




Supporting Adolescents Through Addiction

A guide for Parents and Caregivers

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Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Navigating Adolescence:How Addiction Impacts Our Youth	4
3. Why Adolescents Are Vulnerable to Addiction	6
4. Types of Addictions in Adolescents	8
5. Signs of Addiction	9
6. Tips for Parents and Caregivers	10
7. Types of Professional Help	12
8. Resources and Support Services	13
9. Self-Care for Parents and Caregivers	14
10. Common Concerns and Answers	15

Introduction

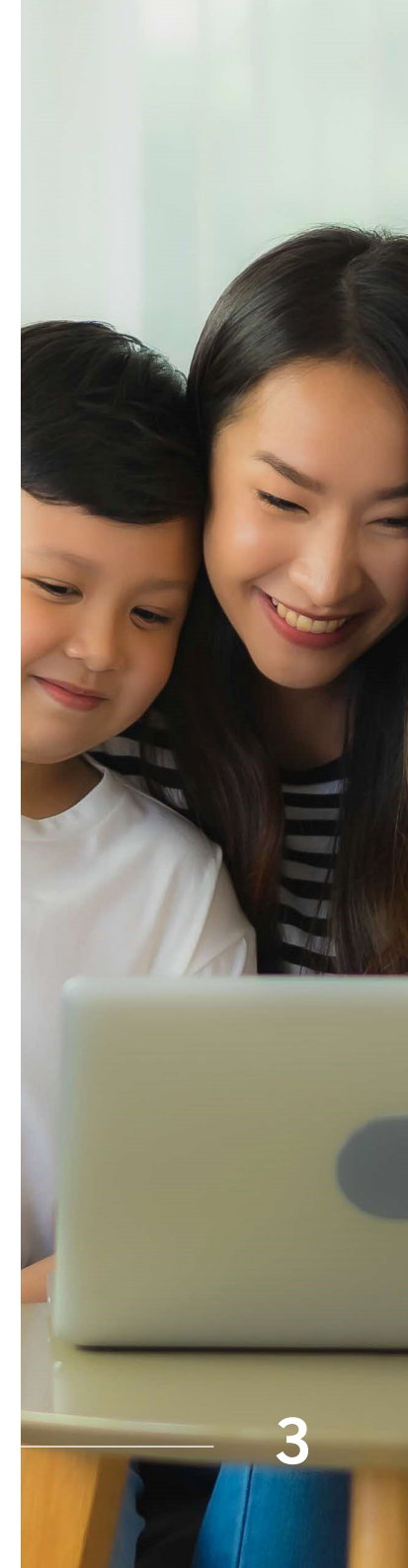
As a parent or caregiver, navigating the challenges of adolescence can be difficult, especially when it comes to issues like addiction. Adolescents are at a stage in life where they experiment, take risks, and deal with peer pressure, all while their brains are still developing. Unfortunately, this makes them more vulnerable to addictive behaviours, whether it's substance abuse, or excessive gaming.

This booklet is designed to provide you with essential information about adolescent addiction, including the warning signs to look out for, and practical advice on how to support your child through recovery. We understand that facing addiction with a loved one can feel overwhelming, but you are not alone. There are resources, treatment options, and support systems available to help both your child and your family through this difficult time.

In this guide, you'll find:

- A clear understanding of what addiction is and why adolescents are particularly at risk.
- Tools to recognise the signs of addiction and when to seek professional help.
- Guidance on how to support your child through recovery, while also taking care of yourself.
- Resources for professional support and further reading to empower you on this journey.

Remember, the first step toward helping your child is understanding the problem and knowing that recovery is possible with the right support. We hope this booklet serves as a valuable resource for you as you take that first step toward helping your child live a healthy, addiction-free life.



Navigating Adolescence: How Addiction Impacts Our Youth



The teenage years can pose some of the most challenging times for families. Teenagers going through puberty often feel misunderstood by their parents as they try to establish independence and a sense of identity. Parents, however, may be frustrated that their teen no longer responds to parental authority and discipline methods that were effective when they were younger.

Imagine navigating adolescence through the additional lens of addiction. In many cases, many of our children may begin these behaviours as a form of experimentation - whether due to peer pressure, stress, or the desire to fit in - but they can quickly escalate into something more serious.

Addiction among adolescents is a pressing concern with significant implications for their physical, mental, and social well-being. Adolescence is a critical period of brain development, and substance abuse during this time can disrupt neural pathways and increase vulnerability to addiction. Moreover, addiction among teens is associated with

- Higher risk of academic underachievement
- Impaired cognitive function
- Mental health disorders (e.g. depression and anxiety)
- Strained family relationships
- Legal issues

As parents and caregivers, it's essential to recognise the signs of addiction early. It is also important to understand that addiction is rarely a matter of simple willpower. Addressing addiction requires not only treating the behaviour itself but also understanding the emotional needs of your child.



I never planned for things to get out of control. At first, it felt like I was just having fun, trying new things, or escaping from stress. Whether it was spending hours gaming, drinking with friends, or trying something stronger, it didn't feel dangerous at the start. It felt like something I could handle, like a normal part of growing up. I thought I could stop whenever I wanted.

It wasn't just about the substances or the behaviour anymore; it was about trying to cope with feelings I didn't know how to deal with. Addiction made me feel stuck, like no one could understand what I was going through. I felt ashamed, confused, and like I was losing control over my life.

But here's the thing - I need help. I don't always know how to ask for it, and I'm afraid of being seen as weak or different. What I need is for you to see beyond the behaviour and understand that I'm struggling. I need someone to guide me without judgement, to help me find my way back before it gets too late.

But slowly, things began to change. What started as just an occasional thing became something I relied on, something I couldn't go without. I noticed myself pulling away from my family and friends, feeling angry or anxious if I couldn't get my fix. The worst part? I didn't really know how to ask for help because I was scared of being judged or misunderstood.

I wasn't trying to hurt anyone, especially not the people who care about me. I just didn't realise how quickly something that seemed fun could turn into something I couldn't control.



Why Adolescents Are Vulnerable to Addiction

Adolescents face unique biological, social, and psychological challenges that make them particularly vulnerable to developing addictive behaviours. Understanding these factors can help parents and caregivers recognise the risks and take early steps to prevent or address addiction.



Brain Development

The teenage brain is still developing, particularly in decision-making and impulse control. With a sensitive reward system and an undeveloped prefrontal cortex, adolescents are more likely to engage in risky behaviours or substance experimentation without fully considering the consequences.

Peer Pressure and Social Influences

During adolescence, social belonging is key, and peer pressure strongly influence behaviour. Teens may conform through substance use or risky activities like gaming, while social media amplifies these pressures, normalising unhealthy behaviours and unrealistic expectations.



Mental Health and Co-occurring Disorders

Many adolescents with addictive behaviours also face mental health challenges like anxiety, depression, or trauma. These issues can lead to substance abuse or compulsive activities for relief. If left untreated, they can worsen addiction, requiring comprehensive care that addresses both mental health and addiction.



Understanding these key factors allows parents to better support their children through adolescence and recognise the warning signs of addiction before it escalates. Early intervention, open communication, and professional help can make all the difference in preventing long-term harm.

Reasons for Adolescent Engagement in Addictive Behaviours:

Peer Pressure

- The desire for peer acceptance often drives teens to experiment with substances, even when they know it is illegal.
- Not playing certain games online can make them feel disconnected from their friends, lacking shared interests and feeling excluded from social groups.

Look Cool

- To look grown up, they may try drinking alcohol, smoking, and/or vape.
- The perception that drinking and smoking is “cool” often comes from media portrayals and, at times, from admired family members.
- In the world of gaming, high scores boost their social status and ranking among peers, enhancing their self-esteem as others seek their advice to improve their game.

Curiosity

- Some teens view smoking or alcohol use as key milestone of growing up and are eager to try it to experience how it feels.
- The National Council Against Drug Abuse’s Perception Survey revealed that Singaporean youths tend to have more liberal attitudes towards drugs, with many lacking a full understanding of the dangers of substances like cannabis. As a result, they may downplay the risks associated with casual experimentation.

Coping Skill

- Teens may turn to substance use, gambling, or excessive gaming as a way to cope with stress from school, peer pressure, or family issues. These behaviours provide an escape from reality and help them manage overwhelming emotions. However, over time, they can develop into addictive patterns, becoming problems in themselves.

Looking for Your Attention

- Some teens who feel neglected may explore behaviours like drinking, gambling, smoking as a way to seek attention. Lacking the words or courage to express their true feelings, they might resort to inappropriate actions in hopes of getting noticed.

Types of Addictions in Adolescents

Understanding the different types of addictions that can affect adolescents is crucial for recognising and addressing these issues early.



Adolescents may develop addictions to various substances, including:

- **Drugs:** This includes both illegal drugs (e.g., Cannabis, Ecstasy, Methamphetamine) and misused prescription drugs (e.g., Codeine).
- **Alcohol:** Underage drinking can lead to dependence and long-term health consequences.
- **Smoking and Vaping:** Nicotine addiction through smoking and vaping is increasingly common among adolescents.



This involves compulsive engagement in activities:

- **Gaming:** Excessive gaming can interfere with school, social life, and overall well-being.
- **Gambling:** May engage in risky betting and online gambling, which can spiral into a serious addiction.

By understanding these types of addictions, parents and caregivers can better support their adolescents and seek appropriate help early, resulting in more effective interventions and improved long-term recovery outcomes.

Signs of Addiction

Addiction often manifests subtly. Identifying and attuning to these signs can be a helpful first step to link your child up with timely intervention and support.

Changes in Behaviour

- **Social Withdrawal:** Pulling away from classmates, friends and social activities they once enjoyed
- **Academic Decline:** Significant drop in academic performance or loss of interest in school activities, like CCA or playing truant
- **Behavioural Changes:** Locking doors, secretive use of phone, lying, breaking curfew, avoiding eye contact and problems with cash flow



Physical Signs of Addiction

- **Changes in Appearance:** Noticeable changes such as weight loss or gain, unkempt appearance, poor hygiene, excessive sweating, being hyperactive
- **Bloodshot Eyes or Dilated Pupils:** Frequent red or glazed eyes, or noticeable changes in pupil size



Emotional and Psychological Symptoms

- **Mood Swings:** Unexplained mood swings, irritability or anger outbursts
- **Increased Sensitivity:** Overreacting to criticism or simple conversation.



Note: These signs can vary depending on the unique circumstances of the youth, but being aware of these general indicators can help you evaluate if your child requires professional support and intervention.

Tips for Parents and Caregivers

The opposite of addiction is not sobriety; the opposite of addiction is connection.

Minimising the risk of both substance and behavioural addictions requires a holistic approach to parenting and family dynamics. Here are some guidelines to create a supportive environment and help your child navigate the challenges of adolescence more effectively.

Parenting Tweens (Ages 9-12)

A transitional phase where teens seek independence, focus on fitting in, and spend more time on social media or gaming. They also becoming aware of topics like sex, relationships, vaping, smoking, drugs and alcohol through peers and the internet.

- **Connect with your child:** Get to know their friends and interests. Engage in family activities together and let them know you are always available for them.
- **Encourage open conversations:** Have age-appropriate conversations about smoking, sex, drugs and alcohol and other risky behaviours early, so they feel comfortable discussing these topics as they grow.
- **Set realistic, age-appropriate boundaries:** Establish boundaries and rules with them prior to giving them their first device.
- **Guide them in decision making:** Teach them how to evaluate the pros and cons as part of effective decision making. While they are gunning for independence, many tweens still need a lot of guidance at this stage.
- **Monitor technology use:** It is important to monitor your tween's use of technology while also teaching them internet safety. Have a conversation with them about inappropriate content and what to do if they encounter or witness cyberbullying.



Parenting Teens (Ages 13-20)

- **Respond, not react:** Hold back your parental instinct to protect your teen or give advice when problem arises. Allow space for independence and safety by practising active listening and validating their experiences. Sometimes, a good way to gauge their need in this conversation, is to ask "Do you need a solution or do you need a space to vent?"
- **Praise:** When you see your teen doing something positive, like keeping to the time limit of gaming, acknowledge their efforts. Be specific on their behaviour, effort or character that you want to compliment. This encourages your teen to know what they are doing well and boosts self esteem and promotes parent-child connection.
- **Encourage goal setting and responsibility:** Support your teenager in setting goals and taking responsibility for their actions. This helps to build self-esteem and a sense of purpose, thereby reducing the likelihood of turning to addictive behaviours to fill a void.
- **Acknowledge your teen's positive experiences:** Highlight your teen's strengths and contributions to the positive experiences.
- **Be the role model:** Your teenager's expectation on alcohol and smoking will often stem from your beliefs and action at home. The same applies for the use of electronic devices. Model responsible behaviour by putting away devices during meals, family outings and be mindful of your alcohol intake and smoking.

Types of Professional Help

Parenting requires a willingness to recognise and accept when you need additional support. Don't hesitate to check in with a mental health professional when your child is showing troubling behaviours, such as intense mood swings, or exhibiting excessive anger and aggression. Seeking professional intervention help can identify the problem and recommend the right level of care.

Types of Treatment Programmes in Singapore

- **Inpatient Treatment**
Offers a structured environment where adolescents live at the facility while receiving treatment. This is suitable for adolescents with severe addiction or co-occurring mental health disorders.
- **Counselling and Psychotherapy**
Outpatient programmes allow your child to receive treatment while still living at home and continuing with daily activities like school. These programmes typically involve regular visits to healthcare providers for therapy and support. This includes a psychiatric assessments and medications, which can only be prescribed by medical doctor or psychiatrist.

Individual, family and group counselling can be effective for treating the underlying causes of addiction, such as stress, trauma, or peer pressure. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and other forms of psychotherapy are commonly used to help adolescents develop healthy coping mechanism.

What to Expect in Recovery

Recovery is an ongoing process, that requires patience and persistence. Adolescents may experience setbacks or relapse, but with consistent support, they can regain control. Expect emotional fluctuations as they work through their treatment and transition to a healthier lifestyle.



Resources and Support Services

National Addictions Management Service | www.nams.sg

NAMS offers specialised addiction treatment programmes for adolescents and their families, providing inpatient, outpatient and counselling services. Their multi-disciplinary team of psychiatrists, counsellors, nurses and medical social workers who help address both substance and behavioural addictions.

Other Support Services

WE CARE Community Services | www.wecare.org.sg

Community drop-in centre for addiction treatment (drugs, alcohol, compulsive behaviours, etc).

TOUCHline Community Services | www.touch.org.sg

Emotional support and practical advice for ages 12–25 years. Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm. Call 1800 377 2252.

Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association (SANA) | www.sana.org.sg

Those who wish to speak to para-counsellors about any drug-related issue that you or someone close to you might be facing.

24-Hour Crisis Helplines

National Mindline 1771: 1771 or WhatsApp Message 6669 1771
Samaritans of Singapore (SOS): 1767

Preventive Drug Education Handbook for Parents

For more information, please scan here.



Self-Care for Parents and Caregivers

Supporting your child starts with taking care of yourself.

Taking Care of Yourself While Supporting a Child in Recovery

Supporting an adolescent through addiction recovery can be emotionally and physically draining. It's essential to prioritise your well-being to avoid burnout. Make time for self-care activities, such as exercise, meditation, or hobbies that bring you peace. Remember, you cannot pour from an empty cup - taking care of yourself allows you to better support your child.

Seeking Family Counselling for Parents and Caregivers

You're not alone in this journey. Even if your child is not ready to seek help, family counselling is available to provide support. These sessions offer a safe space to share experience, seek advice, and address the challenges you're facing. Professional guidance can help you build stronger relationships and navigate the path toward healing, ensuring you have the tools and support you need.

Managing Stress and Emotional Strain

Caring for a child with addiction can lead to high levels of stress. It is important to recognise your emotional limits and take steps to manage your stress. Techniques such as deep breathing, journaling, or speaking with a counsellor can be effective ways to process feelings of frustration, fear, or sadness. Be kind to yourself and seek help when needed.

For more information about our Family Matters service, scan the QR code.



Common Concerns and Answers

What should I do if my child refuses to seek help?

Approach the situation with patience and empathy. Avoid confrontation and instead focus on creating a supportive environment. Family counselling can help you navigate this process, even if your child isn't ready to seek help yet.

How long those recovery take?

Recovery is different for each individual, depending on the severity of the addiction and the motivation for treatment.

Myth: Addiction is just a phase that teens grow out of.

Fact: Addiction is a serious condition that often requires professional intervention. Dismissing it as a phase can delay necessary treatment.

Myth: Only bad kids or kids from troubled families get addicted.

Fact: Addiction can affect any adolescent, regardless of their background, personality, or upbringing.

Myth: If my child doesn't use drugs, they can't have an addiction.

Fact: Addictions aren't limited to substances. Adolescents can also develop behavioural addictions, such as excessive gaming, social media, or gambling.

Myth: Seeking professional help means I've failed as a parent.

Fact: Reaching out to help is a sign of strength and responsibility. It ensures that your child gets the support they need to recover.