

Risky Behaviors

Is it possible to tell who will and won't get into trouble using and abusing drugs or alcohol? Can we predict using behavior?

There are some predictors; we call them risk and protective factors. Think of it as an equation. Risk factors (things that make it more likely for a youth to use/abuse drugs/alcohol) + protective factors (things that buffer/protect youth from using/abusing drugs/alcohol) = the likelihood that youth will use/abuse drugs/alcohol. The lower the risk factors are and the higher protective factors, the less likely youth will use/abuse. The opposite is also true: the higher the risk factors and lower the protective factors, the more likely youth will abuse/use drugs or alcohol.

Risk factors can predict multiple problem behaviors; they exist in the community, in families, schools and even in an individual and their friends.

Communities That Care of Lorain County, a coalition working to prevent and reduce underage substance abuse, surveys youth every three years about what it's like to live in Lorain County. We get lots of useful information, including important countywide trends about risk and protective factors. Over 10,000 youth in grades 6, 8, 10 and 12 were surveyed last fall. Countywide trends showed that community disorganization and transitions and mobility were the risk factors that were higher than average as they were in 2006 and 2003.

Community disorganization means crime is high, buildings are abandoned and filled with graffiti; it's difficult to feel safe in this environment. Transitions and mobility happen every time youth switch communities, homes or schools – all are times when youth are more likely to have problems. Knowing this – especially with another school year around the corner – it's important to check in with youth and see how they are doing with change.

And, countywide, all risky behavior increases as youth age, problem behaviors begin to spike from 8th grade to 10th grade. Risk factors higher than normal for 8th graders are academic failure and friends delinquent behavior; for 10th graders nearly all risk factors are above average including poor family supervision, parental attitudes favorable toward antisocial behavior, academic failure, friends use of drugs and delinquent behavior. And for 12th graders, some of the risk factors tend to stabilize, but high risk factors include laws and norms favorable to drug use and firearms, friends' use of drugs, poor family supervision, and a family history of antisocial behavior all above average.

Getting from adolescence to adulthood can be like picking one's way through a field of land mines; drugs, family problems, academic failure, rebelliousness, hanging with friends who get in trouble. All lead to unhealthy options. But learning how to reduce problems and increase protection can be a winning combination. The information in the box from the National Institute on Drug Abuse provides actions that everyone can take. It might not always seem easy to make community level change, so why not start in your own family or school?

For more information on ways to reduce risk factors in your child's life and community, contact Communities That Care of Lorain County; 440-282-9920; www.ctcloraincounty.org