Studies show that millions of people aged 15 to 64 have consumed drugs which are under international control at least once in the past 12 months. Cannabis, methamphetamines, cocaine and heroin are among the drugs of choice. Although statistics often leave out children, it is known that one of the side effects of drug use is its negative impact on children under the age of 15.

Children and drugs

Some children are neglected or abused by drug-addicted parents, while others have lost their parents to drug abuse. Family members or government institutions often care for these orphans. Children and drugs are also linked as the younger generation is turning to cigarettes, alcohol or marijuana to fit in or deal with stress. Although it is not the norm, some children start doing so as early as 8 or 9 years of age. Harder drugs may follow. Peer pressure and other factors influence their decision. Children who live and work on the streets are particularly vulnerable to substance abuse. Using inhalants like glue, amphetamines and other types of drugs suppresses hunger and anxiety and makes them feel they can cope better with their day-to-day problems.

“Drugs are not child’s play” is the 2006 theme for the International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking, commemorated every year on 26 June.

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Supportive mothers and fathers, as well as other caregivers, teach kids values and life skills that will guide them in making the right choices. They also encourage children to make good use of their leisure time: participating in sports, music and art are three positive options. Within a nurturing environment, children have the opportunity to speak their minds and share their feelings. Drugs, for example, can be a topic of open discussion between parents and kids. If there are signs of trouble at home or at school, the family should act in the child’s best interest, trying to understand the problem and looking for solutions within or outside the family unit.

The family plays a key role in bringing up healthy children.

In the Northern Shan State in Myanmar, UNODC supports a community-based project that assists children whose lives have been damaged by drugs. Baem Yain, a 5-year-old boy who lives with his grandparents, is a beneficiary. His mother has been in prison for three years for peddling drugs, and his father, who is a drug addict, has abandoned him. Baem Yain attends primary school in the village of Namtaung along with almost 80 other vulnerable children. The project provides them with rice, schoolbooks and clothing.

Teachers play a key role in educating children about drugs.

Effective teachers seek to build children’s confidence and self-esteem. They communicate with their students and respect them as individuals. School should be a safe environment where children can develop inter-personal skills and a sense of responsibility. School, in addition to the home, is where kids can learn about the dangers of drug use and the benefits of a healthy lifestyle. Class debates and drawing competitions are some activities that can help children understand the effects drugs have on families and communities. With this information, kids will be better equipped to say no to those who offer them drugs.

In Peru, UNODC supports the association Deporte y Vida (Sport and Life) in its efforts to prevent drug use among vulnerable children and adolescents. The Drug Abuse Prevention Centre of Japan funds the association’s sport and cultural programmes in poor neighbourhoods. Karen, a young girl from Villa El Salvador near Lima, is one of 1,500 kids who participate in this grassroots initiative. Through Deporte y Vida, Karen has been able to play football, a game she has always been passionate about. Karen also receives help with schoolwork and gets books to read. Playing football has taught her and other vulnerable kids about teamwork, respect for other players and the value of helping friends in times of trouble.

Society has a responsibility to protect children from drugs. Home, school and the playground should be safe for kids. As individuals and communities, pay attention to warning signs and address drug-related problems. Got involved in keeping children and drugs apart!

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Kids are never too young to learn to be responsible and protect themselves from harm. Refusing to take illegal drugs is a smart choice. Although growing up is not always easy, childhood and adolescence can be fun! Millions of kids around the world practise sports with their friends, play an instrument in a band and participate in after-school clubs. In addition to studying and playing together, children and adolescents can inform each other about the dangers of drug use.
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