

Adverse Childhood Experiences, Substance Misuse, and Social and Emotional Development

This research summary provides information about adverse childhood experiences, the relationship between these experiences and substance misuse, and how strengthening the social and emotional skills of youth can lessen the negative impact of adverse childhood experiences and reduce the likelihood of substance misuse.

Adverse childhood experiences are negative experiences and stressful events in childhood, including trauma, abuse, and neglect that a child may have witnessed or directly experienced.¹ These experiences include emotional, physical, and sexual abuse; emotional and physical neglect; witnessing domestic violence; parental separation or divorce; and living with someone who was misusing substances, had a mental health disorder, or who had gone to prison. Adverse childhood experiences can impact a person's health and wellbeing throughout their lifespan, including problems with substance misuse.¹ Negative health and social outcomes associated with adverse childhood experiences have been well established. Efforts to prevent these negative outcomes are a focus of many prevention strategies that are in use today, and the literature supports the efficacy of strengthening the social and emotional skills of youth.^{2,3}

Positive childhood experiences contribute to healthy development and wellbeing. Developing the social and emotional skills of youth increases their positive childhood experiences and helps to reduce the negative impacts of adverse childhood experiences.⁴ Social and emotional development is the building of critical life skills. These social and emotional skills include understanding and managing oneself, relating to others, and making responsible choices based on self and others. More specifically, these skills include being able to recognize and regulate emotions, empathize and care about others, make good decisions, behave ethically and responsibly, establish and maintain positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviors.^{5,6}

Building social and emotional skills of youth can help reduce the likelihood of future behavioral problems,^{2,3} decrease the potential for emotional distress,^{2,3} and improve overall well being.³ Social and emotional skills are also associated with improved outcomes at school^{2,3,7} and employment outcomes, such as the ability to get and keep stable, full-time employment.⁸ There is also evidence that the stronger social and emotional skills youth have, the less likely they are to engage in underage drinking⁹ and substance misuse.⁸

The following are three examples that illustrate the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and substance misuse, and how strengthening the social and emotional skills of youth can lower the impact of adverse childhood experiences and reduce the likelihood of using substances.

Experimentation With Alcohol at an Early Age

Research has found that youth who have adverse experiences are at greater risk of experimenting with alcohol at a younger age.^{10,11} When people experiment with alcohol at an earlier age, this can increase their risk of developing alcohol-related problems later in life.^{12,13}

Every adverse childhood experience has the potential to increase the risk of drinking alcohol.^{12,13} Further, exposure to these adverse childhood experiences has been associated with an increase of initial alcohol use during early adolescence.¹² Helping youth develop positive coping skills to deal with negative and traumatic events is a strategy to prevent the early onset of drinking.¹² Strengthening the ability of youth to make constructive choices about their behavior, evaluate the consequences of their actions, and effectively manage stress,¹⁴ equips youth with skills that minimize risk for early experimentation with alcohol.⁹

Drinking Alcohol to Cope With Problems

Research suggests that people who have experienced adverse childhood experiences are more likely to drink alcohol to deal with problems or negative feelings about themselves or their lives, rather than for pleasure or socially as people who have not experienced such experiences might.¹³ Social and emotional skills such as managing stress and controlling emotions improve coping skills¹⁴ and reduce the negative impact of adverse childhood experiences. Strong social and emotional skills can lessen the chance of using alcohol in ways that lead to substance use disorders.

Problem Drinking and Drug Use in Adulthood

Research shows that children who have had adverse childhood experiences have a higher likelihood of problem drinking in adulthood.^{15,16} One study showed that adults who reported experiencing at least four adverse childhood experiences, when compared to those who had experienced none, were twice as likely to report drinking heavily on occasion and three times more likely to report having problems with alcohol as adults.¹⁵ Another study showed that people who had adverse childhood experiences are more likely to struggle with a substance use disorder later in life.¹⁶ When children experience multiple adverse experiences, it can increase their likelihood of substance misuse in adulthood.¹⁶ Specifically, “for every unit increase in the number of types of violent crime/abuse experiences, a person’s odds of developing dependence on alcohol, cocaine, and/or opioids were nearly doubled.”¹⁶

Social and emotional skill development protects children, helps them counter the negative impacts of adverse childhood experiences, and reduces their exposure to risky behaviors.¹⁷ These skills have been shown to significantly reduce substance misuse problems in adulthood.⁸

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