

## ***Risk and Protective Factors for Substance Use and Abuse in Emerging Adulthood: Continuity and Change as Young Adults Enter New Social Contexts and Prepare for New Roles***

Original research published in *Addictive Behaviors*.

Substance use and misuse peak in young adulthood, age 18 to age 26. This stage of development is marked by rapid transitions into new social contexts that involve greater freedom and less social control than experienced during adolescence. Concurrent with this newfound independence is an increase in rates of substance use and abuse.

Which factors increase the likelihood of substance misuse by young adults, and which offer protection? A group of researchers from SDRG, the University of Washington - Bothell, and the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services addressed this question for several important reasons:

- \* The young adult period sets the stage for later adult development. Substance misuse can keep young adults from successfully transitioning into adult roles and responsibilities, with potential long-term consequences.
- \* A growing body of longitudinal research following children and adolescents into young adulthood and longitudinal studies during emerging adulthood make the identification of risk and protective factors for substance misuse in young adults ripe for review.
- \* Understanding child and adolescent predictors that remain important, as well as predictors specific to the young adult years, will help guide prevention programs to reduce young adult substance misuse.

Table 1 summarizes risk and protective

factors associated with substance misuse in young adulthood that have been identified by at least two longitudinal studies. Several predictors from childhood and adolescence continue to predict young adult substance use, providing early prevention opportunities. Some of these same factors measured in young adulthood also predict young adult substance misuse.

However, some risk factors are only predictive from the young adult time period. Unique young adult risk factors that predict substance misuse in young adults point to the importance of social contexts that involve greater freedom and less social control. Moving out of the parental home, living in a community with laws and norms

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### **MISSION of SDRG**

To understand and promote healthy behaviors and positive social development among diverse populations, we:

- ◆ Conduct research on factors that influence development
- ◆ Develop and test the effectiveness of interventions
- ◆ Study service systems and work to improve them
- ◆ Advocate for science-based solutions to health and behavior problems
- ◆ Disseminate knowledge, tools, and expertise produced by this research

### **Key Messages**

- Many risk and protective factors predicting substance use and abuse in adolescence remain important in young adulthood.
- Additional risk and protective factors are associated with the changing social contexts typical of young adulthood: college attendance, job attainment, living arrangement, and marital status.
- Longitudinal studies are needed to explain the mechanisms linking risk and protection to problem substance use in young adulthood.
- Studies need to include both college and non-college attending young adults.

**Table 1. Developmental Salience of Risk Factors for Substance Misuse in Young Adulthood**

	Developmental period*
<b>COMMUNITY</b>	
Availability of Drugs	YA
Community Laws and Norms Favorable Toward Drug Use, Firearms, and Crime	YA
Income, Parental Education	C, YA
<b>SCHOOL</b>	
Academic Failure Beginning in Late Elementary School	C, A, YA
Lack of Commitment to School	A
<b>FAMILY</b>	
Family Management Problems	C, A
Family History of Substance Use	C, A
Favorable Parental Involvement in Substance Use	C, A
Family Conflict	C, A, YA
<b>INDIVIDUAL AND PEER</b>	
Constitutional Factors	C
Internalizing	C, A
Early and Persistent Antisocial Behavior	C, A, YA
Early Initiation of Substance Use	C
Favorable Attitudes Toward Substance Use	C, A, YA
Friends Who Engage in Substance use	A, YA
Adolescent Substance Use	A
Not Married	YA
Not Living with a Parent	YA
Unemployed	YA
College Attendance	YA

\* Childhood (C), Adolescence (A), Young Adulthood (YA). Risk factors measured in the developmental periods indicated predict substance misuse in young adulthood.

favorable toward use, and attending college predict increased substance misuse. Young adult social contexts that are predictive of lower levels of substance misuse include work (but not long hours) and graduating from college.

Research has also identified protective or promotive factors that predict lower rates of young adult substance misuse. These include strong bonds to and support by family of origin, marriage and cohabitation, and healthy beliefs. Protective/promotive factor research is limited, and more studies are needed.

Opportunities to prevent the harms of substance misuse in young adulthood through risk and protective factor modification may begin prior to birth and continue through young adulthood. It's never too early or too late to address parental substance use, poor family management, and bonding to family in childhood, or favorable attitudes and norms toward substance use at work, school, and in romantic relationships in young adulthood.

Currently, college campuses provide the majority of interventions targeting young adults. Interventions incorporating motivational feedback and focusing on risk reduction (in contrast to abstinence-only approaches) are promising with respect to reducing problem substance use. Interventions targeting young adults not in college are also needed. Strategies reducing access to alcohol for those under age 21, increasing taxes, and reducing norms favoring substance use have evidence of effectiveness. Supporting work or educational involvement in young adults who are neither in school nor employed could also reduce risks for young adult substance misuse.

*For additional information on this topic, please refer to the original article:*

Stone, Andrea L., Becker, Linda G., Huber, Alice M., & Catalano, Richard F. (2012). **Review of risk and protective factors of substance use and problem use in emerging adulthood.** *Addictive Behaviors*, *37*, 747-775.

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