

CERTAIN BEHAVIORS IN ATTENTION DEFICIT DISORDER CHILDREN MAY RESULT IN EARLY DRUG USE

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In children with certain external behavior problems, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) increases the risk of early drug use, according to a report in the Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (November, 1999). Experts say the findings have important implications for prevention and early intervention.

In this study, researchers assessed over 700 children at ages 6 and 11 for psychiatric disorders and behavior problems. Data were collected using objective testing as well as reports from mothers and teachers. Additionally, reports from children were used to assess use of tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, or inhalants by themselves and their peers. The data showed that 19% of all the children had used drugs by age 11. Most had used tobacco and alcohol; a small number had used both.

In regard to ADHD, these researchers found a definite correlation between the disorder and externalizing behavior problems including aggressiveness and other disruptive behaviors. Regardless of ADHD status, externalizing problems have been consistently associated with early drug use. In children with ADHD, drug use increased significantly with increases in externalizing behavior problems. The highest risk for early drug use was found in ADHD children with moderate levels of externalizing problems. In addition, children with ADHD had a twofold increase in early drug use when parental monitoring was minimal and a sixfold increase when peer drug use was heavy. The researchers found no evidence that the medications used to treat ADHD increased the risk of early drug use.

Professionals need to target kids with behavior problems both with and without ADHD. These children are at high risk for early drug use, and interventions should begin in elementary school. It is also important for parents to monitor where their kids are and who they are with. Most professionals stress the importance of the parent-child relationship in this regard. We need to focus on strengthening the parent-child relationship rather than controlling children's lives because kids use this relationship as an internal reference. When peer behavior strays too far from this point of reference, kids often make appropriate adjustments."

From an early age, kids with ADHD need to be educated so they can learn how to manage their impulsivity. When this occurs then they are more able to resist the influence of peers. But drug therapy alone cannot accomplish this. Experts agree that behavioral therapy for an ADHD family is an important supplement to ADHD drug therapy.