



## Substance Abuse among Children in India

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Drug addiction, also known as substance use disorder, is a condition that affects how the brain works and how a person behaves. It makes it hard for them to stop using drugs, whether they're legal like alcohol, marijuana, and nicotine, or illegal. Drug addiction symptoms or behaviours in children include

- Tendency to use the drug regularly — daily or even several times a day
- Having intense urges for the drug that block out any other thoughts
- Usage of more drugs to get the same effect over time
- Taking larger amounts of the drug over a longer period of time than you intended
- Making certain that you maintain a supply of the drug
- Not meeting responsibilities like studying
- Continuing to use the drug, even though they know it's causing problems in their life or causing you physical or psychological harm
- Doing things to get the drug that you normally wouldn't do, such as stealing for getting money for drugs
- Failing in your attempts to stop using the drug
- Experiencing withdrawal symptoms when you attempt to stop taking the drug

Substance use earlier considered being a problem of street children, working and trafficked children, has now become widespread among school going children from different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Dhawan, et.al, (2020). According to a study, for Protection of Child Rights, the common substances of use among adolescents are tobacco and alcohol, followed by inhalants and cannabis and it has also been reported that in India around 20 million children a year and nearly 55,000 children a day start using tobacco. Child Protection and Child Rights (2008). Studies reveal that, substance abuse is also associated with domestic violence, maltreatment of the child, nuclear families, runaway status and working status of the child. Singh M, et.al, (2017). According to the study Living and working on the streets can be really tough for kids as they are more prone of getting addicted to various harmful substances. Some of these kids end up there because their families don't have enough money to take care of them. Their parents might be struggling to provide food, clothes, and a safe place to live. Other kids on the streets don't have parents at all. They might have lost their parents or had to leave home because they were being hurt by them. Because these kids don't have stable homes, they face a lot of challenges. They often don't have enough to eat, so they're malnourished and hungry a lot of the time. They might not have access to doctors or medicine when they're sick, which means they can't get better easily. And sometimes, they don't even have clean water to drink or a roof over their heads to protect them from the weather. But it's not just the physical stuff that's hard for these kids. They also miss out on the love and care that parents are supposed to give. Without someone to look after them and keep them safe, they're vulnerable to being taken advantage of by others. Some people might try to use them for work or even hurt them. This makes them feel scared and alone, and they don't know who they can trust. So, life on the streets is really tough for these kids. They're hungry, sick, and without a home to call their own. And without parents or someone to take care of them, they're at risk of being harmed by others. It's a sad situation, and these kids need help to get off the streets and into safe and loving homes where they can grow up healthy and happy.

Another study showed that many children expressed desire and are trying their best to quit the habit. A majority of the users reported trying to end the habit and most of the users expressed a desire to quit the habit. These views were also expressed in other studies which revealed that all users did not want to continue the habit and they held a positive attitude toward quitting, therefore, motivation on the part of family, friends, and close ones could help the user to come out of this habit. Dechenla Tsering, et.al, (2023) But there are some external factors which are not allowing the children to come out of their habit. The continued use of substances, particularly those that are legally available, is frequently due to their easy accessibility. This means that children can obtain these substances with ease, often without significant barriers or restrictions. For many children, this easy availability serves as a constant temptation, making it difficult to resist continued use. Additionally, relief from stress emerges as another significant factor contributing to the continuation of substance abuse. In times of heightened anxiety, pressure, or emotional distress, children may turn to substances as a coping mechanism to alleviate their discomfort and escape from their problems temporarily. The ability of substances to provide relief from stress can create a cycle of dependence, as children may increasingly rely on them to manage life's challenges. Furthermore, the desire for social acceptance among peers like friends plays a pivotal role in encouragement of substance use. Especially among nowadays among children, the use of certain substances within children's friend circle, leading first time user child to partake in order to fit in, get recognition as well as to avoid social exclusion. The acceptance or the prevalence of substance use among friends can exert considerable influence on a child's behavior, reinforcing their continued engagement in substance abuse.

According to J Pharm Bioallied Sci. (2010) when people don't have enough money and the basic things they need, like food, water, and a safe place to live, they might turn to using drugs or alcohol. This is because they might feel stressed or unhappy, and using substances can seem like a way to feel better, even if it's only temporary. When researchers looked at young people, like teenagers and young adults, they found that those who didn't have good living conditions or had problems in their families were more likely to start using drugs or alcohol. This means that if kids grow up in families where they feel loved and supported, where there are rules to follow, and where they're looked after and taught right from wrong, they're less likely to start using drugs or alcohol. But if kids grow up without their parents or in families where there's fighting, or where they're hurt physically, they might feel upset or troubled. And sadly, this can increase the chances of them using drugs or alcohol to cope with their feelings. Sometimes, when someone in the family uses drugs or alcohol, it can influence other family members, especially young people, to try it too. So, if someone's brother or sister or parent uses drugs or alcohol, they might be more tempted to try it themselves. Now, when we think about kids who live on the streets, it can be even harder for them to stay away from drugs or alcohol. They might not have families to take care of them, and they might not feel safe or loved. This makes them more likely to try using substances. But there are things we can do to help these kids. One way is by teaching them about the risks of using drugs and alcohol through something called Information Education Communication (IEC) activities. These are like lessons that help them understand why it's not a good idea to use substances and what they can do instead. Another important thing is to try to make their family situations better. This can be really tough, especially because these kids might not have families that are stable or supportive. But by trying to help them reconnect with their families or by providing support to their families, we can give them a better chance of staying away from drugs and alcohol.

Imagine you're in school, and you have friends who start doing things like smoking or drinking. Maybe they say it's cool or fun, and you start to wonder if you should try it too. That's called peer influence. When your friends do something, you might feel tempted to do it too, even if you know it's not a good idea. Now, think about your family. If someone in your family, like a brother or sister, uses drugs or alcohol, you might see them doing it and think it's okay. You might even want to try it yourself because you see them doing it. This is called family influence. Based on another study done by Dechenla Tsering. (2009) We learn a lot from our families, and sometimes, we might copy what they do without really understanding if it's right or wrong. So, for kids and teenagers, starting to use drugs or alcohol often happens because of what they see their friends or family members doing. They might think it's normal or cool because the people they look up to are doing it. And because they want to fit in or feel accepted, they might try it too. Now, here's something important to know: sometimes, kids might not have enough money to buy drugs or alcohol. But they still want to try it. So, what do they do? Some might do things they know they shouldn't, like stealing or lying, just to get money to buy substances. This is called deviant behaviour, and it's not good. But when kids really want something, they might do things they wouldn't normally do. In many studies, researchers found that most kids who start using substances get the money to buy them from their pocket money. That's the money they get from their parents or guardians to spend on things they need or want. So, if they're using their pocket money to buy drugs or alcohol, it means they're spending it on something harmful instead of something good for them. What's really disappointing is that all these factors that make it easier for kids to start using drugs or alcohol are usually found right around them. It could be their friends at school, their family members at home, or even just the money they have in their pockets. And when kids start using substances, it can lead to more problems, like doing things they shouldn't just to get money for drugs or alcohol. So, it's important for kids to understand that just because their friends or family members are doing something doesn't mean it's okay. And if they ever feel pressured to try drugs or alcohol, they should talk to someone they trust, like a teacher, parent, or another adult who can help them make the right choices. It's not always easy, but staying away from substances is the best way to stay healthy and safe.

Further studies looked into biological risk factors of addictive behaviour According to Naresh Nebhinan, et.al, (2022) Their studies explains that a human brain is still growing and changing a lot when you're a kid and teenager. This process is called neurodevelopment. When substances like drugs or alcohol get into the mix, they can mess up this development. It's like throwing a wrench into the gears of a machine that's still being built. One important part of the brain that's affected by substance use is called the prefrontal cortex, or PFC for short. This is the area responsible for decision-making, planning, and controlling impulses. But in kids and teenagers, the PFC is still growing and maturing. So, when they start using substances, it can disrupt this growth and make it harder for them to control their impulses. Now, let's talk about another part of the brain called the limbic system. This is like the emotional centre of the brain, and it's where things like pleasure, reward, and stress are processed. When kids use substances, it can make the limbic system go into overdrive, making them crave more of the substance and feel stressed out. Think of it like this: imagine you have a car with two drivers. One driver is the PFC, who's supposed to steer the car and make smart decisions about where to go. The other driver is the limbic system, who's always looking for fun and excitement. When kids use substances, it's like the limbic system takes over the steering wheel and drives recklessly, while the PFC struggles to regain control. But it's not just the PFC and limbic system that are affected. There's also a part of the brain called the nucleus accumbens, which is involved in decision-making and reward processing. When kids use substances, it can mess up the communication between the PFC and the nucleus accumbens, making it harder for them to make good choices. Now, let's talk about how social cues and hormones play a role. Kids and teenagers are more influenced by their friends and social situations than adults. This means that when they see their friends using substances or when they're in a stressful environment, they're more likely to give in to peer pressure and try it themselves. Plus, teenagers go through a lot of hormonal changes during puberty, which can make them more impulsive and emotional. So, when you combine hormonal changes with environmental stress, it creates a perfect storm for substance use. Now, let's talk about symptoms. Some kids might show externalizing symptoms, like being rebellious or aggressive, while others might show internalizing symptoms, like being anxious or depressed. It turns out that these different symptoms are linked to different parts of the brain. Kids with externalizing symptoms tend to have lower activity in the PFC, while kids with internalizing symptoms have less activity in the nucleus accumbens. When kids start using substances at a young age, it messes up the development of their brain, making it harder for them to control their impulses and make good decisions. This is because substances affect important brain regions like the PFC, limbic system, and nucleus accumbens. Plus, hormonal changes and social influences make it even harder for kids to resist peer pressure and stay away from substances. And different symptoms are linked to different parts of the brain, which means that substance use can affect kids in different ways.

Another article discusses that social media is a big part of our lives nowadays. Naresh Nebhinan, et.al, (2022) One might have seen posts or videos on social media where people are smoking or drinking, and they make it look really cool or fun. They might be wearing fancy clothes or hanging out with a lot of friends, and it seems like they're having the time of their lives. When kids see these kinds of posts, they might start to think that smoking or drinking is something they should try too. But here's the thing: those posts on social media don't always show the whole picture. They might make smoking or drinking look cool, but they don't show the negative effects that these substances can have on one's health and further life. Smoking can cause serious health problems like lung cancer and heart disease, and drinking too much alcohol can lead to addiction and other issues. Another way that social media can influence kids to try smoking or drinking is by showing their favourite heroes or celebrities doing it. If a famous actor or musician is seen smoking or drinking in a movie or on social media, kids might think that it's okay for them to do it too. They might even look up to these celebrities and want to be like them, so they might start smoking or drinking to imitate them. But just because someone famous is doing something doesn't mean it's okay. In fact, many celebrities regret smoking or drinking and wish they had never started. They might even use their platform on social media to warn kids about the dangers of these substances. It's also important to remember that what one sees on social media isn't always real. People can edit their photos and videos to make themselves look cooler or more popular than they really are. So, even if it looks like everyone is smoking or drinking on social media, that might not be the case in real life. One thing is to be aware of the messages that social media is sending. Another thing kids can do is to find positive role models on social media who promote healthy behaviours. Look for accounts that encourage exercise, good nutrition, and staying away from harmful substances like cigarettes and alcohol. Surrounding the children with positive influences can help you make good choices and stay healthy.

Further articles discussed regarding the preventive strategies in addressing substance use disorder (SUD) among children and adolescents. These strategies can be implemented at various levels, including school, family, and community, to effectively tackle the issue and promote healthy behaviours. Let's delve into some of the key preventive measures and interventions. Schools serve as important platforms for imparting social resistance skills, normative education, and coping mechanisms to students. These interventions focus on teaching assertiveness, problem-solving, and social skills techniques. Additionally, school-based programs emphasizing assertiveness, personalized feedback, and self-management have been effective in reducing substance use, particularly alcohol and cannabis, among adolescents. Despite some lack of robust evidence, school-based preventive interventions like the unplugged program, life skill training program, and good behaviour game have shown efficacy in reducing substance use. Improving family bonding, cohesion, communication, and parental supervision are crucial measures in preventing substance use among children and adolescents. Family-based interventions have shown consistent, albeit small, evidence for reducing alcohol misuse among adolescents. These interventions focus on enhancing parental monitoring and support, as well as fostering positive family dynamics. Community-based interventions have proven effective in reducing the frequency and amount of substance use among adolescent students. These interventions involve broader community initiatives aimed at raising awareness, promoting healthy behaviours, and providing support services. They often target environmental factors that contribute to substance use, such as peer influence and social norms. The rise of digital platforms and social media has opened new avenues for substance use prevention and treatment efforts. Utilizing these platforms, such as web, mobile phones, and video games, can help spread awareness about substance abuse and teach appropriate coping skills. Mass media campaigns and policy changes also play a role in prevention, although more systematic studies are needed to assess their effectiveness. Legal measures, such as prohibition of substance use and restrictions on sale, can contribute to prevention efforts. The Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act in India prohibits the sale, purchase, and consumption of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances, except for medical and scientific purposes. Similarly, bans on advertising related to controlled substances, such as tobacco and alcohol, are crucial in curbing substance use among adolescents. Competence-enhancement programs, including social skill training and life skill training, equip individuals with the necessary tools to resist peer pressure and make informed decisions. These programs enhance life skills and coping strategies, empowering individuals to navigate challenging situations without resorting to substance use. Behaviour change communication focuses on promoting positive behavioural outcomes through targeted messaging and awareness campaigns. In India, efforts have been made to raise awareness about substance use through electronic and print media, aiming to influence behaviour and attitudes towards substance abuse. Additional measures include providing formal training to health professionals and building capacity for early identification and intervention. Health-care professionals, including paediatricians and general physicians, play a vital role in identifying indicators of substance use and providing timely treatment and referrals.

In today's world, drug addiction, also known as substance use disorder, is a serious problem that affects many children and teenagers. It's a condition that changes how the brain works and how a person behaves, making it hard for them to stop using drugs, whether they're legal like alcohol, marijuana, and nicotine, or illegal. There are many signs that a child might be struggling with drug addiction. They might start using drugs regularly, have intense urges for the drug, and need more drugs to get the same effect over time. They might also take larger amounts of the drug than they intended, spend a lot of time thinking about getting and using the drug, and have trouble meeting their responsibilities, like studying. They might even continue to use the drug even though they know it's causing problems in their life or causing them harm, and they might do things they wouldn't normally do, like stealing, to get the drug. If they try to stop using the drug, they might experience withdrawal symptoms, which can be very uncomfortable. Unfortunately, substance abuse among children is becoming more widespread, even among those from different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Many children are starting to use substances like tobacco and alcohol at a very young age, and the numbers are alarming. This can lead to a lot of problems, not only for the children themselves but also for their families and communities. One of the reasons why children might start using drugs is because of the influence of social media. They might see posts or videos where people are smoking or drinking, and they make it look cool or fun. They might even see their favourite heroes or celebrities doing it, which can make them think it's okay for them to do it too. But social media doesn't always show the whole picture. It doesn't show the negative effects that these substances can have on their health and their lives. And it's important for children to be aware of that. Another reason why children might start using drugs is because of their living conditions and family situations. If they don't have enough money or the basic things they need, like food, water, and a safe place to live, they might turn to using drugs or alcohol as a way to cope with their feelings. And if they see their friends or family members using drugs or alcohol, they might be more tempted to try it themselves. But there is hope. Many children express a desire to quit using drugs, and with the right support from their families, friends, and communities, they can overcome their

addiction. It's important for children to have positive role models who promote healthy behaviours and to surround themselves with positive influences. And it's important for them to know that they don't have to give in to peer pressure or the temptations of social media. They can make good choices and stay away from harmful substances, and they can lead happy, healthy lives.

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