

# Research-to-Results <sup>Brief</sup>

Child **TRENDS.**

*...information for program practitioners on substance use and on assessing substance use outcomes among adolescents.*

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## **ASSESSING SUBSTANCE USE AND ABUSE AMONG ADOLESCENTS: A GUIDE FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAM PRACTITIONERS**

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### **BACKGROUND**

This brief discusses the signs and symptoms of alcohol and drug use and provides recommendations to assess substance use among youth in your program. It is not uncommon for adolescents to experiment with different substances such as alcohol or cigarettes, but this can lead to heavy and continued use, which is dangerous and may put their health at risk. Additionally, individuals who drink and smoke are more likely to participate in other risky behaviors, including using other drugs or driving after drinking. Adolescents may turn to substance use when they are under stress at home or at school, or when their friends are smoking or drinking.

### **TOBACCO USE**

Tobacco can be used in the form of cigarettes, cigars, pipes, or smokeless tobacco. Using tobacco at a young age increases the risk of addiction and later health problems.

- About one-quarter of high school students reported having smoked a cigarette before the age of 13, and more than one-third of high school students reported smoking cigarettes in the past 30 days.<sup>1</sup>
- Tobacco use has been associated with many health problems, including heart disease and cancer,<sup>2</sup> and is the leading preventable cause of death in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

### **ALCOHOL USE**

Alcohol impairs both mental and motor functions including hand-eye coordination.<sup>4</sup> It is particularly harmful since youth can consume large amounts of alcohol quickly.

- Fifty percent of high school students surveyed reported they had at least one drink in the last 30 days, and 31 percent reported having up to five drinks on at least one occasion in the past 30 days.<sup>1</sup>
- Alcohol poisoning can result when large amounts of alcohol are consumed in a short period of time, leading to extreme sleepiness, unconsciousness, difficulty breathing, dangerously low blood sugar, seizures, and death.<sup>5</sup>
- Consequences of heavy alcohol use include memory problems, liver disorders (such as hepatitis), and cancer.<sup>6</sup>
- About one-third of high school students and 39 percent of college students reported riding at least once in the past month with a driver who had been drinking alcohol.<sup>1</sup>
- Thirteen percent of high school students and 28 percent of college students reported that, one or more times during the past month, they themselves had driven a vehicle after drinking.<sup>1</sup>

## ILLICIT DRUG USE

Illicit drugs are drugs that are illegal to possess, sell, and use. More than 54 percent of high school seniors report ever trying some type of illicit drug, such as marijuana, cocaine, heroin, Ecstasy, methamphetamine, hallucinogens, psychedelics, OxyContin, or steroids.<sup>7</sup> The two most common illicit drugs are marijuana and inhalants.

- Marijuana is the most common illicit drug used by teens.
  - Roughly 6,000 people each day use marijuana for the first time, and 64 percent of first-time users are under the age of 18.<sup>7</sup>
  - Short-term effects of marijuana include problems with memory and learning, distorted perception, difficulty in thinking and problem solving, loss of coordination, and increased heart rate.
- Inhalants are the second most common drug used by teens.<sup>8</sup>
  - One in five eighth-graders has ever used inhalants, such as spray paints, cleaning fluids, gasoline, and hair spray.
  - The immediate effects of inhalants include extreme giddiness, excitement, and hallucinations. These substances may also cause brain damage, memory loss, and death.

## RECOGNIZING SUBSTANCE USE AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN YOUR PROGRAM

- The key to recognizing signs of tobacco, drug, or alcohol use is to be aware of change within the adolescent – whether it is physical, social, or emotional.
- The American Council for Drug Education has identified symptoms typically associated with various substances, as seen below:<sup>8</sup>
  - *Tobacco/Nicotine*: Smell of tobacco; stained fingers or teeth.
  - *Inhalants*: Watery eyes; impaired vision, memory, and thought; headaches and nausea; appearance of intoxication; drowsiness.
  - *Marijuana*: Glassy, red eyes; loud talking and inappropriate laughter followed by sleepiness; loss of interest and motivation; weight gain or loss.
  - *Alcohol*: Clumsiness; difficulty walking; slurred speech; sleepiness; poor judgment; dilated pupils; possession of a false ID card.

## ASSESSING SUBSTANCE USE BEHAVIORS AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN YOUR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAM

Below we list several questions you may wish to use in an evaluation or outcomes study to assess substance use among adolescents in your program. It is a good idea to involve a researcher or research organization to help you learn how best to ask sensitive questions like these, which may upset some youth in your program. These organizations can also help you work with your local Institutional Review Board (often called an IRB) which will look over the questions you want to ask and the way you are going to get the information (e.g., paper and pencil survey, or in-person interviews). They will also make sure the children and/or adolescents in your programs have permission and have agreed to participate.

Cigarettes

1. During the past 30 days, on how many days did you smoke cigarettes?<sup>9</sup>
  - A. 0 days
  - B. 1 or 2 days
  - C. 3 to 5 days
  - D. 6 to 9 days
  - E. 10 to 19 days
  - F. 20 to 29 days
  - G. All 30 days
  
2. During the past 30 days, on the days you smoked, how many cigarettes did you smoke per day?<sup>9</sup>
  - A. I did not smoke cigarettes in the past 30 days
  - B. Less than 1 cigarette per day
  - C. 1 cigarette per day
  - D. 2 to 5 cigarettes per day
  - E. 6 to 10 cigarettes per day
  - F. 11 to 20 cigarettes per day
  - G. More than 20 cigarettes per day

Alcohol

3. During the past 30 days, have you had at least one drink of any alcoholic beverage, such as beer, wine, or liquor?<sup>9</sup>
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
  
4. During the past 30 days, how many days did you have at least one drink of any alcoholic beverage?<sup>9</sup>

\_\_ \_\_ Days
  
5. During the past 30 days, on how many days did you have five or more drinks of alcohol in a row, that is, within a couple of hours?<sup>9</sup>
  - A. 0 days
  - B. 1 day
  - C. 2 days
  - D. 3 to 5 days
  - E. 6 to 9 days
  - F. 10 to 19 days
  - G. 20 or more days

Marijuana

6. During the past 30 days, how many times (if any) have you used marijuana?<sup>10</sup>

\_\_ \_\_ Times

### Other Illicit Drugs

7. During the past 30 days, how many times (if any) have you used other illicit drugs, like cocaine or crack or heroin, or any other substance not prescribed by a doctor, in order to get high or to achieve an altered state? Do not include marijuana or alcohol.

\_\_ \_\_ Times

8. During your life, how many times have you sniffed glue, breathed the contents of aerosol spray cans, or inhaled any paints or sprays to get high?<sup>9</sup>

\_\_ \_\_ Times

### **NEXT STEPS: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR YOUR PROGRAM**

- **American Council for Drug Education (ACDE)**  
Find additional tips on talking to your students about drugs, as well as informational lectures on drug use for use in your program. Call 1-800-488-DRUG or go to [www.acde.org](http://www.acde.org).
- **National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)**  
Find educational resources on alcohol use for programs at [www.pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/Science/main.htm](http://www.pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/Science/main.htm).
- **The National Drug and Alcohol Treatment Referral Routing Service**  
This Help Line provides information on local treatment options for students who are abusing drugs and alcohol. Call 1-800-662-HELP (4357).

<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (1997). Youth risk behavior surveillance: National college health risk behavior survey - United States. (1995). *CDC Surveillance Summaries, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 46(SS-6):1-56*.

<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (1994). Guidelines for school health programs to prevent tobacco use and addiction. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 43(RR-2):1-19*.

<sup>3</sup> Mokdad, A.H., Marks, J.S., Stroup, D.F., & Gerberding, J.L. (2004). Actual causes of death in the United States, 2000. *Journal of the American Medical Association, 291:1238-1245*.

<sup>4</sup> National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. (1994). Alcohol-Related Impairment. *Alcohol Alert, 25 (PH 351)*.

<sup>5</sup> Shatz, E. (2004). *TeensHealth: Alcohol*. Nemours Foundation.

<sup>6</sup> Dorsey J, Larson H, & Segal J. (2006). *Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism: Signs, Symptoms, Effects and Testing*.

<sup>7</sup> Drug Policy Alliance. (2006). *Adolescent drug use*.

<sup>8</sup> American Council for Drug Education. (1999). *Signs and symptoms of drug use*.

<sup>9</sup> National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. (2007). *State and Local Youth Risk Behavior Survey*.

<sup>10</sup> *Monitoring the Future: A Continuing Study of American Youth (8th, 10th, and 12th-Grade Surveys)*. (1976-2004). Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research.