

# **Role of School leadership in combating substance abuse among children**



**Dr Unnikrishnan R Nair**

Psychiatrist

Kerala Health Services Department

## INTRODUCTION

Globally there is an increase in the use of drugs especially illicit drugs among youths. As per the World Drug Report 2022, young people continue to use more drugs than adults and have higher levels of use than in the past generations. Substance use is among the leading cause for disease, disability, and death. It has an adverse impact on the physical, mental, and social wellbeing of the person resulting in marital disharmony, financial, and occupational dysfunction. The most alarming trend is people are beginning to use drugs increasingly at younger ages over the last few decades. "The mean age of onset of alcohol use and alcohol use disorder has reduced from 24 years to 17 years and 46 to 21 years respectively from prebirth 1950 birth cohort to the post 1985 birth cohort". Early age of initiation is associated with increased risk of dependence and other complications. Strong family history, poor psychosocial environment, unhealthy peer relationships and poor life skills, undetected and untreated mental health issues such as ADHD, Conduct disorder, Curiosity and experimentation in addition to the lack of cognitive maturation in adolescence, myths propagated by media, art forms, cultural beliefs, easy availability are some of the factors leading to Early age of initiation and dependence. Only less than 15% of people with substance use disorder get adequate treatment. There is a long delay in initiating treatment and by then the support system is poor hindering the rehabilitation. Stigma and lack of awareness are the two main reasons for this huge treatment gap.

Substance use disorder is still considered as a moral issue and not as a disorder with biological, psychological, and social basis. Thus we need to develop drug prevention systems that reach children as early as possible in their development and focus on building resilience, reach out to and involve adolescents, disseminating prevention messages in the society through various platforms, promote prevention and treatment options for young people who use drugs and those with drug use disorders that are backed by evidence, including mental health services, screening, brief interventions and health services referral rehabilitation services and family intervention.

In Kerala, different departments have taken initiatives in this area and have developed separate projects but unfortunately, they lack effective coordination and hence

are far away from the desired outcome. The ongoing “Lahari Vimuktha” campaign in the State of Kerala aims to curb this drawback through a system in which, committees are to be formed at school level, ward level, panchayath level, district level and state level involving all the stake holders and effective integration of all the services offered by various departments. School leadership can play a pivotal role in coordinating and integrating the services that suits the child in the best way taking into account the social, political, and cultural environment.

## Role of School leadership in combating substance abuse among children

### Learning Objectives

1. Understand the various factors that lead to early age of initiation and dependence and about the preventive, promotive and treatment measures that can be taken to reduce the risk.
2. Understand the scope of contribution from various departments and parts of the community in the journey against substance abuse
3. Understand the role of School leadership in combating substance abuse among children by coordination and integrating the services that suit the child in the best way.

## An insight to the menace of addiction

Psychoactive substances are those, when administered, produce euphoria by activating the dopamine mediated reward circuit in our brain and thereby producing a desire to use it again and again, finally leading to dependence.

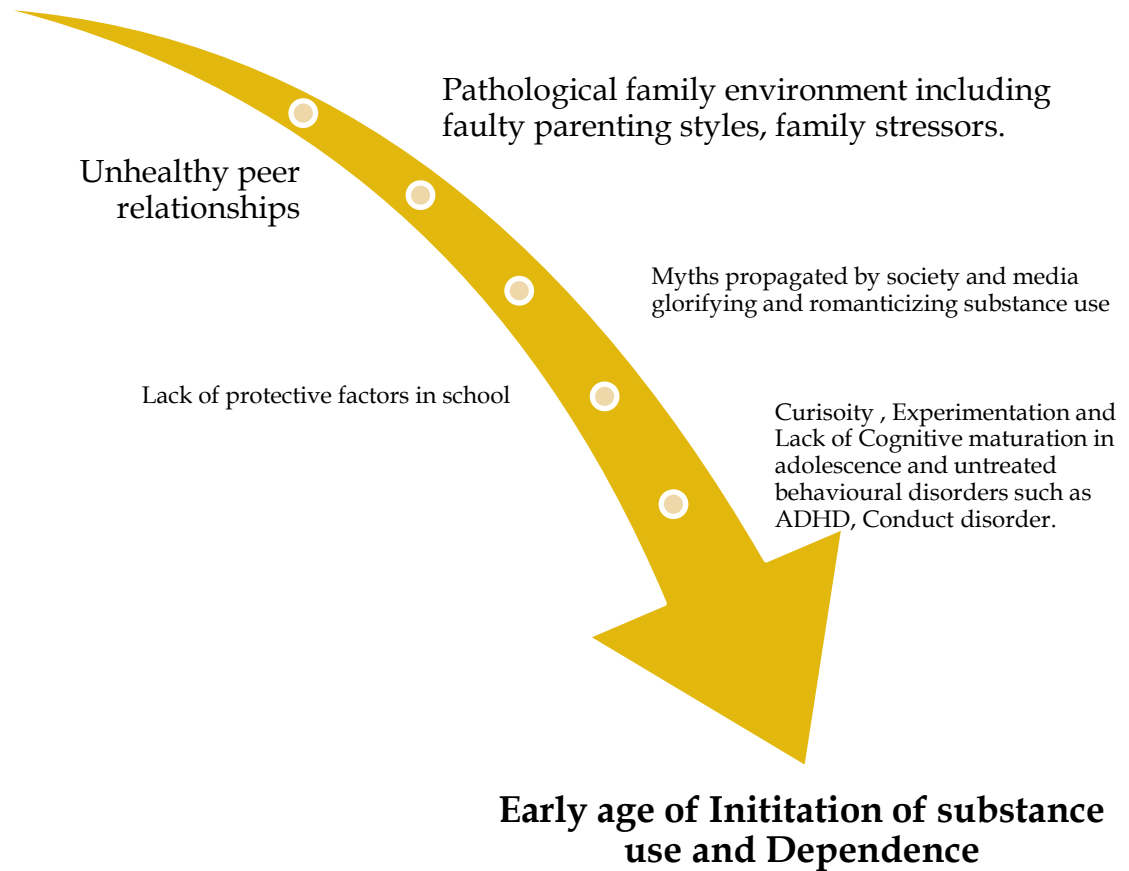
### Way to addiction



# Factors leading to Early age of Initiation and Dependence

## Biological vulnerability

A child born in a family with multiple relatives with substance use disorder carries a 3-4-fold increased risk for dependence



## **Intervention to combat substance use among children**

An adolescent brain is cognitively immature, i.e., the brain areas that control decision making, judgment and self-control are still developing. Hence, they are prone to risk taking behavior including substance use. Thus, exposure of the young brains reward circuit to psychoactive substance leads to increased risk of dependence. Biological vulnerability (positive family history of substance use disorders), pathological family environment, unhealthy peer relations, lack of protective factors in school, lack of age-appropriate life skills like poor assertive skills (ability to say “NO”), myths propagated by media and society glorifying and romanticizing substance use in addition to the curiosity and experimentation in adolescence further increase the risk of dependence.

**Intervention should aim at preventing emergence of risk factors in general, modifying risk factors to prevent onset of illness in ‘at risk’ and ensure early identification, treatment, and rehabilitation of those with substance use disorders.**

- Awareness on the psychoactive substance and its ill effects, at various levels (individual, school, community) thereby tackling the myths promoting substance use.
- Imparting age-appropriate life skills in children to deal with the challenges in life.
- Activities promoting healthier ways to stimulate reward circuit – sports, arts, social service.
- Peer support programs: Healthy peer relationships are an integral part of the normal development of a child.
- Parent training programs: Age-appropriate healthy parenting styles and supportive family environment with parents and relatives being good role models can reduce the risk of substance use among children.
- Teachers training programs: Identify and nourish protective factors in each adolescent, early identification of risk factors of substance use, its management and referral when indicated.
- Awareness and strong enforcement of laws and regulations in relation to substance use.

- Ensuring Treatment for adolescence with behavioral issues and substance use disorder, Rehabilitation, and reintegration back into the society

## Contribution from various departments and community.

- **Thalir**, School mental health program under **District Mental Health program** conduct **Parent and Teachers training program** with focus on healthy parenting, conduct **awareness programs** on common mental health issues in children, risk factors, early signs of substance use and dependence and ensure **treatment through community mental health clinics. Tele - Manas, 24-hour mental health helpline (14416) and District Mental health helpline** services cater online services.

### • Education Department

- “**ULLASAPARAVAKAL**” an activity-based Life skills education module prepared by a group of experts in health and education published by SCERT Thiruvananthapuram <https://scert.kerala.gov.in/ullasaparavakal/>. For the first time in India, separate 20 hours of activity-based life skills training module for each standard from 1 to 12 have been prepared. It was tried out on a trial basis in 100 schools in Kerala with promising feedback.
- Head Teachers Training programs - **SIEMAT**

- **NSS** <http://nsskerala.org/>,

**NCC** <http://keralancc.org/>,

**SPC** <https://studentpolicecadet.org/>,

**Scouts and Guid e** <https://ksbsg.kerala.gov.in/>,

programs also aims at empowering children with various skills to become good citizens.

- **‘Yodhavu’** is a scheme conceptualized by **Kerala Police** to curb the supply, use, and spread of drugs. With the help of the departments of education, health, excise, social justice, and local self-government, the scheme aims at preventing drug abuse among school, college, and university students. where one teacher from each school/college will be selected and they will work in tandem with the Principal of School/College, Janamaithri Police, Students and Parents with a view to launch awareness campaign against drug abuse ..

- **Initiatives of Vimukthi mission by Kerala Excise Department.**

- **Unarvu** – In a major initiative to wean school children away from the growing scourge of alcohol, narcotics and substance abuse, Vimukthi Mission of the Excise Department in Kerala launched a project to channelise the energies of students into creative pursuits of arts and sports, besides helping them improve their academic performance. The project, ‘Unarvu’, is being carried out by the Vimukthi Mission, in association with Parents and Teachers’ Association of the concerned schools, representatives of civic bodies and resident’s associations besides traders and businesspeople of the locality. ‘Unarvu’, which means ‘Awakening’, seeks to dissuade children from using drugs, instil confidence and train them in creative pursuits, turn their minds from pernicious habits in a bid to spot and nourish their talents in arts and sports, thus saving their future from being wrecked. Excise officials make themselves available in these schools even during intervals in order to ensure that students do not come in contact with drug mafia and fall into their trap. The officials will arrange the facility for counselling children suspected to be using drugs. The interventions by the initiative will definitely inculcate discipline among the students



- **'Balyam Amulyam'** targeting younger children and through them instilling the parents a proper awareness regarding the issue of drugs and to impart necessary parenting skills to deal with these issues.
  - **'Nervazhi'** to facilitate teachers to effectively intervene in drug-related issues which they come across in their day-to-day work
  - Peer support programs are being implemented by various departments. **Sraddha** in hostels, **Nerkoottam** in campuses by Vimukthi.
  - **Model community program in Rajaji nagar**, Thiruvananthapuram.
- Implementation of NDPS Act by Excise, Police and Narcotic control bureau  
Data bank of drug peddlers
  - **'Kaval' by Kerala Social Justice Department** - Kaval is a project aimed at the integration of children in conflict with the law into the mainstream of the society. The project was started in 2016 for "Psychosocial Care and Support to Children in Conflict with Law" project initiated by Department of Women and Child Development, Kerala under the technical support of National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro sciences (NIMHANS), Bangalore. Under the project, the individual care plan is be given to each child who is in conflict with the law. It provides social as well as psychological support and motivation to the children. The volunteers will provide any legal support also if required.  
<https://vosard.org/kaval-project/>
  - **Department of Women and Child - Our Responsibility to Children ( ORC)**  
ORC is an innovative initiative of Integrated Child protection Scheme (ICPS), Kerala, under the Department of Women and Child Development. ORC identifies and scientifically addresses deviancies and other vulnerabilities of children and integrates them to the social mainstream through enhancing life

skills, nurturing strengths, addressing risks, and promoting mentoring and good parenting.

- <http://www.orcindia.org/>

- **LSGD – Public vigilance committees**

- **Parent teacher association/ School management committee**

- Celebrities/NGO/Student organizations

## **Role of School leadership in combating substance abuse among children**

- School is the second home of the child. It has a critical role in the overall development of the child. The principal and teachers should be able to identify the unique qualities in every child and nourish them and at the same time identify 'at risk' and ensure early intervention.
- School leadership has an important role in combating substance abuse among children. Many programs are launched by various departments, but they lack effective coordination leading to lack of desired results. School leadership can lead from the forefront and coordinate the activities of all the stakeholders and can hence make our campaign against substance abuse a grand success.

### **SCHOOL LEADERSHIP MUST DO**

1. Ensure Public Vigilance Committee/ Jana Jagratha Committee is formed in the LSGD and motivate the members, which includes all the stake holders to actively participate in meetings and thus strengthen community participation against substance abuse.
2. Ensure Vimukthi clubs/ Mental health clubs are formed in school and there are routine activities such as

- Celebration of international days such as International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking, World Mental Health Day, etc,
  - Seminars, Poster exhibition, Painting competitions, Flash mobs aimed at tackling myths promoting substance use.
  - Awareness classes by Professionals from Health, Excise And Police Department.
  - Palliative care activities will help demonstrate the ill effects of substance.
  - Life stories by those affected, sessions by celebrities.
3. Take measures to implement “ULLASAPARAVAKAL” an activity-based Life skills education module in the school which will again equip children to combat substance abuse.
  4. Ensure participation of all children in extracurricular activities, especially ‘at risk ‘children, as they are healthier ways to stimulate reward circuits.
  5. Implement peer support programs with the help of various departments.
  6. Parent training programs should be organized with the help of PTA and compulsory participation of parents needs to be ensured. Support of District Mental Health Program can be sought.
  7. Teachers training programs on Identification and nourishment of protective factors in each adolescent and early identification of risk factors of substance use, its management and referral when indicated should be arranged on a regular basis.
  8. Implementation of NDPS act - ‘ Yodhavu ‘ needs to be selected. Helpline number to be widely shared. Inspections/Mock drills can be done with the help of officials.

9. Liaison with District Mental Health Program/Health Services department to refer children in need of intervention.

## Conclusion

Substance use has an adverse impact on the physical, mental, and social wellbeing of the person resulting in marital disharmony, financial, and occupational dysfunction. The most alarming trend is people are beginning to use drugs at increasingly younger ages over the last few decades. Thus we need to develop drug prevention systems that reach children as early as possible in their development. In Kerala, different departments have taken initiatives in this area and have developed separate projects but unfortunately, they lack effective coordination and hence are far away from the desired outcome. School leadership can play a pivotal role in coordinating and integrating the services that suits the child in the best way taking into account the social, political, and cultural environment.

## References

1. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/data-and-analysis/world-drug-report-2022.html>
2. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4980898/>
3. [https://prd.kerala.gov.in/sites/default/files/inline-files/Kerala%20Calling%20September%202022%20LS-5\\_0.pdf](https://prd.kerala.gov.in/sites/default/files/inline-files/Kerala%20Calling%20September%202022%20LS-5_0.pdf)