

Substance Abuse and Learning Disabilities: Is There a Link?

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In February 1999, the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University hosted a conference with the National Center for Learning Disabilities and the National Institute on Drug Abuse. The objective of the conference was to better understand the relationship between substance abuse and learning disabilities. The CASA conference and subsequent white paper attempted to answer the following questions:

- Does having a learning disability increase an individual's vulnerability to start using drugs?
- Does a learning disability increase the chance that a person will become addicted to drugs?
- Do drugs compound existing learning disabilities?

The conferees, representing the medical, education, and treatment communities, agreed that while learning disabilities may increase the risk for substance abuse, they were not able to identify the precise nature of the link between substance abuse and learning disabilities. After examining existing research, they did, however, concur on the following:

- The link between learning disabilities and substance abuse begins in the womb.
- Prenatal smoking and drug or alcohol abuse can seriously damage the fetus and result in learning disabilities.
- Children with learning disabilities are at a higher risk for academic failure and for peer rejection—risk factors associated with substance abuse.
- Children with learning disabilities are twice as likely to have Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, a behavioral disorder that often appears in combination with a learning disorder. Individuals with ADD/ADHD are twice as likely

to abuse substances and have greater difficulty shaking addiction.

Authors of the CASA white paper make clear that correlation is not causation and that having a learning disability does not insure that a child will abuse drugs. Yet, the authors contend that the high statistical coincidence occurring in these two conditions warrants further attention. They recommend the following next steps:

- Conduct needed research, particularly with older children, to further our understanding of the linkages between substance abuse, learning disabilities, and behavior disorders.
- Refine diagnostic criteria that help identify specific learning disabilities and behavior disorders.
- Inform parents so they can: (1) understand the risks involved in abusing alcohol, cigarettes, and other drugs during pregnancy; (2) identify and respond to children's learning disabilities and behavior disorders early on; and (3) respond to children's academic difficulties and peer rejection that may lead to increased risk for substance abuse.
- Educate physicians, teachers, guidance counselors, and treatment professionals so they understand the relationship between substance abuse, learning disabilities, and behavior disorders, and so they can accurately identify and respond to each condition alone and in combination.

The white paper, "Substance Abuse and Learning Disabilities: Peas in a Pod or Apples and Oranges?" can be read online at the Web site of the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (<http://www.casacolumbia.org/index.htm>).

For More Information

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
<http://www.samhsa.gov/>

ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education
<http://ericec.org>

Preventing Substance Abuse at Home and at School
<http://npin.org/pnews/pnew497/pnew497d.html>

Boys Treated with Ritalin and the Relationship to Substance Abuse Later in Life
<http://npin.org/pnews/1999/pnew1199/int1199b.html>

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