What Do Bullying and Youth Substance Use Have in Common? More Than You Might Think.

3 October 2012 3 Comments

Written By: Frances M. Harding, Director, Center for Substance Abuse Prevention

October is Bullying Prevention Month and National Substance Abuse Prevention Month, a busy and important time for prevention efforts. On the surface, bullying and youth substance use may seem like separate problems. However, from research, we know that youth who use substances are at risk for other problem behaviors during their teen years. In fact, new findings suggest that middle and high school students who bully their peers are more likely to use alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana.

Bullying and substance use among children and teenagers have shared risk and protective factors. Effective prevention efforts minimize these risk factors and maximize protective factors in a child's life. If a problem has already surfaced, learn to recognize the warning signs of bullying and being bullied, underage alcohol use, and drug use to intervene before the problem becomes worse.

But let's rewind: how do you know which risk and protective factors to focus on? Read on!

Family

Lack of parental support, warmth, and supervision put young people at risk for problem behaviors. Likewise, overly permissive or harsh parenting styles, inconsistent discipline methods, and a lack of clear boundaries or rules increase the likelihood that a child will act out in harmful ways. Children whose parents use drugs and alcohol are also at risk.

Bonding and cultivating close parent-child relationships are vital for a child's well-being. Open communication strengthens this relationship and can alert a parent or caregiver to difficult issues a young person might be dealing with. Additionally, clear, consistent discipline—without being overly extreme or physical—helps young people understand that certain behaviors, like bullying and substance use, are unacceptable and that there are consequences for those actions. Finally, modeling empathy and helping young people form positive values helps keep them from bullying others and using drugs or alcohol.

Peers

Peer groups and friendships are essential for social and personal development. However, youth who associate with peers who bully or use alcohol and drugs are more likely to engage in those activities. The same goes for children who have difficulty interacting or establishing relationships with their peers.

Children should be exposed to social situations from an early age, and their social skills should be encouraged by family and educators—social support and positive relationships with others contribute to children's well-being. In addition, parental supervision and involvement, such as getting to know your child's friends, can help a young person avoid behavioral problems by making wise decisions about the company he or she keeps.

Academic performance

In addition to the many benefits of strong academic performance, doing well in school and being enthusiastic about learning are protective factors for youth substance use and bullying. Poor grades and disinterest in school are just the opposite—they put a child at risk for those same behaviors.

Individual characteristics

Parents and teachers should be on the lookout for aggressive behavior, especially if it manifests at an early age, because it's an indicator that a child could become involved in drugs, alcohol, and/or bullying. Teachers and families should also seek opportunities to recognize and reinforce children's abilities and accomplishments—self-esteem, competencies, and skills are characteristics that "protect" a child from developing deviant behaviors.

Environmental characteristics

Our environments play an important part in shaping who we become. Young people who are surrounded by substance use, crime, poverty, and violence at home or in their neighborhoods are more likely to turn to bullying and drug or alcohol use. Community and policy initiatives are essential to remove and prevent environmental risk factors that affect youth. Explore prevention resources and tools, and take the first step toward tackling these issues in your community.