

Substance Use: Teen Talk Among Early Adolescence

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INTRODUCTION

The teen and adolescent years are the period of rapid growth, where children have a higher level of exploring and risk-taking attitude. CDC has reported that majority of adults who are having substance use disorder had started using substances during their teen or young adult years.¹ Tobacco use among middle and high school children India is about 14% among 13 to 15 years old and the median age of starting as per GYTS 4 is 9.9 years.^{2,3} CDC reports have shown that among adolescents in the US, students involved in drug use have lower academic grades and higher involvement in sexual risk behaviours such as ever having sex, having multiple sex partners, not using a condom, and pregnancy before the age of 15 years of age.^{4,5} The challenge remains in identifying and counselling them. Adolescents tend to talk freely among people of their age and hence encouraging such talk sessions can help us identify the social pathologies like substance use prevailing. Owing to the level of stigma, bullying and stress handling capacity that adolescence experience it is necessary to ensure confidentiality of the subject also. Hence, a generic

session for adolescents to talk on substance use was organised with a moderator to guide the discussion points under each section and ensure participation of all the children.

DISCUSSION

As a part of school health project organised by social work department of a university among government schools in Coimbatore, a team of doctors from a private medical college were invited for an awareness session on substance use after obtaining due permission from the school. The team consisting of doctors and medical social worker from department of Community medicine along with a psychiatrist addressed 97 middle school children (6th to 8th standard) in the age group of 11 to 13 years. The session was conducted in March 2023 and had two sessions for a total of about one and a half an hour. The first was an awareness lecture. The second talk session had three components as 1. Knowing teens 2. Experience with substance and 3. Societal expectation for an enabling environment.

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The first session was an awareness talk by in which a psychiatrist spoke on risk factors, protective factors, peer pressure and physical and psychological effects of substance use and a professor in Community Medicine spoke on addiction. Students were also informed to seek help of teachers and professionals if they were using substance and to report to teachers if their friends were using.

The second session created an able environment for 'teen talk' and was a success as almost 80%-90% of the children participated. To allow the children to express without inhibitions, the school authorities cooperated by remaining outside the hall and just one school teacher was present inside. The boys spoke freely without hesitation whereas girls required some time to start talking. Relatively a greater number of boys spoke than girls.

In the knowing teens section students were asked to talk on What do you do for fun in life / What things do you do with friends? What are you good at? How much TV do you watch? What are your favourite shows on TV? and do you feel you are working hard in academics / Do you feel you academics is not needed for you? The students said that they enjoy doing arts like dancing, drawing, and playing sports. On the positive front, many students said they had pets like cats, birds, dogs, etc and enjoyed spending time with them. But on the negative front invariably all the children spoke that they enjoyed watching television on daily basis and that they watched only movies. To our dismay there was no child who had the habit of reading books other than their school subjects. Children reported that they are taking efforts to perform well in academics.

To find the vulnerability of children towards substance use questions like What do you evening after you go home? Are there adults at home by the time you reach? Who are your friends after school? Do you prefer to be alone at home or with company? were put in front of students. Many children had spoken about how their evenings are unsupervised, few are, "Parents come home few hours after I reach", "I stay alone at home in the evenings", "There will be no adults at home in the evening". Girls said that they spend their evenings with friends who are not from their school and those who were elder to them. As a positive aspect few girls answered that they enjoyed taking up responsibilities of the house in the evenings after school.

In the experience with substance section, the questions included were Have your school friends ever tried drugs? Has anyone ever asked you to try drugs? Many boys started answering loudly that their school friends use substance. "Our friends use Collips, Hans

and bidi". They were using it in the evenings in abandoned areas in the locality. Almost all the boys said that they were subjected to spoken peer pressure of substance use- "Try this it will make you happy", "Just try once", "I am using and I am fine, you can try". The girls said they have not seen any of their school mates use any substance but have seen school students in their locality use substance like bidi smoking in open public spaces. Children also said that in the evenings they hang out with friends who use substance while with them.

The students were asked to think and tell what help they want from the school family or society to make a substance free environment. Few suggestions by students were. "The community I live in should have a dance class", "they can allow us to play in the school ground after school", "I should be able to learn a new language". Other suggestions included that their community should have some arts classes.

CONCLUSION

It was appalling to know that many students in the middle schools know that their schoolmates are using substance. Even in early adolescence children experience spoken peer pressure for drug use. Vulnerable factors in the present group might be children staying unsupervised at home and friends outside school and family environment. Children are willing to use their time constructively and hence the society should be more responsible to create an enabling environment for the same. Further research to find the Thus the study recommends, that school health program should give more importance to substance use control among school children.

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