

Drug Use among Juveniles in Conflict with the Law

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ABSTRACT

Objective. To study the pattern of drug use, reasons for initiation and the perception about the effects of using drugs, among juveniles in conflict with law.

Methods. A qualitative study was conducted at Prayas Observation Home for boys, New Delhi. Eight key informant interviews were conducted to find the prevalence of prior drug use among boys. Five focus group discussions were conducted with 34 children using a topic outline guide.

Results. The study showed that drug use was related to other criminal activities. Peer group and media were the most important influences for initiation of drug use. All kinds of drugs could easily be procured by children and there was a gradual progression from non-use to tobacco and alcohol use, to marijuana and ultimately to other drugs. Knowledge about medical and social mal-effects of consuming drugs did not seem to effect either the consumption of drugs or the desire to leave this habit.

Conclusion. Results of the study demonstrate an urgent need for taking stringent measures in order to curb drug use among adolescents. [Indian J Pediatr 2007; 74 (4) : 353-356] E-mail : drnandini1@gmail.com

Key words : Drug use; Juveniles; Qualitative study

Today, there is no part of the world which is free from the curse of drug addiction. India, too, has a long history of drug abuse. It is surrounded on both sides by routes of illicit transport, namely, Golden triangle (Burma – Thailand – Laos) and Golden crescent (Iran – Afghanistan – Pakistan) and is thus particularly severely affected. As a result, there is a widespread availability of herbal cannabis and opium.¹

The Reproductive and Child Health program in India lays a special emphasis on the health of adolescents since it is a crucial and dynamic period in the life of an individual.² This group has also been considered as a high risk group for drug use. Among this group, juvenile delinquents are particularly at a higher risk. Research has also shown that there is a strong positive association between drug use and crime in adolescents.^{3, 4, 5} Thus, the problem of drug use is not related just to the individual but is also the concern of entire family and community.

There is a paucity of studies in India focusing on substance use among the deviant youth. This study

was therefore, conducted to provide an insight into the pattern of drug use, reasons for initiation and the perception about the medical and social effects of consuming drugs, among adolescents who are facing trial for various offences. Since they were housed in an observation home, they presented a chance for reform. As drug use is a sensitive subject and since, there is little information about drug use behaviors, habits and consequences among young people, it was decided that a qualitative study was needed to gain this understanding. Such a study would also provide a base for the development of a quantitative schedule.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study was conducted at an observation home for boys in Delhi in September 2005, with permission of Principal Magistrate, Juvenile Justice Board. This observation home houses between 100-160 juvenile boys in conflict with law aged between 7-18 years at any given time. These boys are facing trial at the Juvenile Justice Board for various crimes. The duration of their stay at this home is variable and depends on the period for which they are tried in court. After the trial, those convicted are sent to another observation home run by the government.

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The children at this observation home are divided into six houses (called as “*sadans*”) viz. Tilak, Bhagat, Patel, Gandhi, Subhash and Maulana, on the basis of age group and type of vocational activity they pursue during their stay at the home. The Department of Community Medicine at Maulana Azad Medical College provides medical care to these children.

For the purpose of the study, eight key informants were interviewed to estimate the prevalence of drug use among boys before they were admitted to the observation home. These key informants included the staff members of the observation home, including the project manager, welfare officer, nurse at the clinic in the home and one teacher from each of the houses. These key informants also selected children for participation in focus group discussions (FGDs).

A total of five FGDs were conducted, one FGD with children of each *sadan* except “Gandhi *sadan*” since it housed children less than 13 years of age. Each group consisted of 6 to 9 children. A total of 34 children were thus selected for FGDs. An informed consent was taken from these children for participation in the study. FGDs were conducted by the first author using a topic outline guide. The boys were familiar to this author due to a continuous interaction between her and the boys as she provided medical care to them on a routine basis. The topic outline guide contained questions regarding type of drugs that are consumed by boys, reasons for initiation of drugs, pattern of progression from one drug to another, the place of availability of drugs, and perception of effects of drug use. Each FGD lasted for around 30-45 minutes and the responses were noted verbatim by a notes-taker. The result of each FGD was transcribed in English on the same day. Thematic analysis was done to interpret the data.

RESULTS

By interviewing the staff of the observation home, it was estimated that the prevalence of any drug use among the boys before coming to the observation home was between 60-70%. They were confident that no drugs could be procured or used inside the observation home.

Five FGDs were then conducted with 34 children. The average age of children was 15.4 (13-17) years. Ten children (29.4%) were illiterate. The mean years of schooling was 4.3 years. The duration of stay in the observation home ranged from 9 days to 18 months. (Table 1)

Drug use

When asked about the types of drugs used by their peer group, the boys replied that a large number of drugs were used by adolescents. Substances commonly used

TABLE 1. Distribution of Participants in Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Variable	FGD 1	FGD 2	FGD 3	FGD 4	FGD 5
Number of participants	6	8	7	7	6
Average age (in years)	14.5	16.4	16.1	15.3	14.7
Mean education (in years)	3.8	3.3	9.0	2.6	2.3

included smokeless tobacco products like gutka, khaini and kuber; and smoked ones like bidi and cigarette. Cannabis preparations like bhang, ganja and charas were mixed with tobacco and smoked through a cigarette, pipe or “chillum”. Volatile substances that were sniffed included “fluid” or “solution”, glue, spirit, petrol and shoe polish. Drugs like morphine, fortwin, avil and phenargan were injected. Other popular drugs included codeine syrup, tab ten (an anti-anxiety drug), cap proxivon (analgesic) and iodex (a local anti-inflammatory ointment). Heroin or smack was burnt on a piece of aluminum foil and its fumes were inhaled through a pipe. Some atypical products included dried tail of lizard, snake oil and sting of wasp.

According to the boys, tobacco products were often the first substances to be abused. They then paved way to other products like alcohol, ganja, charas, injections, sniffing and ultimately to hard drugs like smack. Boys had usually started with what they considered to be a “safe” drug. Then over a period of time, they started consuming a variety of substances. Physical and psychological dependence developed even before they became aware of it.

“If we were unable to obtain drugs, it used to lead to body ache, restlessness and increased appetite.”

Initiation into drugs

According to the boys, peer group plays a major role in initiation of drug use. All the boys who had been consuming drugs had a peer group, which had introduced them to drugs. According to the boys, “We used to take drugs because our friends did so; we started taking them after watching our friends; initially friends offered us and slowly it became a habit.” This indicated that there was initially a sense of curiosity which in turn led to a desire to experiment and ultimately it became a habit.

Media has also played an important role in initiation of drugs. According to one of the boys, advertisements of ‘Red and White cigarette’, ‘Bagpiper Whisky’, ‘*Rajnigandha Panmasala*’ (a type of chewing tobacco) and ‘*Chaini Khaini*’ (a type of chewing tobacco) attract adolescents. Young boys also try to emulate their favorite heroes on big screen. As one of them pointed out that if popular Indian film heroes like ‘Akshay Kumar’ and ‘Salman Khan’ could smoke why couldn’t they. “When I ride a bike with a cigarette dangling from my mouth, I look like a hero.” “Staggering on the streets

Drug Use Among Juveniles in Conflict with the Law

with a bottle of liquor in hand makes me look like a hero.”

Moreover, consuming drugs was considered to be a sign of maturity and the best way to impress a girl. In many instances, drug dealers had initiated children into taking drugs. Some of the boys also mentioned that drugs were a means of escaping an emotional stress or anxiety due to the death of a family member or loss of a girlfriend.

Drug availability

Despite legal restrictions on sale of tobacco to children, these products continued to be widely available to this age group. Substance like glue and “solution” could reportedly be procured from a bookshop; medicines could be purchased from a drug store either over the counter or by faking a medical prescription. Substances like ganja, charas and smack were reported to be sold in slums scattered all over Delhi. Some were even available at the local “*pan*” shop, tea stalls, or with hawkers standing outside schools. In order to purchase drugs, boys indulged in shoplifting, gambling, pick-pocketing, burglaries and even murders. Thus, drug use led to other criminal activities. There were instances where one child had to sell one of his kidneys and one had turned into a professional blood donor. They reported that all drugs were strictly prohibited inside the observation home and no one was consuming drugs while in the observation home.

Perception about effects of drug use

Children were aware that consuming drugs is against the law. Therefore, drugs like smack were consumed at deserted places like old monuments, parks; in school toilets and at railway stations. These drugs were usually consumed in the company of friends.

Before coming to the observation home, most of the boys perceived drugs to be source of enjoyment. According to one of them, “We used to like it earlier, we used to roam around with friends, forget all our tensions, never go to school, ultimately all of us have to die one day”

Children were aware that society, at large disparages on those who consume drugs. They were abused both verbally and physically by family members, neighbors and relatives. “People called us druggies, they did not let us play with their children, they didn’t even call us to any party.”

The boys were also aware that drugs are harmful. Boys correlated substance use with weakness, mouth cancers, kidney stones, lung disorders and early death. They also linked drug use with thefts, violent behavior and parental disapproval thereby straining their relations with family members, relatives and neighbors. Most of the children attributed their indulgence in

criminal activities and ultimately their detention to their use of drugs.

The boys admitted that their family members, neighbors and some friends had tried their best to persuade them to quit drugs. But, they felt that. “The habit of drug use goes only after death.”

Almost all the boys felt that it was difficult to leave drugs and once they were back at their homes and with the same peer group, they would start all over again.

DISCUSSION

The study examines a number of influences that play a role in initiation and maintenance of drug use as well as its relation with deviant behavior. The most important influences in initiating drug use appear to be the peer group and media. Many studies from India and other parts of the world have explored peer influence and have found a strong peer effect.^{6, 7, 8, 9} According to the study, media was found to influence the behavior of adolescents since it was difficult to escape from the images of movie stars drinking, smoking and consuming drugs. Media thus played a powerful influence in creating expectations about substance use. This negative influence of the media on the adolescents has been documented in several other studies also.^{10, 11}

The present study also points that one of the factors leading to initiation might be the limited ability to cope with stressful situations in life like the death of a family member or loss of a girl friend. At the same time, there appeared to be little support from the parents and other family members. All this led to an inability to deal with stressful situations of life. Several other studies have also pointed that adolescence is a period that is characterized by limited coping abilities which might increase their vulnerability to drug use.¹² Thus, there is no single influence but a set of variables that determine the initiation of drug use among adolescents.

The results of the present study showing progression of drug use in youth from non-use to tobacco and alcohol use, to marijuana and ultimately to other drugs is supported by a number of other cross-sectional and longitudinal studies.¹³⁻¹⁶

The present study shows that substances used and abused are widely available even to adolescents. This shows that despite the existence of several legislations,¹⁷ like “The Cigarettes and other Tobacco Products Act, 2003”, “Delhi Anti-smoking and Non-smoker’s Health Protection Act, 1996”, “The Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985”, government has been unable to stop the widespread availability of drugs to youth. This calls for greater co-operation from all stakeholders so that there can be a more effective enforcement of the legislation.

C. Malhotra *et al*

The results from the study suggest that drug use leads to other criminal activities. Several other studies have also linked drug use with such deviant behavior.^{5,18} Thus drug use has an immense social impact also.

CONCLUSION

Since peer influence was found to be an important factor influencing initiation of drug use, it is imperative that peer group should be targeted in anti-drug use campaign. Moreover, media should also take the responsibility and lead the way in propagating anti-tobacco and anti-drug use messages. It is also important that steps be taken to provide facilities for counseling the youth at all levels of health care system. Those taking tobacco products should be counseled and treated before they venture onto other drugs and those taking drugs should be referred to drug de-addiction centers before they indulge in criminal activities.

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