

Social-Emotional Learning and Substance Abuse in Young People

Adolescent substance use has long-lasting implications.

Roughly 50 percent of high schoolers report using substances such as alcohol and marijuana,¹ 14 percent report using illicit substances such as cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamines, and another 14 percent report using nonprescription opioids.^{1,2}

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that adolescent substance use is associated with risky behaviors that can harm youth. They note that substance use prevention should include “school-based programs that promote social and emotional competence.”³ Strategies for early prevention are critical for youth because most adults with a substance use disorder began using substances as young people.²

Risk factors

Adolescents are at increased risk of substance abuse when they:

- Are rejected by their peers⁴
- Develop hostile or controlling social goals (which can lead to peer rejection)⁴
- Engage in bullying behavior⁵
- Align with peers who use substances⁴
- Overestimate (have erroneous norms about) how many of their peers use or approve of substance use⁷
- Use other substances and are thus at an increased risk for opioid misuse⁸

Research-based SEL programs prevent substance abuse through the promotion of both personal and social skills.^{1,2}

50%

Fifty percent of high schoolers report using substances such as alcohol and marijuana.¹

Protective factors

The risk of substance abuse decreases when adolescents:

- Regulate emotions and develop healthy coping skills⁹
- Use social skills to develop positive friendships and healthy relationships
- Possess effective refusal skills for saying no and still maintaining friendships
- Empathize and self-regulate¹⁰
- Exercise assertiveness and problem-solve in stressful situations⁴
- Develop positive normative perceptions against substance use¹¹
- Form stronger ties to school, thereby increasing connectedness¹²

Solutions

- Prevention programs for elementary and middle school children should target improving social-emotional skills—including self-control, emotion awareness, social skills, and social problem-solving—to address risk factors for substance abuse, such as aggressive behavior, academic failure, and school dropout.^{13,14}
- Early interventions that target shortcomings in social-emotional competencies (like poor self-regulation) can have greater impact than later interventions, shifting children's life course trajectories away from problem behaviors and toward positive outcomes.¹⁴

For more information, go to [cfchildren.org/policy-advocacy](https://www.cfchildren.org/policy-advocacy)

Policy Recommendations

- Promote access to research-based social-emotional learning in educational settings,¹⁵ and include research-based SEL strategies in substance use prevention efforts.
- Provide sustainable funding streams to schools to fund SEL as a Tier I universal intervention for substance abuse prevention.
- Create a framework for schools to equitably provide research-based substance use prevention strategies that encompass efforts that might fall outside the scope of SEL.
- Provide funding to support research-based prevention strategies and to continue research to improve and evaluate promising prevention practices.

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