

Understanding and Addressing the Intersection of Substance Use and Child Trauma: For Teachers and School Professionals



The U.S. Department of Education has joined with other federal agencies to address the impact that the opioid crisis is having on students and families, as well as the role that schools can play in prevention and recovery efforts. In addition to providing funding for schools to address opioid misuse prevention, the Office of Safe and Supportive Schools has emphasized the importance of safe and supportive school climates that can foster the positive health and wellbeing of all students.

Given the number of families that have been impacted by the opioid crisis, it is very possible that there may be students on campus dealing with opioid use or students who will have a caregiver or family member who is dealing with opioid addiction.

Educators and school professionals should have a way to support these students and referrals for resources or services designed to assist families when someone is struggling with addiction. This resource identifies the scope of opioid use disorder and the links between trauma and opioid use that have emerged from research. It also examines the needs of the children and families affected by it, the barriers they may face in accessing treatment and support, and strategies and recommendations for school professionals who will encounter children and families struggling with opioid use.

Opioid Use, Academic Functioning, and Peer Relationships

Students spend a significant amount of their day at school, and therefore, teachers, school nurses, counselors, or administrators may be the first to notice a change in a student's behavior and suspect that they may be using substances.

Some of the signs that you can look for if you suspect a student may be using opioids or dealing with addiction include:

- Drastic changes in their appearance or personal hygiene
- Changes in peer groups or more conflict/fights with peers
- Changes in school attendance or a drop in academic performance
- Engaging in behaviors without fear or concern for the possible consequences.

If you notice any of these signs, you may want to observe the student more to try to become aware of what's happening. Students often disclose their behaviors to their friends and peers before their family. Students may also reach out to you if you are a trusted adult for them. If you have a good relationship with the student, you may also encourage them to talk to their peers or trusted adults about seeking support if they are misusing opioids or dealing with substance abuse. Students can also be encouraged to engage in activities which don't involve using drugs such as sports or school clubs like art or chess.

What You Can Do:

- Be mindful of how opioid use may impact school performance. In addition to leading to disruptive behavior in the classroom or delinquency, substance use can also affect school attendance, peer relationships, academic performance, motivation, and attention or concentration.
- Have conversations with students about peer relationships and selecting friends. Associating with peers who engage in delinquency or substance use can sometimes lead to students engaging in risky behaviors. In addition, if the student has been in a treatment program or is trying to stop using drugs or alcohol, spending time with peers who are still engaging in that behavior increases the possibility that they will relapse.

What Can Educators and School Professionals Do?

Although you or some of your school colleagues may sometimes feel that caregivers are responsible for talking with their children about alcohol or drug use, there are ways that you can assist as well, especially if you suspect that a student is dealing with substance use or addiction.

Historically, school-based drug prevention programs that simply tell students “don’t do drugs” have not been found to be very effective. Instead, it is important to equip students with different strategies that they can use to avoid engaging in alcohol or drug use and to address some of the issues that tend to precipitate substance use.

For example, school-based programs can educate students on facts and misconceptions about alcohol and drug use, discuss the importance of evaluating consequences before making decisions or engaging in behaviors, discuss ways that students can resist peer pressure and choose better friends, discuss issues affecting youth such as bullying or self-esteem, and have counselors discuss positive coping strategies to deal with anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges.

Tracking drug-related offenses among a school’s student population can help administrators identify the severity of these issues on their campus. If there are patterns in use or distribution of opioids those can be the focus on the school’s prevention efforts.

What You Can Do:

- Have open conversations about the dangers associated with substance use.
- Discuss the importance of making wise and safe decisions about the peers that students spend time with and the behaviors that they engage in when together.
- Make it clear that your primary aim is to help ensure the students’ safety and wellbeing.
- Provide ways that students and/or families can get help, such as giving information about treatment programs.

Opioid Epidemic and School Athletics

There are instances in which a student may have been prescribed opioids or pain pills, such as following surgery or to recover for a sports injury. If schools are having conversations with students about possible opioid misuse, they should emphasize the importance of taking medication only as it was prescribed by the doctor, not taking pills after they need them or once the pain has been managed, and not taking pills that were prescribed for another student.

Undoubtedly, opioid misuse can become a major issue of concern for student athletes during recovery from a sports injury. In addition, following the absence from one’s team and having to miss games or an entire season, student athletes will likely experience a range of emotions such as depression. The feelings connected with this type of loss could possibly make them more susceptible to misusing their pain medication, possibly to numb the emotions that have risen as a result of the sports injury.

Tips:

- Students and families should thoroughly discuss the use and risk of pain medications with a medical professional.
- Medication should be dispensed by the caregiver or school nurse exactly as prescribed.
- Student athletes should be given the appropriate amount of time to heal from their injuries and not be asked or allowed to return to sports before being advised by a medical professional.

School-Based Treatment and Connecting Families to Care

School-based treatment programs or groups focused on reducing teen substance use should include skills training components. During challenging situations, students may choose to engage in substance use as a form of coping. Implementing skills training classes at school can help students with the development of problem solving skills, conflict resolution skills, and social skills that are needed to handle some of the stressors associated with school, negative peer interactions, and difficult situations going on at home.

Schools should be prepared for how to respond in the event that a student has an opioid overdose while on campus. In addition to having a nurse on staff, schools should be aware of their district's emergency protocols and state laws regarding the administration of the overdose-reversal drug naloxone or Narcan.

Students and families impacted by trauma and substance use may need a range of supports in order to recover. Referral for an integrated/collaborative approach to mental health and substance use treatment that uses trauma-informed interventions is recommended. In addition to treatment of the identified student or caregiver, schools should be prepared to provide resources and referrals for family-based treatment, mental health and substance use treatment for individual family members, and information regarding community resources.

School-Based Resources

- [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\) School-Based Resource Materials](#)
- [National Institute on Drug Abuse \(NIDA\) Classroom Resources on Drug Effects](#)
- [Positive Choices Drug & Alcohol Resources for Teachers and Schools](#)

Suggested Citation:

Suarez, L., Adams, Z., Gibson, L., Ruisard, D., Marriott, B., Kelner, W., and the NCTSN Trauma and Substance Use Collaborative Group. (2026). *Understanding and Addressing the Intersection of Substance Use and Child Trauma: For Teachers & School Professionals*. Los Angeles, CA & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.