



The WCPA News

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Volume 5, Number 1

Fall, 2003

How to Identify an Individual At-Risk for Substance Abuse

Michael E. Mahon, MA, LPC

As we enter into a new school year, it has been heartening to me to be involved in a coalition of local secondary schools whose goal is getting information on adolescent substance abuse into the hands of parents and educators. Large groups of parents and educators have come to presentations about adolescent substance abuse and what we as adults can do to prevent and/or respond effectively to it. The response to these meetings has been overwhelming and encouraging. One point that should be emphasized, however, is that of how to identify at-risk students.

Many of us believe that we know what a substance user “looks like.” However, many of these preconceived notions are wrong. For example, we often associate drug use with being socially provocative (e.g. having strange piercings, wearing black attire, dying hair odd colors, etc.) While these issues are connected, in that an adolescent who is socially provocative may be using drugs or alcohol, the issues themselves are separate.

Adolescents are socially provocative because they have a need to make a statement. They are outwardly expressing their sense of not being accepted or feeling separate from society at large. While these feelings certainly put these individuals at greater risk for substance abuse, there are many more adolescents who are using drugs who do not display this socially provocative behavior.

The primary reason adolescents fall into peer groups who use drugs is because of their own feelings of insecurity. Even if they display other signs of success (e.g. good grades, active in athletics and clubs) adolescents may not feel secure and confident. When this is the case, these individuals are at higher risk for substance use because the peer group that is most accepting is the group that is using. This is because groups that use feel like outcasts themselves. Because it is so easy to gain access to these groups, insecure adolescents will gravitate towards peer groups who use as a way to satisfy their need to belong.

If your school does any of the following, the chances are good that you are failing to identify some students who are using substances: only identifying kids as at-risk who don't fit in, have troublesome families or failing grades, failing to consider athletes and student leaders, not taking seriously those kids who “only” drink beer on weekends, and not realizing that over half of students will try illicit drugs before graduation.

When we see the numbers of professional athletes, doctors, lawyers and other professionals who use drugs, we can see that the problem is not limited to those we believe “look like” they use. It is our responsibility then to courageously identify individuals who may be at-risk regardless of other outward signs of success. If we allow ourselves to ignore early warning signs simply because the individual is “a good kid,” then we do all adolescents a disservice. The earlier we intervene in the at-risk adolescent's life, the higher our chance of success is going to be. With the courage and conviction to intervene early and not only identify socially provocative adolescents, we can and will make a difference.

If you have questions or would like more information, please call Mike Mahon at (314) 275-8599. In addition, please feel free to copy and distribute to your students' parents the “For Parents Only” article on page three.

From the Director: Changing School Climate

We at WCPA are often asked to give presentations on various topics. Last year, we were asked by the St. Louis Archdiocesan Education Office to give a presentation on "Bullying." At that time, we began becoming more aware that single presentations on such topics could be helpful, but may not necessarily have a long-term effect. It also became obvious that school professionals were truly desiring an impact on the overall climate of the school, not just one small facet of it. And, in fact, most of the programs that we were providing in schools were addressing overall school climate in some form. As WCPA became more and more excited about the school climate issue, we suggested that not only could we address the "Bullying" topic, but we could also look at how schools can change their overall climate.

After much research, discussion and planning, we developed a model for the improvement of overall school climate. The foundation of this model is the Mission Statement of the school, which must include the core values by which the school wants to be known. The model includes a leadership team, composed of various members of the school community including the administrator, teachers, parents and students, which evaluates the school's strengths and weaknesses and develops a plan for change. To be effective, it is critical that the administrator spearheads the effort and teachers are invested. All members of the school community, including staff, parents and students, are expected to exhibit the core values represented in the Mission Statement.

On December 6th, 2002 and January 22nd, 2003, Brett Newcomb and I gave a large presentation to many school representatives on "Bullying" and "Changing School Climate by Promoting Personal Safety, Civility and Respect." A month later, a meeting was held with those interested in pursuing the climate change model. Administrators from thirty-eight schools came, each with a copy of their school's Mission Statement and Philosophy. On June 12th, representatives from fifteen schools, both elementary and secondary, came together to begin actually working on a tentative plan to address changing their schools' climates. In attendance were core members of each school community, including the administrator, pastor, school board representatives and/or key staff members. At the end of that meeting, each of the schools reported on their individual plan and how they would begin implementing their plan in the Fall of 2003.

This has been an exciting project. Too often we address problems on a piecemeal basis. Yet if we truly want long-term change, the entire community must have an investment in that change. It is evident that this will not be accomplished overnight and that it will entail a good deal of planning and effort. In fact, we have already begun consulting with schools on "Changing School Climate" as they begin their new school year. However, we truly believe that this program can make a profound impact on your school community. We welcome any school wanting further information to contact us.

- *Mary Fitzgibbons, Ph.D.*

The Catholic Secondary Schools Coalition: Substance Abuse and Parenting Skills Presentations

Recently, a coalition of thirty of the area's secondary Catholic schools came together because of their concern about the impact of drugs and alcohol on today's adolescents. The result was a series of required orientation meetings for the parents of ninth graders, on the topics of substance abuse and parenting skills. From August 4th to August 20th, 2003, eleven parent meetings were held, with audiences ranging from 300 to 800 parents. WCPA was honored to present at these meetings. It has been extremely satisfying to hear numbers of positive comments in regard to the schools' initiative and leadership.

Our Philosophy

We believe that individuals and systems:

- Are capable of permanent change
- Function best with clearly defined authority that stems from a family systems hierarchy
- Are accountable for both positive and negative aspects of behavior
- Achieve success by conscious choices that lead to strength and development of personal responsibility
- Control their environment by establishing boundaries that are consistent with their values

WCPA promotes change and growth by:

- Helping to establish order within the environment
- Meeting consistently in a collaborative relationship to achieve identified goals
- Helping to identify and process significant issues
- Aiding in resolving issues as they arise

The result for the system or individual is the development of a strong sense of identity and boundaries that allows for the achievement of goals.



Dr. Mary Fitzgibbons, Director

FOR PARENTS ONLY:

Am I Enabling My Child to Use Drugs or Alcohol?

By Michael E. Mahon, MA, LPC

As a parent, it is often difficult to identify and/or follow through with intervening in the life of our son or daughter who may be using drugs or alcohol. In that vein, the following is a list of behaviors on the part of parents that make it easier for an adolescent (or preteen) to use or abuse substances. Think about the extent to which these statements apply to you. If one applies, you may want to evaluate why that is true. If two apply, there is real reason for concern. If three apply, it's recommended that you seek assistance from a qualified professional.

- I have discovered supplies of alcohol, drugs or paraphernalia but have been afraid to say anything to my child.
- I have avoided talking to school personnel or qualified professionals fearing a stigma.
- I doubt my own perceptions, thinking that I am making something out of nothing.
- I have covered up for my child with his/her school or job.
- I excuse my child's behavior, attributing it to being "just a phase."
- I am afraid to enforce consequences when my adolescent exhibits negative behavior.
- I don't trust my child, but feel as if I am wrong for not doing so.
- I ignore situations to avoid conflict with my adolescent.
- I have become suspicious of my child's activities and therefore try to control who he/she is with or where he/she goes.
- I blame their school, friends, or others for my adolescent's alcohol/drug use.
- I and/or my spouse tolerate some use of alcohol or other drugs by our adolescent.
- I/we have bailed out our child when he/she has gotten into trouble with school or the police.
- I have made excuses for my child, such as doing chores that were his/her responsibility.
- I do not talk about my concerns with others.
- I think the present problems are my fault because I am an inadequate parent.
- I shield my child from experiencing the consequences of his/her behavior.
- I threaten consequences that I do not enforce.

For questions, more information, or evaluation please call Mike Mahon at (314) 275-8599.

If you have any questions or concerns about children or parenting, please feel free to call West County Psychological Associates. Counseling is available for children, adolescents, adults and families, and social skills groups are available for students.
