

Understanding and Addressing the Intersection of Substance Use and Child Trauma: For Healthcare Providers



With the increase in opioid misuse, health professionals are being forced to examine the dispensing of prescription medications and how they are treating patients dealing with pain. The knowledge that opioid use and addiction has skyrocketed, and is affecting numerous youth and families, has created a lot of uncertainty about prescribing opioids and prevention efforts that can be implemented by health professionals.

As a health care provider, you have an important role to play and can make a real difference in the lives of children and families in which there is opioid use. You can help individuals and families navigate the barriers and challenges to connect with treatment and the supports they need. You also are vital in supporting families when treatment does not seem to be working or when the worst happens, and a family member dies. The role of providers is not to save the child or family, but rather to help them identify their sources of strength and resilience, provide them with clear and factual information, and collaborate across professional boundaries to connect families with the best care for their individual needs.

It is critical that healthcare providers understand the responsibility that they have to help prevent the misuse of opioid prescriptions. As a provider, you have an important role in helping families work through trauma exposure, reduce dependency on substances, and achieve their goals. You can share the message that families affected by trauma and substance use can get better with treatment.

What Can Healthcare Providers Do?

Historically, there has been a stigma associated with substance use and addiction, as well as seeking treatment that can aid in recovery. You can make efforts to educate individuals and communities about the widespread impact of the nation's current opioid crisis and how addiction affects individuals across race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class. Likewise, raising public awareness about treatment options that are available can help those dealing with substance use and possibly co-occurring mental health challenges.

Recommendations made by the American Academy of Family Physicians and the American Academy of Pediatrics regarding how frontline physicians can work together to address the opioid epidemic include:

- Addressing the stigma that has been associated with addiction. Healthcare providers can reduce addiction stigma and promote recovery by using non-judgmental language, showing empathy, providing education about addiction as a chronic medical disease, and focusing on solutions and effective treatments.
- Providing comprehensive pain management, including going beyond medication to incorporate non-pharmacological approaches, such as physical therapy, behavioral treatment and other complementary approaches (yoga, massage).
- Ensuring that patients have access to coverage for quality care and treatment programs, which may involve using expanded care teams, leveraging telehealth options, increasing efficiency in scheduling to reduce wait times, and educating patients about their options so that they can make informed decisions.
- Promoting research focused on the prevention and treatment of substance use disorders. Key resources include the [American Academy of Pediatrics Substance Use and Prevention](#), the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administrations' [Evidence-Based Practices Resource Center](#), and the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry's [Substance Use Resource Center](#).

In addition to learning more about pain management and opioid addiction, you should make sure that patients learn more about the comorbidity of substance use and mental health challenges. When recommending possible treatments for opioid misuse, it is important to include integrated treatments that focus on substance use disorders.

No matter the age of the individual, seeking help for an addictive disorder can be challenging. You should be prepared to assist without judgment or perpetuating the stigma that is sometimes associated with addiction.

Prenatal Exposure to Opioids, Caregiver Opioid Use, and Follow-Up Support

Given that opioid use in pregnancy has escalated dramatically in recent years, healthcare providers need to actively identify and treat individuals with substance use disorders. Creating an environment where people feel safe enough to disclose their use is imperative. Educating pregnant individuals about medication-assisted treatment (with drugs such as methadone and buprenorphine) and assisting them with access to these treatments is crucial. This approach has been proven to be effective in treating pregnant people with opioid use disorders.

Children born to individuals who used opioids during pregnancy need multidisciplinary, long-term follow-up including medical, developmental, and social support. Follow-up should include monitoring for neonatal abstinence syndrome (or NAS). In addition to much longer hospital stays following birth, children born suffering from opiate withdrawal often experience a plethora of complications and symptoms. Babies with NAS are at increased risk on experiencing difficulty breathing, increased startle responses making them harder to soothe and put to sleep, high-pitched crying, feeding problems (e.g., increased reflux), and being easily overwhelmed in new, loud, or crowded environments. For more information and resources about NAS, visit <https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/topics/neonatal-abstinence-syndrome.aspx>.

What You Can Do:

- While having a baby can motivate a parent toward sustained recovery, the stress of parenting can trigger caregivers with trauma histories. Relationship based interventions can be particularly effective in helping the parent understand the child's experiences and promote parental alignment, reflectivity, and responsiveness.
- Collaborate with child welfare providers to help to build upon your understanding of parental substance use issues, its signs, the effects on parenting and child safety, and what to expect during a parent's treatment and recovery.
- Recognize that resource parents, who may be foster parents, foster-to-adopt families, or kinship caregivers, also need support and education as they care for children born to substance-using parents. Help resource parents process understandable reactions to reduce placement disruptions, allowing children and their biological parents to focus on strengthening their relationship and working toward permanence.

Opioid Epidemic Among Student Athletes and Pain Management

Opioid misuse can become a major concern for student athletes during recovery from a sports injury. In order to prevent misuse of opioids or pain medication, it is important that you have thoroughly discussed the use and risk of pain medications with families and discussed with caregivers the importance of making sure that medication is being dispensed as prescribed.

What You Can Do:

- Convey to families the importance of consulting with them on the appropriate amount of time to heal from their injuries and not returning to sports before being advised.
- Be mindful that following the absence from one's team and having to miss games or an entire season will likely cause a range of emotions for student athletes such as depression. The feelings connected with this type of loss could possibly make them more susceptible to misusing their pain medication as a way to numb the emotions that have arisen as a result of the sports injury.

Screening, Assessment, and Treatment

Given the strong relationship between exposure to trauma and the use of substances, it is critical for you to screen clients for trauma and provide support to caregivers with a history of trauma. You can help caregivers understand how their trauma histories might affect their daily lives and their parenting behaviors. Parents with substance use problems tend to find parenting more stressful and those with their own trauma history are at risk of displaying punitive and aggressive parenting, which may increase the risk for child maltreatment.

Systematic screening and assessment for trauma exposure, traumatic stress, and substance use should be part of the history collected by all service providers working with youth, families, and caregivers. Resources for selecting appropriate screening tools include:

- Childhood trauma: <https://www.nctsn.org/treatments-and-practices/screening-and-assessment>
- Adult PTSD: <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/assessment/screens/index.asp>
- Adolescent substance use: <https://www.drugabuse.gov/nidamed-medical-health-professionals/screening-tools-resources/screening-tools-for-adolescent-substance-use>
- Adult substance use: <https://www.drugabuse.gov/nidamed-medical-health-professionals/screening-tools-resources/chart-screening-tools>

What You Can Do:

- Recognize that comprehensive and integrated treatment is key when you are caring for individuals with co-occurring traumatic stress, other mental health challenges, medical illness, and substance use.
- Consider trauma-focused interventions as the first alternative for addressing the needs of youth, adults, and families impacted by trauma. Providing psychosocial treatment in conjunction with any needed pharmacological treatment of opioid use disorder is essential.
- Become informed about the medical management of opioid addiction using drugs, such as methadone for opioid use disorder treatment and withdrawal management; buprenorphine, also for opioid use disorder treatment and withdrawal management; naltrexone for relapse prevention; and naloxone to treat overdose. Here are a couple of helpful guidelines:
 - [Practice Guidelines for the Treatment of Opioid Use Disorder, American Society of Addiction Medicine \(ASAM\)](#)
 - [Practice Guidelines for the Treatment of Patients with Substance Use Disorders, American Psychiatric Association](#)

Training Resources for Healthcare Providers

- Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Interactive Training Series for Healthcare Providers: Guidelines for Prescribing Opioids for Chronic Pain
<https://www.cdc.gov/overdose-prevention/hcp/trainings/guideline-for-prescribing-opioids-for-pain.html>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Resources for Medication-Assisted Treatment
<https://www.samhsa.gov/substance-use/treatment/options>
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Pathways to Safer Opioid Use Course
<https://www.aaap.org/pathways-to-safer-opioid-use-online-course/>
- Guidelines for Treating Individuals with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Co-Occurring Opioid Use Disorders, SAMHSA: http://atforum.com/documents/Pharm_Guidelines_508.pdf
- American Society of Addiction Medicine-Treatment of Opioid Use Disorder Course
<https://elearning.asam.org/products/treatment-of-opioid-use-disorder-course>

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