility to make sure their child is not being exposed to negative influences at work, and there should be controls placed on the kids' earnings so the money will not be spent on cigarettes, alcohol, or drugs.

Supervisor Responsibilities

For many companies, especially in the retail and tourism industries, young workers are indispensable. And teen workers provide lots of benefits to businesses. They have plenty of energy and they are typically upbeat and idealistic.

Keeping these young workers safe is critically important, and doing everything possible to ensure they remain drug and alcohol free is the duty of every supervisor who manages teen workers.