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# Teen Research Update



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## Did you know?

- Only 10% of the estimated 1.4 million teens with alcohol and other drug problems get treatment compared to only 20% of adults.
- 20-25% of females experience an attempted or completed rape while at college

## Do 12-step programs work for teens?

Research tells us something parents already know – teens and adults are different! But teens are not just different from adults in terms of styles, attitudes and behaviors, but also different in terms of how they respond to treatments for disorders like depression and addiction. Quite simply, what works best for adults is not always effective for teens.

When it comes to treating addiction, developmental differences between teens and adults raise the question of whether traditional treatment approaches, like the 12-step programs common in adult treatment, are effective for teens. This is particularly important given that, nationally, an estimated 2 out of 3 in-patient and out-patient treatment programs for teens are constructed at least in part on the 12-step approach.

First, what is the 12-step approach? As the name implies, it centers on the use of 12-steps to break free from addiction, make healthy changes that support sobriety, take a close look at the personal problems that contributed to addiction, make amends to those affected negatively

by the addiction, and help others in their efforts to become sober and stay sober.

Social support from others struggling with addictions is a key component of the process, as is belief in a higher spiritual power and the willingness to turn control of one's life over to that higher power.

Such programs can work for adults, particularly those committed to following the 12-steps. But do 12-step programs like AA and NA work for teens? The answer appears to be yes – with some caveats!

Dr. Steve Sussman from the Department of Preventive Medicine and Psychology at the University of Southern California reviewed 19 published studies examining whether the 12-step programs Alcohol Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) are helpful for teens struggling with addiction.

He concludes that teens who attend 12-step meetings weekly are 2-3 times more likely to maintain abstinence than teens who do not. The trick is getting teens

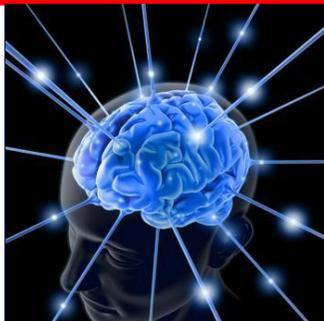
to show up at meetings, and to keep showing up! Teens attend roughly 1/3<sup>rd</sup> fewer 12-step meetings than adults in the first 90 days after leaving in-patient treatment, and teens are more likely than adults to drop out of the programs during the first year.

Part of the barrier to participation, suggests Sussman, is the fact that teens might be more reluctant to give over control to a higher power, as adolescence is a stage of life marked by the quest for autonomy.

With regard to why such programs work for teens, he suggests that teens who participate find tremendous benefit in the social support for sobriety, which makes sense given that adolescence is a time marked by a strong need for social support.

In short, 12-step programs can and do work for teens, particularly for teens motivated to live healthier lives and willing to put in the effort to do so.

Like exercising at the gym, 12-step programs work for teens – but only if they show up and put in the effort.



### Did you know?

- Teens in the US are less likely to binge drink than teens in France, Italy and more than 30 other European countries.
- The average age at which a teen in the US has his/her first drink is 16.9, compared to 12.5 across Europe.
- Teenagers today are more likely to use marijuana than tobacco.
- Use of most drugs, as well as alcohol, is on the decline among teens, with the key exceptions of marijuana and prescription drugs.
- Research shows that using social media can have a calming effect. People report feeling less anxious when perusing friends' Facebook pages.
- Post-natal birth of new neurons in the brain peaks during the adolescent years.

## Why do teens make riskier choices when their friends are around?

It is no surprise that teens tend to make riskier decisions than adults and that their decisions are even riskier when friends are around. But the traditional explanation, peer pressure, has been called into question by recent research.

Psychologist Laurence Steinberg from Temple University and his colleagues examined brain activity in teens, college students and young adults while they played a driving game with or without their friends in the room. Importantly, the friends did not actually interact with the subjects. They were just there somewhere in the room.

College students and young adults performed the same -- that is, they took the same number of chances -- while driving when they were alone and when friends were in the room.

Teens, however, took far more chances when their friends were watching. But why? The researchers report that brain activity in the reward system, the areas activated when we do something that feels good and/or is exciting, were more activated in teens, but not the older subjects, when their friends were around.

Because the friends were just in the room but not actually interacting with the teens, the increase in risk

taking cannot be explained by peer pressure. Instead, it seems that teens might just like to show off for their friends and get pleasure doing it, which often results in taking more risks.

These findings help explain why teens are more likely to get into car crashes if they have friends in the car with them. The findings also help explain how kids who seem to make really good decisions in the presence of parents can make such bad choices when out and about with their peers. The presence of their friends combined with risk taking activates the reward system and makes risky decisions pleasurable!

Source: Chein, J., Albert, D., O'Brien, L., Uckert, K. and Steinberg, L. (2011), Peers increase adolescent risk taking by enhancing activity in the brain's reward circuitry. *Developmental Science*, 14: F1-F10

## Does letting teens drink at home keep them from binge drinking in college?

It makes intuitive sense to many adults that allowing, or "teaching", teens to drink at home should keep them from drinking heavily outside of the home.

Several recent studies in the US and elsewhere challenge this notion and suggest teens who are allowed to drink at home are more likely to binge drink outside of the home and are also more likely to develop problems with alcohol down the road.

In the case of college, many adults believe that students drink heavily when they get there precisely because they were not taught how to drink beforehand.

To study this, researchers at the University of Buffalo recruited 450 female, college-bound high school seniors to participate in a study. Students were categorized as, 1) allowed to drink at home with meals, 2) allowed to drink at home with friends, 3) not allowed

to drink at home.

During the first semester at college, students allowed to drink at home with meals or with friends were more likely to binge drink than those not allowed to drink at home.

As parents, we often try to send one message but our kids hear something very different. This seems to be the case when we try to keep them safe by letting them drink at home.

Source: Livingston JA, Testa M, Hoffman JH, Windle M. (2010) Can parents prevent heavy episodic drinking by allowing teens to drink at home? *Addictive Behaviors*, 35(12):1105-12.