



## Key Drivers of Adolescent Vulnerabilities Towards Alcohol and Drug Abuse<sup>1</sup>

*PAN:Children literature reviews provide a short digest of evidence related to a specific child rights issue and this discussion of the relevant literature presents a useful summary of current debates.*

### Introduction

The high levels of alcohol and drug abuse in South Africa are well documented and these levels of abuse are some of the highest in the world. The country is known to consume over 5 billion litres of alcohol annually (Seggie, 2012). Adolescents in South Africa also have high levels of alcohol and drug abuse and this has increased sexual risk behaviour and HIV rates amongst the youth in the country. This literature note focuses on the key factors that influence adolescents towards alcohol and drug abuse.

### Peer Pressure

One of the crucial factors that influence substance abuse amongst adolescence is peer pressure. One of the toughest periods of growth for any human is the teenage period (Panday et al, 2005). With the changing of the body and the emotions that occur with it, trying not to show any difference is critical for adolescence. Experimenting with alcohol and drugs occurs during this period and adolescents are known to try substances such as cannabis, methamphetamine, alcohol and smoking. Research done in the Western Cape with secondary students found that 22.1% of learners use drugs. When asked what were drugs were consumed, 22.6% said that they used drugs at a friend's house and were experimenting with friends (UNISA Bureau Market Research, 2012). In Gauteng 26.7% of learners use drugs and 27.3% said that they used the drugs at home and on-or-outside school premises (15.7%) (UNISA Bureau Market Research, 2012).

Another key influence on adolescents is what is called social modelling. This means that an individual will imitate behaviour around them. In terms of substance abuse and drugs, adolescents are known to model the behaviours which their parents exhibit, such as drinking and alcohol use (Panday et al,

<sup>1</sup> This literature review has been developed for PAN:Children by Zuziwe Khuzwayo, junior researcher in the Research Impact and Assessment unit at the HSRC.

2005). Teenagers who do not have parents who are actively involved in their lives usually act out in a rebellious and deviant manner and this is predominantly using drugs and alcohol (Brook et al, 2006). Another factor which influences adolescents is stress. In Gauteng, 11.5% of learners used drugs during exam time and most of them are in grade 11 (UNISA Bureau Market Research, 2012). Grade 11 is the most stressful period in secondary education as it is leading towards Matric<sup>2</sup> and learners may want to release the stress of Grade 11 and Matric.

### **Self-esteem and Depression**

As mentioned earlier, adolescents are going through a difficult period at this stage and the self-esteem is tested. Rejection in conventional social groupings and self-rejection can lead to depression in individuals and irresponsible or delinquent behaviour (Wild et al, 2004). Feeling tired, hopeless, worrying about the future and anxiety contribute to adolescents being vulnerable to the use of illegal substances and alcohol. Alcohol and drugs are used as a way to escape the depressive feelings that adolescents experience. This allows adolescents to feel confident and not feel depressed.

### **Socio-economic factors**

South Africa is a country which still has enormous income and social inequality and this has an impact on behaviours amongst youth groups. Poverty is still rampant in the country and this exposes youth living in poverty to risky behaviour (Plüddemann et al, 2012). The lack of proper education and knowledge on drugs and alcohol, and the high exposure to these substances makes adolescents vulnerable who live in poor communities (Plüddemann et al, 2012). The access to these substances is more available in these communities as gang activities which operate with illegal drugs are more prevalent in these areas. Research done in the Western Cape found that only 23.5% of learners were aware of the educational programmes which were directed at drug and alcohol prevention (UNISA Bureau Market Research, 2012 (ii)). Tobacco smoking, alcohol and cannabis are the highest forms of drugs used by adolescents in poor communities.

Another critical influence towards adolescents using drugs is the media. Alcohol is portrayed in the media as fun and exciting substance to use that does not have fatal consequences (Seggie, 2012). There have been many campaigns which have requested for the reduction of alcohol advertisements in print or on the television but this has not occurred as alcohol brands sponsor concerts, and national sports teams (National Cricket Team and National Soccer Team). The influence of the media on the youth is critical and if reducing alcohol abuse is fundamental then the role of the media needs to be looked at.

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<sup>2</sup> This is the final academic year in the South African high school structure.

### **Impact of Alcohol and Drug Use**

One of the biggest impacts of alcohol and drug abuse is that it leads to risky sexual behaviour. When individuals are using alcohol, they are prone to unprotected sex (Shuper et al, 2010). Research done in South Africa has found that males are more likely to consume alcohol than females in sexual situations. Alcohol use before sex leads to uninhibited sexual behaviour and an increase in participating in casual sex (Woolf-King & Maisto, 2011). Research done in Cape Town high schools found that the use of methamphetamine amongst students increased their sexual behaviour (Plüddemann et al, 2012). Females in South Africa in the age group of 15-19 have a 5.6% prevalence of HIV as compared to males in the same age group who have 0.7% (South African National HIV Prevalence, Incidence and Behaviour Survey, 2012). A reason for this is alcohol consumption before sex which leads to risky sexual behaviour and younger females dating older males and do not have economic empowerment to ask for protection during sex.

### **Proposed solutions and Conclusion**

One of the key ways of reducing alcohol and substance abuse amongst adolescent is educational programmes (UNISA Bureau Market Research, 2012). This education must not only be in the schools, but must come from the home. Substance abuse is not static and is influenced by the local communities and they must be actively involved in addressing alcohol and substance abuse in the community for both adults and adolescents. This issue will not be addressed properly and effectively if all spheres of society are not involved.

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