

Nine Elements of Effective Alcohol Treatment for Adolescents

An Example from Wisconsin

David Poehlmann has been counseling people recovering from alcohol addiction for more than two decades. He focuses his work on adolescents and employs numerous approaches researchers consider key to effective treatment.

"We've worked with thousands of kids and it's a thrill to bump into them or their families in the community and have them talk about how they've been successful in their lives," Poehlmann says.¹ At any given time, Poehlmann works with about 40 patients at the Lawrence Center, a part of Waukesha Memorial Hospital/Pro Health Care. Waukesha, a county of 66,000 people, is tucked into the southeastern corner of Wisconsin, about 25 miles from Milwaukee.

Philosophically, the Lawrence Center adheres to two tenets. First, its staff reaches out to teens by setting up a treatment program that can build on whatever personal strong points a client might have. Second, says Poehlmann, "We will always look for parents to be involved in the adolescent treatment process." The program treats young people on an outpatient basis.

Throughout the U.S., concerned citizens have established many prevention programs to educate young people about the consequences of drinking. Fewer resources have been allocated to raising awareness of what to do if drinking does become a problem. Each year, three million young Americans develop a serious alcohol problem that significantly increases their risk for experiencing life-altering problems such as dropping out of school, getting arrested or needing emergency room care. Many people: don't realize the necessity of providing professional help for teens who are addicted to alcohol or use it in hazardous ways; don't know the extent of treatment options, and remain unaware of the fruitfulness of such treatment.

"There are so many barriers for adolescents seeking treatment," notes alcohol recovery advocate Samantha Hope-Atkins of New Orleans.² "Removing these barriers and seeing that they have the necessary support in their community to flourish and grow as a young person" is critical. A distinguished group of physicians, including a former surgeon general, estimates that only 10 percent of the adolescents who have problems with alcohol or other drugs receives treatment, and that of those who receive treatment, only one in four gets enough care to make an impact on the problem.³ If a teen can overcome the stigma associated with seeking help, he or she then often faces the

challenges of identifying people who can help them, securing insurance coverage for their treatment and finding an open slot in an appropriate treatment program. Many privately insured health plans restrict coverage for treatment of addiction through benefit limitations and higher copays for services.

In evaluating a broad spectrum of treatment programs and approaches, researchers have identified common themes among the treatments that are most effective in helping teens. Drug Strategies, a Washington-based nonprofit research institute that promotes more effective approaches to the nation's drug problems, found these key elements in an extensive review:⁴

1. ASSESSMENT AND TREATMENT MATCHING

Assessment is a necessary step in determining if the services available at the program, as well as the level of treatment intensity, match an adolescent's needs.

The assessment, including the initial diagnosis, must take into account the unique aspects of being a teenager. Although some have labeled adolescents "diagnostic orphans" because they do not fit the standard, scientifically accepted criteria for diagnosing alcohol use disorders in adults,⁵ scientists and health care practitioners have made great strides in understanding teens' alcohol use. Researcher Michael Dennis says we are in a "renaissance of research" on adolescent treatment, with "methodological advances in screening and assessment, placement, manual-guided approaches for targeted interventions and for more comprehensive program management."⁶ The mixture of alcohol, other drugs and mental health problems, especially depression, is so common among troubled teens as to be expected rather than the exception. Some alcohol assessments ask wide-ranging questions yet provide little guidance to treatment providers. Other assessments and screenings are more useful. Clinical research indicates that health professionals can effectively screen adolescents to diagnose alcohol use disorders in as little as 15 minutes when they use the right tools.⁷ For more on screening, visit the Ensuring Solutions Alcohol Cost Calculator for Kids at <http://www.alcoholcostcalculator.org/kids/help.php#>

2. COMPREHENSIVE, INTEGRATED TREATMENT APPROACH

An effective treatment program should address the adolescent's problems comprehensively rather than concentrating only on one.

Scientists know that alcohol problems can contribute to lower grades, poor attendance and increases in dropout rates. In any given age group, heavy and binge drinkers are 4-6 times more likely than nondrinkers to say they cut classes or skipped school. Among high school students, those who use alcohol are five times more likely to drop out than those who don't use alcohol.⁸ Alcohol is implicated in more than 40 percent of all college academic problems and in 28 percent of all college dropouts.⁹ Treatment programs should recognize these linkages and help adolescents address these challenges. The Lawrence Center, for instance, assigns a school/study coordinator to assist young patients with academic challenges.¹⁰

3. FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN TREATMENT

Engaging parents increases the likelihood that treatment will be effective.

"If you can effect change in the family system, the system is better able to respond to the client's needs" such as getting transportation to self-help meetings or providing accountability, something "a lot of parents struggle with," Poehlmann says. In fact, when a young person comes to the Lawrence Center for treatment, his or her parents or guardian are asked to sign a contract that spells out the family commitment to helping their loved one recover.

Although some treatment professionals worry that families will be deterred when confronted with such a contract, the Lawrence Center families have not balked.

4. DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PROGRAM

Adolescent treatment programs need to address the unique difficulties that accompany adolescence.

Some treatment professionals may overlook the extent of stress experienced by young people. They struggle with issues of “academic performance, peer acceptance and employment issues,” Poehlmann has observed. These are different issues than those that confront adults struggling with alcohol problems. Also, programs for younger teens are not always appropriate for older teens.

For more information about the risks posed by adolescent alcohol problems, visit www.alcoholcostcalculator.org

For more information on different adolescent treatment programs, visit www.drugstrategies.org/teens/programs.html
Using its nine elements of care, Drug Strategies has identified 144 adolescent treatment programs in 42 states. The information is available in a database searchable by state.

5. ENGAGE AND RETAIN TEENS IN TREATMENT

Adolescent treatment programs should be designed to engage teens and keep them in treatment.

Successful treatment programs often encourage young people to make a self-assessment, challenging them to evaluate their own lives in comparison to other people their age, especially in terms of alcohol and illicit drug use. “Adolescents have to see what’s in it for them,” Poehlmann says. He and his colleagues do their best to appeal to their clients’ desires to “feel better, more at peace.”

6. QUALIFIED STAFF

Professional staff members who understand adolescent development and can work effectively with families are important to treatment success.

Improved results spring from strong training, along with empathy. Lawrence Center’s staff members are certified addiction counselors with a minimum of a bachelor’s degree. Many have earned master’s degrees in social work; some have had their own life experiences with addiction and other drug or alcohol problems.

“Every study I’ve ever looked at has said that 50–60 percent [of treatment success] has to do with the connection back to the counselor,” Poehlmann notes. “That’s why you need clinicians that have the passion to work with the kid.”

7. GENDER AND CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Programs need to recognize both gender and cultural differences in their treatment approach.

Girls, for instance, are at much higher risk of developing alcohol problems after suffering trauma such as sexual abuse.¹¹ Thus, gender appropriate programs for girls and young women might address sexuality; culturally appropriate programs might be conducted in languages other than English or take into account the social impact of racial inequities.

8. CONTINUING CARE

Treatment programs should educate teens to recognize and deal with factors that lead to relapse.

Some treatment efforts encourage clients to keep working at their recovery through ongoing individual and family therapy and through involvement in self-help groups. Organizing self-help for adolescents can be challenging, as traditional self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) don't always meet the needs of teens.

The Lawrence Center staff members say that they must "slice in half" their adolescent client population. "Older adolescents have better efficacy with self-help," Poehlmann says, but "with younger kids I don't see it work well at all. For one, they don't have the abstract reasoning skills that enables them to relate to concepts such as 'higher power' or 'turning it over,'" common precepts in self-help groups. "Second, there are no young-people-specific AA groups in our area. We've tried multiple times [to get them going], but they don't seem to sustain themselves." Still, Poehlmann says, "We encourage them to check out meetings before they rule it out...We stress continuing care right from the beginning of the treatment – recovery is an ongoing process."

9. TREATMENT OUTCOMES

Monitoring of results provides useful information since research indicates that successful treatment is closely linked to the completion of a program.

Drug Strategies notes that evaluating the impact of the treatment program is an important element of shaping successful care. Many programs have only begun to track their treatment outcomes recently, if at all. The Lawrence Center is participating in a Wisconsin state-organized study that includes nine other treatment providers. The study monitors the progress of participating patients at six months, nine months and a year.

Lynora Williams, January 2005

Sources

- 1 Poehlmann, David. Interview with the author. May 25, 2004.
- 2 Hope-Atkins, Samantha. Interview with the author. May 6, 2004.
- 3 Physician Leadership on National Drug Policy. 2002. *Adolescent Substance Abuse: A Public Health Priority. An Evidence-based, Comprehensive and Integrative Approach to Adolescent Substance Abuse*. Providence: PLNDP.
- 4 Drug Strategies. 2003. *Treating Teens: A Guide to Adolescent Drug Programs*. Washington, DC: Drug Strategies.
- 5 Martin, C.S. and Winters, K.C. 1998. Diagnosis and Assessment of Alcohol Use Disorders Among Adolescents. *Alcohol Health & Research World*. Vol. 22, No. 2.
- 6 Physician Leadership on National Drug Policy, 2002.
- 7 Knight, J.R., Sherritt, L. et al. 2002. Validity of the CRAFFT Substance Abuse Screening Test Among Adolescent Clinic Patients. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*. 156: 607-614.
- 8 National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University. 2001. *Malignant Neglect: Substance Abuse and America's Schools*. New York: Columbia University.
- 9 National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University. 1994. *Rethinking Rites of Passage: Substance Abuse on America's Campuses*. New York: Columbia University.
- 10 Oconomowoc Memorial Hospital Website. www.oconomowocmemorial.org/cgi-bin/home.pl?coeAlcoholLevelsOfCare
- 11 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. 1999. *Alcohol Use Among Girls*. Available from the World Wide Web: <http://www.health.org/govpubs/rpo993/>

2021 K St. NW, Suite 800
Washington, DC 20006
Phone: 202.296.6922
Fax: 202.296.0025
info@ensuringsolutions.org
www.ensuringsolutions.org



Ensuring Solutions to Alcohol Problems (Ensuring Solutions) at The George Washington University Medical Center in Washington, DC, seeks to increase access to treatment for individuals with alcohol problems. Working with policymakers, employers and concerned citizens, Ensuring Solutions provides research-based information and tools to help curb the avoidable health care and other costs associated with alcohol use and improve access to treatment for Americans who need it. The project is supported by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts. For more information, please visit the Ensuring Solutions Website at www.ensuringsolutions.org.

What to Look for in a Treatment Program

Nine Key Elements of Effective Care for Adolescents with Alcohol Problems

I'm a young person who needs help dealing with an alcohol problem. How can I tell if a treatment program is right for me?

1. ASSESSMENT AND TREATMENT MATCHING

Treatment programs are not all the same. Does the program carefully evaluate people it's helping when they begin? Assessment is a necessary step to determine if your needs match what the service offers. The services – and the level of treatment intensity – should be a good fit for your specific situation.

2. COMPREHENSIVE, INTEGRATED TREATMENT APPROACH

If you have a drinking problem, you may have other problems in your life too. An effective treatment program should address your problems comprehensively rather than concentrating on one problem only.

3. FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN TREATMENT

Your treatment is likely to be more successful if your parent or guardian is involved.

4. DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PROGRAM

Treatment has to address the unique challenges young people face. You should not be in the same program as adults. Also, there are very different teen challenges at age 14 and age 18.

5. ENGAGE AND RETAIN TEENS IN TREATMENT

The program should take steps to make sure you are fully involved in decisions about your treatment and about sticking with it.

6. QUALIFIED STAFF

Staff should understand young peoples' needs and abilities. They should work well with families, too.

over

7. GENDER AND CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Treatment should fit with who you are, including your cultural background and language preference. Treatment doesn't work as well if everybody has to fit into it, rather than it fitting each person. Programs are less successful if they follow a one-size-fits-all formula. For instance, if you are most comfortable speaking in a language other than English, the staff should understand you. Also, girls often have different treatment needs than guys because they may be facing different challenges in their lives.

8. CONTINUING CARE

Treatment programs should strongly emphasize that care may take time, and help you to recognize and deal with factors that can cause you to drink again.

9. TREATMENT OUTCOMES

The most effective treatment programs are those that keep track of you, including after you finish treatment. It is hard to change. Good programs follow up to help you keep your resolve up and to keep with the new behaviors that you learned in treatment.

For more information:

Drug Strategies, an independent research institute, has identified nine keys to effective alcohol treatment for 12- to 20-year olds.

www.drugstrategies.org

The Alcohol Cost Calculator, a free online tool to help communities calculate the extent of alcohol problems, includes separate calculators for businesses and young people.

www.alcoholcostcalculator.org

Ensuring Solutions to Alcohol Problems at The George Washington University Medical Center seeks to increase access to treatment for individuals with alcohol problems. For further information or more copies of this handout, contact:

Ensuring Solutions
2021 K St. NW, Suite 800
Washington, DC 20006
phone: 202.296.6922
fax: 202.296.0025
info@ensuringsolutions.org
www.ensuringsolutions.org