

Myth 2: Addicts made the wrong choice, it is their fault

Nobody decides to get addicted on drugs out of their own free will. Even starting to experiment and use drugs is something that does not happen only because one likes it. As we hope it becomes clear from the paragraphs below, there are multiple factors that increase the likelihood of someone to starting to use drugs. These factors are out of control of the individual. Nobody chooses to be born in a dysfunctional family or in a poor community. Not everybody that uses drugs will develop dependence: the risk of someone to develop dependence is also affected by individual as well as environmental factors.

Which kind of environmental factors can increase the vulnerability towards starting to use drugs?

- Lack of a strong loving bond between children and the adults that take care of them - it could be parents, but it could be other relatives or foster parents too.
- Major changes in life such as moving to a new town or school, divorce of parents or death of a family member.
- Poor quality of early education, negative school climate and poor attachment to school, poor or no school attendance and academic performance, lack of evidence-based health education and prevention programs at school.
- Easy access to alcohol, tobacco or other drugs.
- Social norms that are okay with or even promote drug use within friends, peers or family.
- Growing up in marginalized and deprived communities characterised by poverty, homelessness, conflict or war, lack of safety, violence or antisocial norms, social exclusion, and discrimination within society.

What kind of individual level factors can influence someone to start using drugs?

- Personal characteristics and temperament traits, such as sensation seeking, aggressiveness or impulsive behaviour.
- Mental health issues such as high anxiety or depression.
- Poor emotional and personal skills, such as not being able to regulate own emotions or recognise emotions in others or cope with stressful situations
- Insufficient decision making and problem solving skills.
- Belief that the majority of peers are already experimenting with or using substances and the perception that use of substances is not risky.

Are these factors of vulnerability within the control of the individual, especially of a child or a youth?

Different factors of vulnerability are linked to each other. They make each other stronger and they contribute to make somebody more or less vulnerable starting to use drugs and/or develop dependence.

Does the age in which you start make a difference?

- Yes. The brain keeps on developing throughout childhood and until the early 20s. The earlier you start using, the more likely it is that you will develop a substance use or other mental health disorder later in life.
- Children who start to use early have mostly been exposed to many factors of vulnerability.

What are specific needs of children and youth in different age groups?

At each age, children and youth need to achieve certain goals in terms of learning skills. If this does not happen, their vulnerability to engage in risky behaviours later in life is much higher, because their safe and health development is compromised. This is why the factors described earlier can greatly increase the vulnerability of children and youth: because they have a negative impact on the process of development.

- Early in life it is important to develop safe attachment to the caregivers and learn self-regulation. After this, learning of basic literacy and numeracy skills start. The development of this goes together with the learning of impulse and self-control, and goal directed behaviour.
- During middle childhood these skills develop further. The learning of various social skills starts to determine health and safe development. Social skills are, for example communication skills, sense of respect and responsibility, self-confidence or self-expression. Also, learning about the role of student and attachment to school become important together with emotional and self-regulation skills.
- During adolescence developing, safe attitudes and intentions towards risky behaviours develop. In period, it is important to achieve and maintain emotional and mental health, including for example self-esteem. Absences of early risky behaviours such as smoking are important for safe development in this age group.

Get more facts:

- NIDA Drug Facts *Understanding Drug Abuse Addiction* provides you with more information on addiction, brain functions and risk factors as well as further links:

<http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/understanding-drug-abuse-addiction>

- NIDA for teens is a website especially designed for teenager. It provides you with drug facts, a blog, videos, and much more: <http://teens.drugabuse.gov/>

- UNODC International Standards on Prevention of Drug Use, helps you to understand the issue of drug use prevention more: <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/prevention/prevention-standards.html>