

Helping Educators Address Substance Use Disorders

Substance use disorders affect millions of Americans – young and old. As many as 69 percent of people in the United States say that either their own or a loved one’s alcohol or drug problem has had some negative impact on them. Many advances have been made over the last 20 years in understanding the disease, how to treat it, and how to help those hurt by it, including students living in a family impacted by addiction. It is crucial for educators to understand the latest information so they can truly help their students in need.¹

For the past 20 years through **National Alcohol and Drug Addiction Recovery Month (Recovery Month)**, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA’s) Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT), within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, has educated the public about these issues, celebrated people who have entered a path of recovery, and helped people with substance use disorders and their family members find treatment and recovery services. As **Recovery Month** embarks on its 20th anniversary, the campaign is dedicated to expanding its reach and providing tools to even more people than in years past.

Education plays a major role in this year’s **Recovery Month** theme, **“Join the Voices for Recovery: Together We Learn, Together We Heal.”** This theme emphasizes the need to use all available resources, in our communities and on the Internet, to educate people about the disease and to help those with substance use disorders, and those close to them, get support. It also celebrates the power of community support and understanding. By opening a dialogue about the harmful effects of alcohol and drug addiction on families, friends, and communities, we can provide hope, healing, and better help those struggling with substance use disorders embark on a successful journey of long-term recovery.

Educators **can** make a difference among youths; teens rank teachers among the most influential people in their lives.² Furthermore, teens with strong bonds at school are less likely to have a drug problem, particularly with prescription drugs.³ As the lives of children and families become more hectic, today’s educators can help people struggling with their own addiction or that of a loved one. Teachers touch the lives of people of all ages: young children just starting school, teenagers using alcohol and drugs for the first time, and kids of all ages coping with a family member’s addiction.

This document walks through the basics of addiction, treatment, and recovery. It also offers resources for educators to work with older students with addiction issues, as well as with children of parents who suffer from substance use disorders. Hopefully, with these tips in hand, you will be able to help more students confront addiction.

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Kevin Hauschulz

I am a person in long-term recovery, and have not used drugs or alcohol since June 25, 2006. I feel reconnected with my family and friends, and I'm truly living a life beyond my wildest dreams. My journey into addiction began during high school and evolved tremendously during college. I entered treatment in May 2005 and obtained support from various treatment centers and programs in my area – all of which were tremendous experiences that helped me realize that recovery was a reality for me. Unfortunately, I fell into the trap of prescription drug abuse in 2006, which is why my sobriety date is June 25, 2006.

Since then, I have been blessed with all the wonders that come along with sobriety. I began volunteering and was hired as a telephone recovery support coordinator. I now help to run the program for the entire state of Connecticut. The concept of telephone recovery support is simple: call someone once a week to simply check in and see how they are doing. The results are amazing. I feel honored and extremely lucky to be able to work at an organization that celebrates recovery and puts a positive face on recovery. Another blessing is all the wonderful, inspiring people I have met along this journey. I am now a homeowner and living with my girlfriend of three years, the light of my life. I am pursuing a master's degree in social work.

The Disease of Addiction

Addiction is a chronic, potentially relapsing brain disease. Through recent scientific advances, we now know that drugs (including alcohol) change the structure and operation of the brain. These modifications can be long-lasting and life-threatening, and the disease can create a compulsive need to obtain and use drugs, despite harmful consequences. Addiction often leads to dangerous and risky behavior, such as engaging in criminal activity, family violence, and driving under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs.^{4, 5, 6}

No single factor predicts whether a person will become addicted to alcohol or drugs. Risk for addiction is influenced by a person's biology, social environment, and age or stage of development. A combination of risk factors influences a person's susceptibility to addiction.⁷

MYTH: Addiction is a character flaw.

FACT: Addiction is a brain disease. All drugs, including alcohol, change how the brain functions. Different drugs can have similar effects on the brain and its abilities, including changes in the molecules and cells that make up the brain, mood changes, and changes in memory processes and motor skills. These changes have such a huge influence on a person's behavior that the substance becomes the single-most powerful motivator the person has.

SOURCE: *Children of Alcoholics: A Kit for Educators*. Rockville, MD: National Association for Children of Alcoholics (NACoA), 2001, pp. iv, 3.

Young People Are at Risk

Adolescence and young adulthood are times of growth and experimentation. Many young people experience a curiosity or pressure from friends to use alcohol and/or drugs. It is a time when the brain chemistry and structure are not fully developed, making the effects of substances on the developing brain particularly problematic. Heavy drinking during the teen years, for example, can lead to lasting impairments in memory, reasoning, and attention.^{8,9} The **2007 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings**, conducted by SAMHSA, found that in 2007:¹⁰

- 10.7 million people aged 12 to 20 had used alcohol within the past month.
- As many as 9.5 percent of people aged 12 to 17 were current illicit drug users.
 - 6.7 percent used marijuana
 - 1.2 percent used inhalants
 - 0.4 percent used cocaine
 - 0.7 percent used hallucinogens
- Even though the drinking age in the United States is 21, 85.9 percent of people aged 12 or older who initiated alcohol use in the past year did so before they reached the legal age of 21. The average age they began misusing alcohol was 15.8 years.

Teachers should be aware of the prevalence of prescription drug misuse among their students. “Pharming” parties are becoming popular among junior high and high school students, where students trade and misuse controlled prescription drugs.¹¹ In fact, 4.7 million teens said in 2007 that they had misused a prescription drug at some point in their lives.¹² Youths may even think that misusing certain medications will help them in school – but any misuse is dangerous, especially when misusing drugs occurs with drinking alcohol and other risky behaviors.¹³

Another recent trend is that teens sometimes use the Internet to spread information about how to use and obtain drugs. A search on [MySpace](#), a social networking site used by millions and popular among teens, turns up tens of thousands of people talking about marijuana.¹⁴ Countless pro-drug Web sites promote how to prepare and administer drugs, glamorizing their psychoactive traits and offering recommendations for managing their adverse effects.

Despite the wealth of negative influences online, educators can help teens learn to use the Internet in more constructive and positive ways. Some teachers already are doing so, and there are positive signs: nearly a quarter of Internet users aged 12 to 17 in the United States look for appropriate information online about a health topic that is hard to talk about, such as drug use.¹⁵

Students With Addiction

Students with alcohol or drug problems are different from adults in many ways. Young people often have other issues that compound their problems, including:

- Stronger peer influences
- Physical and mental development issues
- Other disorders, such as learning problems, that can make it harder to identify the problem
- Different values and priorities¹⁶

It can be difficult to distinguish between normal adolescent adjustments and drug- or alcohol-related activities. Educators must take an active interest in their students' daily lives to gain perspective on what's going on in a young person's life. This gives educators a better opportunity to help when a situation arises.¹⁷

Some indicators of alcohol or drug use among students include:

Physical Signs:¹⁸

- Unexplained weight loss or gain
- Slow or staggering walk, poor physical coordination
- Red, watery eyes; pupils larger or smaller than usual; blank stare
- Smell of substance on breath, body, or clothes
- Needle marks on lower arms, legs, or bottoms of feet
- Tremors or shakes in the hands, feet, or head

Behavioral Signs:¹⁹

- Drop in grades at school, skipping or being late for school
- Difficulty paying attention, forgetfulness
- Changes in friends, sudden avoidance of old crowd, hesitancy to talk about new friends
- Changes in eating habits
- Change in overall attitude/personality with no other identifiable cause
- General lack of motivation, energy, and self-esteem; an "I-don't-care" attitude
- Moodiness, irritability, or nervousness
- Extreme hyperactivity, excessive talking
- Paranoia
- Chronic dishonesty
- Change in personal grooming habits
- Possession of drug paraphernalia

MYTH: Alcohol is less dangerous than other drugs, and teachers should not be as concerned if teenagers are experimenting only with alcohol.

FACT: Alcohol misuse, drunk driving, and alcohol-related diseases take a major toll on our society. Children who begin drinking at a young age are at much higher risk of developing other problems, such as low self-esteem.

SOURCE: *Children of Alcoholics: A Kit for Educators*. Rockville, MD: National Association for Children of Alcoholics (NACoA), 2001, p. iv.

If a child shows any of these symptoms, it does not mean that he or she is using alcohol and/or drugs, but may mean that professional help is needed. The behaviors may be signs of stress, depression, or a host of other problems; therefore, it is important to have a trusting and open relationship with students. This helps educators identify problems so they can refer students to the appropriate assistance. For a more comprehensive list of signs, please visit the [American Council for Drug Education](#) Web site.

Students Who Have Family Members With a Problem

About one in four children in the United States under age 18 is affected by a family alcohol problem, and countless others are exposed to drug use in the family.²⁰ In every classroom in America, students are dealing with the physical, psychological, and emotional effects of familial addiction. Children in these families are at increased risk of a number of problems, including:

- Physical illness
- Emotional disturbances
- Difficulty in school, such as absenteeism and lower grades
- Susceptibility to alcoholism or other addictions
- Physical and emotional neglect or abuse²¹

It may be tough to immediately identify when a student's home life is affected by substance use disorders. Being aware of the signs and having a trusting relationship with your students can make it easier to notice. More than 50 percent of adults suffering from an addiction to alcohol are children of alcoholics themselves, and millions of others are battling other problems that stem from alcoholism or drug addiction in their families.²² To help break the cycle, educators must prepare themselves to respond when a child needs support and help prevent the suffering caused by addiction.^{23, 24}

Teachers should pay particular attention to children of veterans returning from deployment who may experience post-traumatic stress disorder and bring that stress to their home environment.²⁵ SAMHSA, the [Department of Veterans Affairs \(VA\)](#), and other federal agencies offer resources that parents, educators, and other concerned adults can use to help children through the challenges of a parent's deployment. Visit http://www.samhsa.gov/samhsaNewsletter/Volume_16_Number_5/HelpingChildren.aspx for resources on how to help children of veterans through tough times.

The [National Association for Children of Alcoholics \(NACoA\)](#), a national nonprofit organization that works on behalf of children of alcohol- and drug- dependent parents and their family members, has developed valuable tools to help educators learn how to support students who have a family member or guardian with a substance use disorder. These materials are available through its [Web site](#).

How to Help Students

Educators can use portions of their daily lessons to share age-appropriate information with students about substance use disorders and recovery, including how addiction affects family members. In addition, as caring and concerned adults, educators should recognize behaviors or changes in students' attitudes so they can help young people successfully overcome a crisis and develop more effective coping skills, often preventing further problems.²⁶

If you believe a student is suffering from a substance use disorder, engage a student assistance program or social worker and offer to support efforts to help the student. A teacher should work with the school counselor when speaking with a student's parents to offer a consistent presence and help develop a plan of action. Recognize that a professional assessment is advisable and appropriate support is available.

If you believe it is a parent who has a problem, speak directly with the student and bring your school's guidance counselor into the conversation. When speaking with the family and the student, come prepared with different options for treatment, such as mutual support groups and inpatient or outpatient facilities. For teens, encourage them to become involved with [Alateen](#), which offers support for teens who have a family member or friend suffering from an alcohol or drug problem. For more information on different types of treatment and how to locate a facility in your area, refer to the "[Treatment and Recovery](#)" document in this toolkit.

Treatment

No single method of treatment works for everyone, but the majority of Americans believe that treatment programs do work, and that people can recover and live productive lives.²⁷ Some people recover on their own; others recover through treatment and/or the assistance of self-help, mutual-aid groups, or medication-assisted therapies. Helping young people with a problem is different than approaching a parent, and educators are not expected to have all the answers. Even though each person is different and needs to be treated uniquely, it is helpful to know a little about the types of treatment and recovery support services that work best for young people. The science continues to evolve, and new treatment options have emerged over the last 20 years.²⁸

MYTH: It is easy to spot the child of someone with an alcohol or drug problem.

FACT: Children are often taught to hide their family problems and to pretend that everything is "normal." They may also believe that adults cannot be trusted, and they may not ask for help.

MYTH: You need to have special training to help children and families.

FACT: Anyone can help. It is easy to learn the basics so you can better help your students and their families. You can easily find what resources are available, how to listen, and what you should say and do to help children and families dealing with substance use disorders.

SOURCE: *Children of Alcoholics: A Kit for Educators*. Rockville, MD: National Association for Children of Alcoholics (NACoA), 2001, pp. iv, 3.

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To produce the best outcomes, treatment and recovery programs need to be tailored to meet the unique needs of young people.²⁹ Nine key elements that determine effective adolescent drug treatment are:³⁰

1. **Assessment and treatment matching** – Determines whether a young person’s needs match the services available, as well as the level of treatment intensity needed
2. **A comprehensive, integrated treatment approach** – Addresses the adolescent’s problems broadly, and includes medical, mental health, and other issues, rather than focusing solely on the substance use disorder
3. **Family involvement in treatment** – Engages family members to continue to make progress with the young person after the treatment program has ended
4. **A developmentally appropriate program** – Addresses the many contexts that shape the teen’s environment, such as school, recreation, peers, welfare, and medical care
5. **The ability to engage and retain teens in treatment** – Finds ways to make treatment resonate with adolescents to make them more motivated to change behavioral patterns
6. **Qualified staff** – Engages treatment providers with specialized training and experience in diverse areas
7. **Gender, cultural, and spiritual competence** – Recognizes personal differences in developing a treatment approach
8. **Continuing care** – Includes relapse prevention training and follow-up plans
9. **Measurable outcomes for treatment** – Evaluates treatment programs to offer crucial, in-depth insight into their effectiveness

To learn more about these elements and review other resources for educators and parents, visit the Web site companion to “Treating Teens: A Guide to Adolescent Drug Programs” by [Drug Strategies](#), a nonprofit research institute that promotes more effective approaches to our nation’s drug problems.

Recovery from a substance use disorder is a life-long process and requires commitment, introspection, and most importantly, courage. During the initial stages of recovery, supportive adult influences, including teachers, parents, and others, will make the most difference in the lives of young people. To remain on a road of recovery, teens and their support networks should concentrate on finding a direction they wish to take in life. Identifying strengths, values, goals, and interests that are healthy is the first step, and educators are integral to determining what concrete steps young people can take to reach their life goals.³¹

Online Resources for Educators

There are more resources available online than ever to help teachers support students and their families who are dealing with substance use disorders. **Recovery Month's** Web site at <http://www.recoverymonth.gov> is filled with resources to help students and parents learn about substance use disorders. Online resources include:

- **The Office of Applied Studies, SAMHSA** – Provides the latest national data on alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse, as well as information about the nation's substance abuse treatment system
- **The National Council on Patient Information and Education (NCPPIE)** – Educates parents and teenagers about the importance of appropriate medicine use
- **The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)** – Educates children aged 11 through 15, as well as their teachers and parents, about the science of addiction
- **Check Yourself** – Helps young adults understand issues of addiction and offers answers to questions about substance use, first-person experiences, quizzes, message boards, and addiction, treatment, and recovery information
- **The American Council for Drug Education** – Offers educational programs and services designed to engage teens and address the needs of parents
- **The American Counseling Association** – Features downloadable resources and online learning classes
- **The American School Counselor Association** – Provides professional development, publications and other resources, research, and advocacy support to more than 24,000 professional school counselors around the globe
- **The National Student Assistance Association** – Provides training, materials, and support for student assistance professionals across the country

How You Can Help During *Recovery Month*

Teachers, counselors, school administrators, and anyone who interacts with young people can contribute to the 20th annual **Recovery Month** this September. Below are some ideas to implement during this year's campaign. For more information, please visit <http://www.recoverymonth.gov>.

- **Invite young people** who have shown a long-term commitment to their recovery to share their recovery experiences with fellow students. Ask them to present the hope that recovery gives them for the future at an assembly or in an article for the school newspaper. Consult your school district's guidelines regarding sharing students' sensitive and personal information. If students are not of legal age, obtain the consent of a parent or legal guardian before pursuing these activities.

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- **Set up educational tables or booths** at public areas frequented by young people and their families. This will educate parents, guardians, and young people in your community about substance use disorders, treatment effectiveness, and recovery. You can provide links and resources on your school's Web site to other sites that offer information on substance use disorders in young people or information on how students can get help if a parent suffers from a problem. For organizations in your area to collaborate with, please visit <http://www.recoverymonth.gov> and click on the "Resources" link.
- **Role play in health class** so students can experience what it would feel like if they had a substance use disorder and understand the issues they would face.
- **Create or join an existing task force**, community coalition, or a larger initiative to dispel myths and educate your community that substance use disorders are treatable conditions, treatment is effective, and recovery is possible. For more information, refer to "Building Community Coalitions" in this toolkit.
- **Plan a concert** or rally with local musicians to raise money for youth-focused recovery efforts.
- **Sponsor a community health fair** with other schools and youth organizations in your area. Set up booths for local treatment centers focused on young people with substance use disorders. Provide information on how your school works to prevent substance use and the help it provides to those who need it. If your community already sponsors an event of this kind, contact the organizers to get involved.

For more resources that can help educators, please consult the "Policy/Education" section of the "Recovery Month Resources" brochure at the *Recovery Month* Web site at <http://www.recoverymonth.gov>. Additional materials also are available on the Web site or by calling 1-800-662-HELP. Information on treatment options in your area and the special services available can be found at SAMHSA's "Find Substance Abuse and Mental Health Treatment" Web site, a portal that includes a searchable database of more than 11,000 U.S. treatment facilities and additional treatment resources.

Web sites or event examples mentioned in this document and on the *Recovery Month* Web site are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment.

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