

Research Article

Substance Abuse among Children: A Rising Problem in India

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ABSTRACT

Substance abuse among children is a cause of concern across the globe. India shares this problem in massive volume and focuses its future adverse consequences on health, growth, productivity, and well-being. The health risks inherent, with substance abuse, often are linked with other risk behaviors (like early sexual activity, violence, academic failure, school dropout, delinquency) among children. This renders children vulnerable and poses a greater burden in terms of health, performance, and economic cost to the family and the nation. The available literature provides evidence that developed nations have taken cognizance of this problem long ago, and are working towards educating, rehabilitating, protecting children and preventing this problem. India is still oblivious of the concurrent and future threats and consequences. In spite of the gravity of the problem, not many systematic empirical research studies have focused on why children are turning towards alcoholism and substance abuse, who are these children, what are the motivators, temptations, pulling or pushing forces, or compelling circumstances. What are the concurrent and future consequences and what measures can be taken to protect growing children from turning to such vices in India. This paper tries to focus on the epidemiology of substance abuse, its genetic correlates, psychosocial and socioeconomic factors associated towards alcohol and substance abuse among children. The paper also suggests some preventive measures and strategies control substance abuse among children.

Keywords: *Substance Abuse, Genetic and Environmental risk factors, family, psychosocial risk factors, Socioeconomic/Society, Adverse Effects, Preventive Strategies, Children, India.*

Although the crown of the world's most populous country has been on China's head for decades, India is all set to take the distinguished positions from 2030. The population growth, increasing at the rate of 1.2 percent, India is predicted to have more than 1.53 billion people by the end of 2030 (The Indian Express, 2016). According to the (UNDCP, 1997) report, India is one of the youngest countries, has the largest population of children constituting 28 per cent of the country's population. India with 356 million youths in the age range of 10-24

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Substance Abuse among Children: A Rising Problem in India

year, will have the world's largest youth population, despite having a lesser total population than China, who is second with 269 million young people (UNDCP, 1997).

Children are a valuable asset and pride, not only to their family but to the nation. Today's children are tomorrow's adults and builder of the nation. Substance abuse in children today is becoming a major problem in India (UNDCP, 1997). Today children are experimenting with drugs quite early in life (Qadri, Goel, Singh, Ahluwalia, Pathak, & Bashir 2013). World Health Organization estimated that globally, 25-90 percent of street children indulge in substance abuse (Kar, Debroy, Sharma, & Islam, 2014). Hundred million children live and work on the streets of the cities of the world: 40 million in Latin America, 25-30 million in Asia, and 10 million in Africa (Parker, 2002). India alone is the home for the world's largest population of street children, estimated to be 18 million (Gurumurthy, 2000). The National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights estimated report said that 40-70 percent of India's (18 million) homeless children were exposed to some form of substance abuse (Kailash, 2016). One in every five of India's drug addicts is a child (Kailash, 2016)

Kar, Debroy, Sharma, & Islam, (2014) reported that there are more than 5,00,000 (five lakh) street children in India who live and work in inhumane conditions and are at high risk of substance abuse, and this number could be a drastic underestimation. Even if least estimated, the 25-29 percent Street children in India alone may be estimated to be indulging in substance abuse (Kar, Debroy, Sarma, & Islam, 2014). Though, there has been a renewed concern at the national level about the high percentage of substance abuse among children in the past several years. Substance abuse has increased among children in sizeable proportions in many states of India e.g. Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Hyderabad, Andra Pradesh etc as per the report of (UNDCP, World Drug Report, 1999).

Substance abuse (drug abuse), refers to a pattern of harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances, including alcohol and illicit drugs ("Substance abuse", 2017). Earlier, substance abuse was considered to be a problem of street children, working children, and trafficked children, but, today it has become widespread among school going children who hail from different socioeconomic and educational status (Kailash, 2016). The alarming fact that the age of beginning to consume or having the first taste of drugs is declining sharply, and no amount and type of stringent measures of familial, social, and state level look sufficient to check supply and availability drug and substance to children. As per one of the study, at the age of five years, many children reported that they were consuming drug (Kailash, 2016). In India, around 5500 children start consuming tobacco products daily, and some as young as 10 years old (Saxena, Saxena, Kishore, & Kumar, 2010). There are many varieties of drugs and substance available Rao, (2010) found that the most common substance consumed was nicotine, as cigarettes or "bidis" and "gutkha" and inhalant/volatile substance used in the form of sniffing of adhesive glue, petrol, gasoline, thinner, and spirit. The comprehensive list includes alcohol, Liquor, cocaine, Marijuana, Bhang, Ganja, Hashish etc.

Substance Abuse among Children: A Rising Problem in India

In India, this epidemic prevalence of substance abuse in children has assumed alarming dimensions. It is changing cultures, increasing economic burden, encouraging poverty, ignorance, migration, and exploitation (child labor) which is further leading to initiation into substance abuse (Qadri, Goel, Singh, Ahluwalia, Pathak, & Bashir 2013). The picture is grim if we look at the world trade and statistics on the drugs consumption scenario. With a turnover of around \$500 billion, it is the *third largest* business in the world, next to petroleum and arms trade. About 190 million people all over the world consume one drug or the other (Asha, 2003). The magnitude of illegal trading and illicit trafficking is reflected by the statistics of 322 billion Dollars as per the World Medicine Report. The annual marketing of Afgan Opium is 61 billion Dollars. The world market for cocaine in Western Africa is around 85 million dollars. During the World Summit, in 2011, Ban Ki Moon, the General Secretary, UNO declared war against illicit drug trafficking to protect worlds' security. It has stressed to create the awareness in people about the deadly drug they destroy societies (Ramesh, 2017).

Adverse effects of substance abuse among children

Millions of substance abusers, all over the world, are leading miserable lives or struggling between life and death. India too is caught in this vicious circle of drug trading, paddling and abuse, and the numbers of substance abuse are increasing day by day among children. Research studies report that children, who have tried to consume tobacco, would have a high risk of becoming regular tobacco users, which would lead to an increased risk of developing communicable diseases (Ramavat, Gunjana, Kelkar, Patel, Saiyed, & Thakor, 2016). Addiction to drugs and substance among children, especially the vulnerable populations can directly lead to high-risk behaviors like gambling, drug peddling, pick pocketing, stealing, fighting, rape and self-harm are common among children (Rudatsikira, Siziya, Kazembe, & Muula, 2007). When intoxicated, these children are at a higher risk of depression and suicide (De, Mattoo, & Basu, 2003). The psychological symptoms caused by substance addiction include oscillating, arrogant mind, anxiety, reduced interest in daily life, mental confusion, and illusions. It attacks the brain and higher mental processes and makes decision-making capacity deficit (Ramesh2017).

Sometimes, children and adolescents indulge in or are forced into sex in exchange for drugs. Children substance abusers are very frequently prone to delinquent behavior and anti-social activities (De, Mattoo, & Basu, 2003). They are also at a higher risk of contracting blood-borne and sexually transmitted infections like HIV/AIDS and STD (sexually transmitted diseases), Hepatitis, especially when they share infected needles to inject substance and/ or are forced or lured to unprotected sexual acts under the influence of a substance abuse (De, Mattoo, & Basu, 2003). The physical ill effects of substance abuse children include physical strains and pressures, shivering, feeling pain and sleepy, the speed of respiration is reduced and heart rate gets accelerated. These children suffer from absenteeism, school dropouts, poor performance, aggressive behavior, bullying, fighting, suppressed anger, criticism, isolation, rejection, cheating, stealing, lying, truancy, low self-esteem, loneliness, guilt, feelings of helplessness, fears of abandonment, and chronic depression manipulating become their usual defensive behaviors in school and at home (Millar & Stermac, 2000). They are physically

Substance Abuse among Children: A Rising Problem in India

abused and blackmailed by the drug abusing parents, relatives and friends and drug traffickers. Unmonitored by the parents and school administration, they may drift away from the right path of growth and development and are dragged into the dark world of drug trafficking, trading, extremism, terrorism, anti-social and anti-national activities, knowing or unknowingly. They are lured and get caught by the people of anti-social, national, communal groups to be blackmailed and misused. The inability to share their concerns and problems out of fear of punishment from well-wishers as well as blackmailers, rejection, blame and guilt coupled with ignorance, they shun from seeking the social support (family, friends), legal support from administration, police, school authorities remain being unquestioned victims, drown in helplessness accept the fate and are caught in the cog mare of the very difficult complicated situation. If they hail from the family where one or both the parents indulge in antisocial or a social activity, they are slipping into a such cog mare becomes easy. The "Drug Abuse and Addiction", (2017) report discussed that the influence of the family, home environment, especially during childhood, is a very important factor. Parents or older family members who indulge in substance abuse, or who engage in criminal behavior, can increase children's risks of developing their substance abuse problem easily passes). Similar findings were reported by Millar & Stermac, (2000) that on family or parental substance abuse also has severe effects on children of substance abuse. It was reported that an alarming 66 percent of children raised by alcoholic parents were found physically abused or witnessed family violence and 26 per cent children of such families were sexually abused repeatedly. Physical or sexual abuse was reported to occur regularly in one-third of alcoholic homes.

The adverse effects of the substance abusing parents on their off springs start from the mother's womb. Pregnant women who consumed alcohol during their pregnancy may give birth to babies with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) (Heffner & Heffner, 2017). Fetal Alcohol Syndrome is one of the three top known causes of birth defects second one is Heart defects happen when a part of the heart fails to develop properly when a baby is in the womb and the third one is Gastrointestinal Tract Defects structural defects that can happen at any point along the gastrointestinal tract, which is made up of the esophagus, stomach, small and large intestines, rectum, and anus. The incomplete or abnormal development of any of these organs can cause blockages that can lead to swallowing difficulties, vomiting, and problems with bowel movements and that adverse effects of the substance abusing parents (Heffner & Heffner, 2017). A report of the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence reported that about 5000 babies are born each year with severe damage caused by Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and another 35000 babies are born with milder forms of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (Heffner & Heffner, 2017). Cocaine creates problems in the brain, genes and hereditary transfer.

Schools are the temples of knowledge and wisdom. During ancient times there were Gurukuls where disciples live and learned in close contact and supervision of his guru in a Vedic family environment. The guru helped in the all-round development and had a great influence on the scholar. Today, schools do not have power to closely monitor the life activities and events of his learner to keep a check against smoking, drinking, sex or poor eating patterns and other

Substance Abuse among Children: A Rising Problem in India

influencing agents like parents, relatives, peer, social and electronic multi-media (TV, cinema, mobile, internet etc.) overpowers his mind, time, decisions and faith. Modern time children are grossly influenced by western values of comfort, pleasure, leisure instead of observing the traditional principles of wise life. Studies report that children who follow school rules tend to perform better in the classroom setting and are less likely to leave school early (Bradshaw, O'Brennan & McNeely, 2008). Emphasizing the role of school in shaping the habits of children, a study stated that the risk of substance abuse was 1.26 times relatively higher among those children who had never been to school and 1.12 times more common in those children who hailed from joint families when compared to others (Kar, Debroy, Sarma, & Islam, 2014). With such evidence, should schools be blamed when children engage in healthy behavior that is less than desirable. They should be blamed, or at least held accountable, if children do not gain essential knowledge and skills regarding health, and cannot articulate a value position (Wilson, 1998).

Studying the school dropout and indulgence in risk behaviors, there seems a circular relationship of both being the cause as well as consequences. School dropout children are at higher risk of displaying social, emotional problems and engaging in the delinquent and criminal behavior which in turn results in the school absenteeism, drop out and poor performance in school (Prevatt & Kelly, 2003). Lochner & Moretti, (2004), also reaffirmed the observations that children who are involved in substance abuse are more likely to drop out of school. Conversely, children who continued their academic career had a lower risk of becoming current substance abuser than their peers who had dropped out from school (Esch et al., 2014). The possible mechanisms linking these behaviors may range from cognitive and neural, biological deficits (paralyzing effects on mind and body) leading to learning difficulties and low academic performance (Townsend, Flisher & King, 2007) along with a host of other variables, e.g. there is empirical evidence that shows that substance abuse children from single-parent households are more likely to drop out of school (Townsend, Flisher & King, 2007). Similarly, those children living with parents have a protective effect against substance abuse, while low parental education level was associated with substance abuse, thus emphasizing the importance of family and parental monitoring to reduce the likelihood of substance abuse (Park & Kim, 2015). Another report suggested that those children who began to substance abuse before the age of 16 were up to five times more likely to drop out of secondary school than their peers who did not substance abuse (Harford, Yi & Hilton, 2006). We still need to explore the problem from a different perspective to identify the possible mechanisms linking child substance abuse with school dropout that is unclear.

Peer Influence on Substance Abuse among Children

The Role of friends, peer and associated also need to be explored. Drug Abuse and Addiction", (2017), reported that friends and acquaintances can have an increasingly strong influence during childhood. Substance abuse peers can sway even those without risk, factors to try substance use for the first time. Academic failure or poor social skills can put a child at further risk for substance abuse. Studies report that children with early behavioral problems are at risk of developing academic problems and experiencing rejection from their pre social

Substance Abuse among Children: A Rising Problem in India

peers, probably leading to connections with deviant peers and in turn engage in other maladjusted acts such as truancy, substance use, or possibly violent behavior (Bradshaw, O Brennan & McNeely, 2008; Patterson, De Baryshe & Ramsey, 1989). A study of a sample of 1023 children, reported that parental monitoring would be able to strengthen resistance to peer pressure and therefore it can be expected to reduce substance abuse (Guillen, Roth, Alfaro & Fernandez, 2015).

Role of Genetics and Environment in Substance Abuse among Children

The problem of addiction not confined to the environmental exposure, poor monitoring, and circumstantial evidence or experimentation. The studies on addiction give evidence of genetic element to it too. Prescott, & Kendler, (1999) reported that the role of nuclear genes is responsible and asserted that addiction has a genetic component. This study was conducted on 9000 twins that revealed that early users of alcohol were carriers and that its association with alcoholism risk and it was mediated entirely by genetic factors (Prescott, & Kendler, 1999). Though, another study of twins reported that social contact and co-twin dependency (twins) have shown to moderate twin similarity, with reduced genetic effects and enhanced environmental influences among more co-dependent pairs (Rose, Kaprio, Williams, Viken, & Obremski, 1990). Likely, genetic influences on child substance abuse, especially in environments with lower parental monitoring becomes accentuated (Dick, Viken, Purcel, Kaprio, Pulkkinen & Rose, 2007). It is difficult to ascertain the relative importance and contribution of these factors, but along with the genetic predisposition poor coping skills also contribute to this problem. This has been confirmed by numerous studies. One study looked at 861 identical twin pairs and 653 fraternal (non-identical) twin pairs when one identical twin was addicted to alcohol, the other twin had a high probability of being addicted, but when one fraternal twin was addicted to alcohol, and the other twin did not necessarily have an addiction (Prescott & Kendler, 1999). Based on the differences between the identical and non-identical twins, the study attributed 50-60 percent of addiction to genetic factors (Prescott & Kendler, 1999).

Family influences on Substance Abusing Children

Parents and families have the greatest and lasting impact on children's learning and development. If a child is raised safely, securely he develops good habits and pursues a good and healthy lifestyle. If not, a child may get tempted or dragged in some or the other bad habits and indulge in substance abuse is one of them. Rossow, (2000) report suggested that families can have a powerful influence in shaping the attitudes, values, and behavior of children, Conrad, Flay, & Hill (1992) found in their research that parents have a tremendous influence on their children and the children of smoking parents are twice as likely to become smokers. Due to lack of appropriate care and nurturing, lack of family education, facing separation, homelessness, child of the divorced parent and no structure to a home life often children revert to substance abuse (Boomsma, de Geus, van Baal, & Koopmans, 1999). Further, to ascertain the role of family, parents, and relatives, researchers like Prescott & Kendler, (1999) studied 231 people who were diagnosed with drug or alcohol addiction and compared them to 61 people who did not have an addiction. They also studied and compared

Substance Abuse among Children: A Rising Problem in India

the first-degree relatives (parents, siblings, or children) of those people and found that if a parent has a substance abuse, addiction, the child had an eight times greater chance of substance abuse among children. A Researcher reported from New Delhi that the presence of step parents and maltreatment of the child by family members was found significant risk factors and predictors of substance abuse (Randolph, 2004; Kar, Debroy, Sarma, & Islam, 2014). Further, it was reported that higher number (46.7 percent) of children substance abusing was found when both parents are abusers and the same impact (43.5 percent) prevailed when the only mother was a substance abuser (Panigrahi, Sarangi, & Acharya, 2008). Similarly, if family members of street children use tobacco and alcohol those children are more prone to use drugs and other substances (Kautilya, Sathish, & Hegde, 2015). Analyzing the results of the available researchers, it reveals that children who have parents, siblings or other family members who abuse alcohol or other substances are the easiest victims.

While addressing the issue of the relative importance of parents and peer, in terms of their influence on substance taking, the review of the literature reveals that the influence of peer and friends does not get diluted easily on children (Panigrahi, Sarangi, & Acharya, 2008). The influence of peer groups is usually strong during the formative years of children, may be stronger than that of parents in some cases. Rossow, (2000) reported that usually, friends are more similar in their use of substance abuse than in any other activity or attitude. In this situation, substance abuse by peers may exert a greater influence than the attitudes of parents. Another investigator has reported that peers have a high degree of influence only when the parents have abdicated their traditional supervisory roles (Rossow, 2000). Hence, parents exercising traditional family roles may be able to limit the influence of peer groups on children's attitudes towards substance abuse and therefore have a crucial influence on children's behavior (Rossow, 2000). Researchers observed that peer and parental influences are synergistic, with the highest rates of substance abuse being observed among children whose parents and friends were a substance abuser (Kautilya, Sathish, & Hegde, 2015).

Role of Socioeconomic Factors in Substance Abuse Children

Substance abuse among children is a very complex problem and it needs to be deliberated from different perspectives. Ascertaining the socioeconomic factors contributing to this problem, review of literature revealed that illiteracy, living in a joint family and broken families are the main cause of children being on the street in India along with the poverty, physical and substance abuse being associated causes (Tiwari, Gulati, Sethi, & Mehra, 2002). The Rapid industrialization, urbanization, and changing lifestyles (both parents working, and parents working out of a home for long hours, mounting poverty, population explosion, have left children struggling for their survival, forcing many to refuge in the dark world of substance trafficking and trading and abuse.

Role of Psycho-Social Factors and Its Related Risk Factors in Substance Abuse Children

The gender dynamics of alcohol and substance abuse are complex and worth attending to. Many of the substances such as tobacco and alcohol are socially acceptable if practiced by

Substance Abuse among Children: A Rising Problem in India

males but not for females (Panigrahi, Sarangi, & Acharya, 2008). During social, cultural and family rituals and customs, festivals, celebrations, happiness, relaxation, etc. such practices were common among male members. Therefore, males were more exposed to as well as accepted alcohol consuming. As the consequences, they became more victims of substance addiction. Historically, female using substance has always been disapproving in the Indian society (Mail, 1980). Alcohol abuse has always been perceived as a male concern (not female) especially in India. A study reported that in the past few years there has been a drastic change seen by many substance abuse types of research and report a rising graph of instances of 'women substance abuse' in India (Joshi & Rathore, 2017). A female child with a best friend who is a smoker is nine times more at risk to become smokers. Smoking is a shared activity with important socializing functions of a female child (Hudmon, Gritz, Clayton, & Nisenbaum, 1999). Alienation among female child is also one of the major causes as well as the effect of addicted behavior because of this addiction, females are somehow being alienated from their spouse, family, and friends (Greenfield, Back, Lawson, & Brady, 2010). A female child as an addict of substance abuse has to face tougher consequences and stigma of society as compared to men's world. In the case of females, the empathetic understanding and support from their own families are not being provided to them and they face immense mental and physical trauma and torture (Joshi & Rathore, 2017).

Another very common psycho social causes of substance abuse among street children in India are found to be the peer pressure followed by experimentation and boosting self-confidence according to (Gaidhane et al., 2008). It is also observed in studies that the increasing age of children was significantly associated with increased prevalence of substance abuse (Tsering, & Pal, 2009). In India, Peer group has the greatest influence also on the child smokers. The initiation of tobacco smoke generally occurs in the company of a friend who is a smoker (Millar, & Hunter, 1990). Moreover, peer smoking also predicts continued smoking among children who have already begun to smoke (McGraw, Smith, Schensul, & Carrillo, 1991). Another study (Kapoor, Anand, & Kumar, 1995) reported that developmental transitions, such as puberty along with an increasing independence in exposure, exploration, and decision making along with greater mobility, have also been associated with substance abuse. Conversely, there is an increase in the risk-taking behavior, experimentation, and curiosity among substance abuse children.

The multifaceted problem of substance abuse in children has no one single solution to it. This has to deal with from various aspects and angles. A number of preventive strategies are required to combat substance abuse in children. This paper has highlighted the high prevalence of substance abuse among children and its ill effects on their health and performance. Following are the steps suggested that can be taken for the prevention of substance abuse in children.

Preventive strategies of substance abuse in children

1. The schedule of the child should be constructive and productive with meaningful activities, such as sports, co-curricular activities, and brain games, reading good books

Substance Abuse among Children: A Rising Problem in India

or other group involvement. Such activities can help them in developing good habits and keep themselves busy in some productive works.

2. Schools and institutions should keep a regular check on every student's performance, behavior, attendance, and if any student found suspicious, they should immediately inform parents and take appropriate actions.
3. Parents and caretakers should be aware of the child's interests, their peer groups, stay connected and know where your children are at their free time, keep a check on children's school and tuition, attendance, and performance, attend timely parents' meets with teachers, and keep a check on the child's behavior pattern.
4. Parents, caretakers, teachers, and friends of a child facing substance abuse need to work and help children to enhance positive self-esteem, boost confidence, should be supportive and help the child to make a good choice and healthy habits. They should open communication channels open, initiate dialogue, listen to children, keep patience and have faith in their child as quitting substance abuse requires a long time.
5. The Parent needs to be the role model in shaping their children's attitude toward healthy practices, and alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs because they are the greatest influence on whether their children will use substances or not. Especially, those parents who are facing substance abuse problem could share their experiences and make their children understand the hazardous effects of having a substance abuse. They could seek help and quit and as they will try to quit, their children who are facing substance abuse problem would also quit early as observing their parents quit.
6. Communities and society should take a stand against liquor, tobacco, trading, trafficking and misleading young minds. They should stop buying and demanding substances and keep a check if any, illegal activity is being suspected in their vicinity, immediately informing the police authorities about it.
7. The government should plan awareness camps, health advertisements, etc. To give information regarding substance abuse, its adverse effects, treatment, etc. with special attention on rural, slum and remote, overcrowded poverty stricken areas.
8. The Government should include substance abuse and its related topics in school, college curriculums and make it as a compulsory topic to study. So, that student may get legally, logically and scientifically aware about the adverse consequences of it.
9. The government, Society, parents, teachers, social reformists, ethical committees should monitor on misleading advertisements of tobacco, liquor, pan masalas etc. must be done by the government. Also, legal notification and strict legal alternatives to control the supply and demand of substances should be measured by the government.
10. June 26 is marked and celebrated as The International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking; It was established in 1987 by the United Nations. The day marked the International Day against Drug, Substance Abuse and Illicit Trafficking every year (German, 2014). It is an exercise undertaken by the world community to sensitize the people in general and the youth, but it spreads awareness among children in particular, towards the menace of substance abuse at an early age. Under this campaign, the theme of 2017 is "**Listen First**". We need to listen to our children what they want to tell us and also what they do not want to tell us. We need to listen to the unsaid state of affairs

Substance Abuse among Children: A Rising Problem in India

also. We need to give them space and assurance, we need to build trusting relations with them so that they share their minds, their concerns, their fears, worries and anxieties, their hopes and aspirations, their hurdles and struggles and their dreams and success stories. It is an issue of human Rights of children.

CONCLUSION

Substance abuse among children is a matter of concern only in western countries, developed countries and flourishing countries, it is an important issue to be addressed across the globe. Especially in India, there is a need to conduct scientific and systematic researchers taking into consideration all the factors mentioned above in this paper related to child substance abuse and its relevant issues, including preferences, family, risk factors, socioeconomic status, genetic risk factors, environmental risk factors and preventive strategies of substance abuse and its complications, and their prevention strategies along with follow-up studies. If this issue is not timely addressed it will take the shape of the epidemic with it is severe socioeconomic and familial adverse consequences besides human resource depletion for the nation. It is dismaying to know that there are few studies available on substance abuse among children in India and mostly, researchers are focusing only on urban settlements of the country. There is an urgent and immediate action required to study, understand, explore, take actions and prevention, and make strategies which help children as well as our society to fight against the addictive trap of substance abuse among children. Although, achieving this goal is not an easy task. It may take a long period to bring change in our society, but as it said truly “*where there is a way there is a will*”. If we all stand together for this cause, it would definitely bring a ray of hope in saving children’s future and brightening the future of the children and the nation.

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Substance Abuse among Children: A Rising Problem in India

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Substance Abuse among Children: A Rising Problem in India

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