

# Substance Abuse and Dependence

There are a number of risk factors that can increase the likelihood that a child may develop a substance abuse and dependence problem. These risk factors include depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, the child not feeling like they fit in or belong in their community, and a family history of substance abuse or addiction.

For some children, continued use of alcohol, drugs, or other substances (for example, over-the-counter medications like cough syrup or household products like inhalants) may begin to interfere with their activities and health and develop into a substance abuse problem. If children take the substances often enough, their body or mind may become dependent on them (in other words, they need the substances to function). The child will have negative physical and emotional reactions to not having the alcohol or drugs. Children can also develop a tolerance for the substance. The alcohol or drug will no longer make them feel drunk or high the way it did at first, and they need more of it to feel that way.

## SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Typical signs and symptoms of substance abuse and dependence include:

- Fatigue or red and glazed eyes
- A lasting cough
- Sudden mood changes or irritability
- Irresponsible behavior
- Withdrawal from the family
- Decreased interest in school or a negative attitude toward school
- A drop in grades
- Discipline problems at school or problems with the law



## EVALUATION AND DIAGNOSIS

Substance abuse can affect every aspect of a child's life and can lead to problems in school, with relationships, and even with law enforcement. Continued substance abuse can lead to medical problems, as well. For these reasons, it is important that it is diagnosed as early as possible. Unfortunately, substance abuse is also an issue that can be easily hidden. Substance abuse and dependence is typically diagnosed in adolescence, but it can occur in younger children.

If you think your child has a substance abuse and dependence problem, your child may need a comprehensive psychiatric evaluation or psychotherapy evaluation. For more information, turn to **MENTAL HEALTH EVALUATIONS (p39)**. In addition to an evaluation, a provider will usually do a toxicology screening to determine what types of substances are in your child's system. Sometimes a child may not know exactly what he or she has ingested, so it is important to establish exactly what types of chemicals are present.

## TYPICAL CO-EXISTING DIAGNOSES

Substance abuse is often a sign of other mental illnesses. A child may use alcohol or other drugs as a way to feel better and reduce the symptoms of a mental illness. For example, a child who is depressed may use drugs as a way to feel happier, or a child with anxiety may use alcohol to help him or her relax. If your child is abusing substances, it is important to both seek treatment for the substance abuse and have him or her evaluated and possibly treated for other mental illnesses.

Common mental health diagnoses that co-exist with substance abuse and dependence include:

- Anxiety Disorders (p48)
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (p52)
- Bipolar Disorder (p59)
- Conduct Disorder (p64)
- Depression (p67)
- Eating Disorders (p70)
- Learning Disorders (p75)

For both evaluation and treatment of a substance abuse and dependence problem, it is important to find a mental healthcare provider who specializes in substance abuse.

## TREATMENT FACILITIES

Caritas, Inc.  
401-722-4644  
[www.caritasri.org](http://www.caritasri.org)

CODAC Cranston  
401-461-5056  
[www.codacinc.org](http://www.codacinc.org)

Stanley Street Treatment  
and Resources  
800-747-6237  
[www.sstar.org](http://www.sstar.org)

## RESOURCES

Al-Anon and Alateen  
888-4AL-ANON or 888-425-2666  
[www.al-anon.alateen.org](http://www.al-anon.alateen.org)

Alcoholics Anonymous  
in Rhode Island  
401-438-8860  
[www.rhodeisland-aa.org](http://www.rhodeisland-aa.org)  
[www.alcoholics-anonymous.org](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org)

New England Region  
of Narcotics Anonymous  
866-624-3578  
[www.newenglandna.org](http://www.newenglandna.org)  
[www.na.org](http://www.na.org)

## TREATMENT

Substance abuse and dependence can be treated by a licensed mental health counselor, a psychotherapist, or a child and adolescent psychiatrist. For more information on mental health specialists, turn to page 106 in **MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT**.

There are many successful treatments for substance abuse and dependence. Treatment includes drug or alcohol rehabilitation, which allows the child's body to get over any physical dependence to the substance. In addition, individual and family psychotherapy are suggested forms of treatment. Medication may be used to reduce emotional or psychological dependence on a substance. Treatment of any existing mental illnesses can also help in treating substance abuse. For more information, turn to **MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT (p147)**.

Many treatment facilities exist specifically to treat substance abuse and dependence and provide comprehensive programs for children with substance abuse problems. Treatment programs can include twelve step programs and peer support from friends who do not use substances. In particular, treatment programs usually address how the child is spending his or her time and figure out a way to keep the child busy through recreational or vocational services. As children with substance abuse problems may have trouble in other areas, comprehensive programs also usually include legal, family, and medical services.

If substance abuse and dependence is affecting the child's ability to learn, adjustments may need to be made in his or her education program. For more information on the school system, turn to page 118 in **MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT**.