

Youth and Substance Abuse

Girls Emerge As Leading Risk Takers

PSC Executive Summary

The latest research on substance abuse points to a change in trends – teenage girls are using cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana, and are abusing prescription drugs more than boys.

Youth aged 12-17 were surveyed as part of the US government's National Survey on Drug Use and Health. Overall illicit drug use for this age group has decreased 19 percent since 2001, but the statistics indicate girls are the emerging leaders for risk taking behaviour.

In 2004, for youth aged 12 -17:

- 1.5 million girls started drinking alcohol compared to 1.28 boys
- 730,000 girls started smoking cigarettes compared to 565,000 boys
- 14.4 percent of girls abused prescription drugs compared to 12.5 percent of boys
- 675,000 girls started using marijuana compared to 577,000 boys

Also, research indicates that the effects of alcohol and drugs are more profound physically and psychologically to teenage girls.

"The substance use trends that we are seeing for adolescent girls are disturbing. Using drugs and alcohol—particularly during this stage of development—can have serious consequences on the brains and bodies of our daughters," said Warren M. Seigel, M.D., FAAP, FSAM, Past President of American Academy of Pediatrics—Chapter 2, New York. "Parents need to understand the risks and consequences that are unique to girls if they are to help keep them away from drugs, cigarettes, and alcohol."

The motivation for teenage girls and boys to use and abuse substances is very different and programs to combat abuse must address the unique vulnerabilities and motivations of girls vs. boys. Girls reportedly use substances to deal with issues of depression, self-confidence, academic success, social success, and weight.

The University of B.C. is about to embark on an extensive study of youth attitudes toward the use of marijuana. This research will provide the Canadian perspective to the persistent problem of youth substance use and abuse.

Related Articles

Teenage Attitudes Toward Marijuana Use, University of B.C. [Report](#)
National Survey on Drug Use and Health [Overview \(HTML format\)](#) [\(PDF format\)](#)
National Survey on Drug Use and Health [Results \(HTML format\)](#) [\(PDF format\)](#)
Decline in Teen Smoking Seems to be nearing its end, University of Michigan [Report](#)