

Contextual Influences of Substance Abuse Problems among School Children

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Doi:10.5901/mjss.2013.v4n13p361

Abstract

Developing countries are experiencing serious problems of substance abuse. The substances include tobacco, substance abuse, marijuana and glue sniffing. Developments such as improved socio-economic status, increased movement of people and improved communication technology, also influence the substance abuse trade and leads to an increase in substance abuse. Individuals, families and communities all suffer as a result of substance abuse since this form of abuse exhausts people's physical, intellectual, and economic resources (Mhlongo 2005). The fact is that substance abuse seriously threatens learners' holistic development. Substance abuse not only affects the learner, but also the family, the school and the rest of the community. In recent years, substance abuse among school learners in South Africa has increased, particularly in townships. Indeed, substance abuse is so serious in the townships that the police have decided to make random searches for illegal substance possession at specific notorious hotspot.

Keywords: substance abuse; drug abuse; parenting skills; contextual influences; school children

1. Introduction

Family factors appear especially important in the early initiation to drug use and the initiation to illegal drugs. Family factors, while important throughout childhood, may be especially important in shaping early development which, in turn, may serve to protect against early onset of substance abuse. For introduction into illicit drugs, parental influences, especially parent/child relations, emerge as the dominant influence. Effective parenting skills may be used as a preventive measure for the developmental needs of children. During the basic education years, parents need skills to reduce children's early conduct problems and to build close relationships with their children. Parents need to develop competencies to help their children recognize and resist social influences to abuse substances and other drugs. (Hawkins & Catalano, 1990).

The strongest predictors of drug abuse are early start and having friends who use drugs. Peers take on added importance during youth, but the influence of peers is an add-on rather than a replacement. Child relationship with the family and school is an important influence on their choice of friends. When children feel close to parents and find school interesting and meaningful, they are less likely to associate with drug-using friends, unless everyone in the school uses drugs (Visser and Routledge 2007).

Communities need to assess which support for prevention of substance abuse are in place and which are missing so that the necessary programmes can be directed toward where there is a serious need (Deed 2007). As important as identifying the prevention strategies most needed in the community is targeting the most appropriate developmental age. Intervening early before negative behaviours begin to grow increases the chances that efforts will be successful. Finally, the potential consequences of any prevention effort should be considered carefully. No matter how well-intentioned, any intervention that is powerful enough to change behaviour to produce a beneficial outcome could also have an unwanted or unforeseen adverse effect (Ewhrudjakpor 2009).

2. Literature Review

Substance abuse is a problem for the school-going adolescent, because it makes it extremely difficult for that adolescent to reach his or her full potential in terms of academic ability. The National Centre on Addiction and Substance Abuse

(2010) at Columbia University in the USA states that substance abuse overlaps significantly with learning disabilities and behavioural disorders such as attention-deficit and hyperactivity disorder. The report focused mainly on raising awareness among parents and special needs teachers.

2.1 The Effect of Substance Abuse on the Learner

Landsberg, Kruger and Nel (2005) proclaim that certain types of challenging or disruptive behaviour occur in combination. For example, aggressive behaviour is associated with substance abuse and juvenile delinquency. One of the problems emanating from this is the sheer negativity from these learners; they refuse to achieve or to co-operate with others. This lack of interest in learning inevitably results in underachieving. The underachiever leaves school early or unqualified and may become entrapped in destructive social practices and crime. These people thus become part of a country's social degeneration and are unable to make any positive contribution to its social and economic welfare. Deed (2007) asserts that schools are the key sites for early detection and intervention on substance abuse. Early intervention targets people who have just started to display risky behaviour such as substance abuse. Early intervention makes it possible to identify, observe, assess and treat individuals at risk (Deed 2007).

2.2 The Effect of Substance Abuse on the Family

Mhlongo (2005), stresses that a substance abuser's obsession with addictive substances causes him or her to forget about everything and everyone else. Substance abuse by a family member brings suffering on the whole family; it also brings disruption and conflict. Mhlongo (2005) also makes the point that children who are connected to their parents and who have a healthy relationship with their parents are far more likely to make healthy and safe life choices.

The stability of family relationships is an important factor in helping people manage their lives; however substance abuse in a family may lead to problems of balancing control and discipline especially among the children (The United Nations Drug Control Programme 1995). Substance abuse may further lead to a lack of security, trust and warmth in parent-child relationships and to a lack of structure in family life (The United Nations Office on Drug and Crime, 2009).

A document released by the New South Wales Department of Community Services (2004) states that family members may react in different ways to substance abuse in children. Some family members may experience feelings such as intense sadness, resentment, disappointment, fear, or helplessness. Family members may also experience ill health and neglect as a result of living with this problem. The parent whose child is a substance abuser may be worried about the child's safety and want to protect the child at all costs. Parents may blame themselves for their child's behaviour or even cover up for the child so that the child does not have to take responsibility.

2.3 The Effect of Substance Abuse on the School

Mhlongo (2005) further emphasises that the continued abuse of substances destroys the abuser's ability to think logically and rationally. Substance abuse can also disrupt the entire school. The progress of other learners may be impeded when a number of learners in a class abuse substances or are absent because of substance abuse. Mhlongo (2005) continues by saying that illegal practices such as stealing and selling addictive substances on the school grounds are also a consequence of substance abuse. Such behaviour is obviously not conducive to a healthy school environment and it can lead to problems not only with school officials, but also with the law.

This is confirmed by Van Hout and Connor (2008) who claim that a study done in high schools in Ireland also revealed that substance abusing learners' schooling and academic performance are affected negatively by this social problem.

2.4 The Effect of Substance Abuse on the Community

Serban (2010) states that substance abuse is one of the major challenges that society is faced with today and that its effects are felt at various social, professional and age levels. The majority of highway deaths in the USA involve substance abuse. Neighbourhoods are disrupted due to violence among substance abuse dealers, threats to the community and other crimes that the addicts themselves commit. Sometimes, younger children are used to work as lookouts and helpers (Scheier, 2009).

The USA's National Institute of Health (2011) contends that substance abuse is a serious public health problem

which, in some way, affects almost every community and family in the United States. Every year substance abuse results in around 40 million serious illnesses or injuries among people in the USA. Substance abuse also contributes to many major social problems, such as drugged driving, child abuse, and homelessness. Report findings by the National Drug Threat Assessment (2010) also revealed that substance abuse affects the community and society at large in the following ways (see below):

2.4.1 Impact on the environment

Many chemicals used to produce certain illegal substances are highly flammable and the improper use of these chemicals often leads to explosions and fires. Toxic chemical wastes are also disposed of into sewer systems and fields which, in turn, cause extensive environmental damage.

2.4.2 Productivity

National productivity is affected by things such as premature mortality, illness, injury leading to incapacitation and imprisonment. A great deal of productivity is associated with premature mortalities as a result of substance abuse. In the USA in 2005, there were 26 858 deaths that were recorded as unintentional or undetermined-intentional poisonings; in the previous year (2004), 95% of these poisonings were caused by substance abuse.

2.4.3 Health and health-care systems

Substance use and abuse generally lead to the need for specialised treatment; make the abuser likely to contract illness, and make prolonged hospital stays a necessity. Substance abusers often experience adverse reactions to illegal substances, including non-fatal overdoses that require them to be hospitalised. Substance abusing youngsters are exposed not only to abuse and neglect but also to fires, explosions and health hazards such as exposure to toxic chemicals.

2.4.4 Criminal justice system

The consequences of illicit substance use impacts on the entire criminal justice system. It taxes resources at each stage from the arrest right through to the post-release supervision process. Although substance abuse courts and diversion programmes have partly helped to alleviate this burden, substance abuse within the criminal justice population remains widespread.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is informed by Peer Cluster theory. According to Oetting, Edwards, Kelly and Beauvais (1992), Peer Cluster theory illustrates the strong relationship between substance abuse and peer influence. The basic understanding is that substance abuse occurs in a social setting among peers. Peer groups may consist of best friends, couples or a cluster of people who have the same attitude toward substance abuse. Youth who are at risk normally gravitate toward peers who are experiencing the same kind of problems as they are, such as poor school performance and an intense dislike of school. These learners normally have a tendency toward deviant behaviour. Peer influence is a broad term and is not a new term, but Peer Cluster theory states that small, identifiable peer clusters determine when, how and where addictive substances will be used. Peer Cluster theory also focuses on the importance of the psychological and social characteristics underlying substance abuse.

According to Oetting et al (1992), some of the following characteristics may drive youngsters into forming peer clusters, whether these clusters are good or bad: good or poor school adjustment, family support or conflict, violence, taking a gun to school, scaring someone with a weapon, hurting someone with a weapon, victimisation (e.g. being beaten up by a non-family member), being robbed, being hurt with a weapon, being raped or sexually assaulted, getting drunk, substance abuse and depression.

3.1 Peer cluster and substance abuse influences

Youngsters who abuse substances have friends who also abuse substances. As can be expected, these friends encourage each other to engage in this behaviour (Oetting et al 1992). Youngsters who are part of the peer cluster decide, together, on the rules for the group such as what to wear, types of hair styles, how they will talk and behave and whether or not to abuse illegal substances. Added to this is the existence of a strong social influence that encourages peer conformance to the cluster's norms. Note that the youngster inside the cluster does not feel under pressure to conform, since he or she does not perceive that anyone is suggesting or forcing them to conform (Oetting et al, 1992).

3.2 Personal characteristics of young people that relate to substance abuse

Oetting et al (1992) argues that a youngster's character may be such that it creates and worsens his or her problems simply because it interferes with the bonding process with his or her parents. The same sort of character will also prevent him or her from adjusting to school and may also increase the probability of his or her bonding with deviant peers.

Research has shown that personal characteristics are related to substance abuse later in life (Oetting et al, 1992). Some of these characteristics include: negative mood states, inability to control the emotions, anti-social behaviour, irritability, lack of behavioural control and aggression. All these traits make it difficult for the person to build positive relationships with either family members or the school. This, in turn, makes it difficult for them to learn pro-social attitudes, norms, values and behaviours, all of which are extremely important in the parent-child interaction.

These personal characteristics may also have a negative impact at school, as I have already indicated. Children with these characteristics may have difficulties getting along with teachers, paying adequate attention in class and adhering to school rules and regulations. This usually leads to an inability to adjust to the school and, ultimately, poor academic performance. However, note that some problem behaviours disappear as the child grows up (Oetting et al, 1992).

3.3 School adjustment

Youngsters with substance abuse problems may well experience or display the following problems at school: difficulty in adjusting to the school, failing grades, absconding or expulsion. Furthermore, some of these youngsters do not receive any parental support as far as their schooling is concerned. Adequate family support could help these youngsters perform better and discourage them from associating with peer clusters that indulge in substance abuse (Oetting et al, 1992). Family support provides children with security, because it helps them to adjust and also increases their chances of developing constructive relationships (Oetting et al, 1992).

3.4 Family support and conflict

The family is the primary source of emotional support and socialisation for young children (Oetting et al, 1992). The influence of peers and the school increases as the child grows older, but the family remains an important part of the child's life as far as guidance, support and encouragement are concerned. A family that experiences serious problems is likely to hamper the development of positive attitudes and values in their children. What is more, family problems such as substance abuse, aggression, criminal records, arguments and fights definitely increase the chance that the child will engage in substance abuse. In contrast, the family that offers the child stability makes it far more probable that their child will not engage in substance abuse. Family connections and strong bonds between parents and children usually communicate pro-social norms. This, in turn, helps to establish a solid foundation for good school performance.

4. The Relevance of Peer Cluster Theory

According to Peltzer and Ramlagan (2007) Peer Cluster theory is based on the viewpoint that adolescent substance abuse is influenced by peers. This point has implications for both treatment and prevention. One effective way to change their behaviour is through using agents such as family members, the school and peers to help combat the chances of substance abuse. Peltzer and Ramlagan (2007) continues by stating, if treatment of substance abuse problems is to be effective, it must in some way influence the peer cluster. This implies that either the peer cluster should be changed or that the adolescent should be isolated from the peer cluster. Treatment and prevention programmes must therefore take

peer clusters into account. The effects of prevention programmes can only be effective if it causes the youngster to choose peers who discourage substance abuse or if anti-substance abuse attitudes are developed within peer clusters.

5. Research Methodology

This study is based on qualitative research, using the philosophy of phenomenology as the fundamental mode of enquiry. Qualitative research assumes that a valid understanding can be gained by the researcher gaining first-hand knowledge obtained of the issue in question. In qualitative research, the researcher subjectively explores reality from an insider's perspective Springer (2010). The information obtained is expressed in narratives, which consist of extremely detailed descriptions of people, institutions, environments and the different meanings they construct. To gain optimal knowledge and understanding about the contextual influences of substance abuse problems among school, interviews, observations and document analysis were used as data collection strategies. The number of learners who were interviewed was eight. Purposive sampling was used because the views and experiences of learners with substance abuse problems were crucially needed for this study.

6. Findings and Discussions

The interview revealed that learners would contribute money and then go and buy illegal substances. The participants believed that substance abuse resulted in pleasurable consciousness states, heightened attention, an enhanced status, and that it was used as an excuse for socially unacceptable behaviour. They indicated that the problems with their parents at home caused them to abuse substances. They maintain that difficult family situations, such as parental fights, cause them to experience stress:

"It happens because of stress, Ma'am, maybe problems at home that you have with your parents."

Learners agreed that substance abuse has a negative effect on academic performance and leads to poorer academic results. The interviews revealed that one learner felt that substance abuse encourage learners to leave school. Furthermore, two learners said that they had lost the ability to concentrate in class and that their only focus was on using illegal substances. They said that they would suddenly lose focus and start to think about smoking marijuana. One learner indicated that:

"It is not nice; as you are trying to focus on school work, then you suddenly start to think of something else."

Most of the learners had similar experiences and views on the problem of substance abuse. It was also clear that learners had experiential knowledge about substance abuse. It was apparent that there is a need for certain changes, such as a longer rehabilitation period, more motivation from programme organisers and a different rehabilitation environment. All of these would be more effective in supporting learners with substance abuse problems.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explore contextual influences of substance abuse problems among school children. The most influential reasons found for substance abuse among youth were peer pressure and social issues such as family disharmony and divorce. The need for a longer time span of treatment by support structures should be investigated and relevant adjustments made regarding the time span of treatment. There is also a need to change the environment in which treatment is provided, given that this is a very relevant and important aspect of rehabilitation. In addition, since the children were experimenting with all kinds of substances, schools need to put far more emphasis on their substance abuse teaching and learning programmes.

It is also, therefore, very crucial that the global phenomenon of substance abuse as a social ill and the detrimental impact this abuse has on school children be treated and addressed as a matter of gravity.

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