

Why Adolescent Treatment is Different from Adult Treatment

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Summary

- The physical differences between adolescents and adults are one reason why adolescents need treatment tailored to their age group. Their physical attributes, including their brains, have not finished developing.
- Teens need treatment programs that address their academic issues and make their families an integral part of the plan.
- Most adolescents have entered drug or alcohol treatment involuntarily, and their counselors and doctors must take this into account when establishing a treatment plan.

Adolescent drug users differ from adults in many ways. Their drug and alcohol use often has different causes, and they have even more trouble seeing the consequences of their use for the future.

In treatment, adolescents must be approached differently from adults because of their unique developmental and psychiatric issues, differences in their values and belief systems, and environmental considerations (e.g., strong peer influences).

Adolescents generally have smaller body sizes, a lower tolerance for substances, and they do not have a fully-developed brain, putting them at greater risk for using drugs and at greater risk for physical and other consequences related to their use. The use of substances may also negatively effect their mental and emotional development because substance use interferes with how people learn to handle situations and experiences. Adolescents are also always part of a larger family unit, so family involvement plays a critical role in an adolescent's treatment and recovery.

Finally, as compared to adults, very few adolescents attend treatment because they recognize they have a problem and are voluntarily seeking help. They are much more likely to be coerced by their parents, their schools and/or the court or social services system to enter treatment. While treatment does not need to be voluntary to be effective, special consideration needs to be given to these issues as part of the adolescent's treatment. Although relatively few treatment programs are designed specifically for adolescents, these important differences demonstrate that adolescent treatment needs to be specifically tailored to the unique needs of adolescents and not just based on adult models of treatment.

Ten Questions to Ask a Treatment Provider/Program:

1. What types of treatment do you have? Have there been any research studies of this type of treatment?
 2. What evidence do you have that your program is effective?
 3. How do you specifically address the needs of adolescents?
 4. Can you assess and treat my child's mental health problems at the same time as his/her substance problem?
 5. How is the family involved in the treatment process?
 6. How long will this treatment last?
 7. What things do you do to help adolescents engage and stay in treatment?
 8. Do you have aftercare or a continuing care program for when this treatment ends?
 9. What happens if my child is not successful here? What other options do we have?
 10. How much does this cost and how much will I have to pay? Are there any state, county, or grant funds to help pay for this treatment?
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