

Extended Summary

Protective and Preventative Factors in Struggling with Addiction: The Role of Life Skills*

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Abstract

Drug addiction plays an important role in the problems experienced by children and adolescents in developmental risk groups. The programs developed to prevent drug addiction seem to be more on knowledge level. The aim of this study is to determine the relationship between drug addiction and life skills in adolescents. In this context, a qualitative research has been conducted in order to demonstrate the attitudes of young people and their families towards substance use/dependence, the motivations of considering and starting narratives, the reasons of starting to drug, the consequences of drug use and the importance of life skills in preventing drug addiction. The data were gathered from 10 separate interviews with a total of 87 people, consisting of parents (45) and young people (42) with the focus group interviews. The data were analyzed with qualitative data analysis technique using MAXQDA program. As a result of the research, it is found that young people who use drugs have problems with their families, do not have good relations with their families and friends, and they have low school achievement and school loyalty. Among the life skills that young people believe to be effective in preventing drug use are social skills, communication and nurturing relationships in affective domain; , problem solving, resistance to substance and goal setting, health in the field of managing emotions and self-discipline are the most important ones in cognitive domain.

Keyword

Addiction • Life skills • Preventive and protective factors • Focus group

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Addiction is a condition where one has to increase the dosage of a substance in order to create the same cognitive, behavioral, and/or emotional changes as when usage first occurred; when the substance is not used, one experiences physical and psychological problems, and the use of the substance creates difficulties in the body, in functionality, and in one's social relations (Coşkun, 2006). One continues to use the substance despite the damage, is unable to quit substance usage for an extended time, is constantly searching for the substance, and continues to increase the amount of substance used each time (Ögel, Taner, & Yılmazçetin, 2003).

The importance of protective and risk factors for preventing substance abuse has recently been emphasized. According to the *World Drug Report (2018)*, risk factors are listed as: trauma, adversity in childhood, poverty, mental health problems, peer pressure, drug availability, negative school climate, and sensation seeking; the protective factors are listed as caregiver involvement and monitoring, health and neurological development, coping skills and emotional regulation, physical safety and social inclusion, safe neighborhoods, and a quality school environment. Life skills are considered among the individual-level protective factors that protect the individual from high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse (Özbay et al., 2018).

Life skills are adaptive and positive behaviors that enable individuals to cope effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life (Malti, 2011; UNICEF, 2012). Prevention programs that have been prepared based on improving life skills in the struggle against addiction appear to produce effective results (Botvin & Griffin, 2004; Dusenbury et al., 1997; Faggiano et al., 2008; Korkut, 2007; Shechtman et al., 2005).

One of the effective approaches in reducing youths' risky behaviors (substance use and sexual activities) is positive youth development (Atkins, Oman, Vesely, Aspy, & McLeroy, 2002; Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Oman et al., 2004; Phelps et al., 2009; Schwartz et al., 2010; Shinn & Yoshikawa, 2008; Tebes et al., 2007). Positive youth development is an approach that focuses on the strengths and potentials in an individual's development using a developmental and systemic perspective on youths' strengths (Lerner, 1998). This model aims to highlight the positive developmental characteristics of children and young people in areas called the 5 Cs. These characteristics are: competency, confidence, character, caring, and contribution (Lerner, et al., 2005). Within the scope of the 4-H Life Skills program, which aims to provide these competencies, the main fields (cognitive, social, emotional, and health) include 8 sub-dimensions related to these fields (management, thinking, relationship, social interest, giving, working, being, and living) and 35 basic skills (4-H Organization, 2014).

Although many different life-skills training programs have been tested in the literature (Botvin, Baker, Dusenbury, Botvin, & Diaz, 1995; Parvathy & Renjithaa,

2015; Velasco, Griffin, Antichi, & Celata, 2015), which specific skills are protective for adolescents against addiction is unclear. This study is important in the sense that it provides data that will help prepare intervention programs for realizing policies regarding addiction prevention. In this context, the main problem of this research is to reveal the skills that at-risk youths should have in resisting substance usage.

Method

This study uses qualitative research designs in order to reveal the reasons for substance abuse and for starting substance usage, as well as the consequences of substance abuse based on the views of youths and their families, and to produce preventive policies within the scope of life skills (Büyüköztürk, Kılıç Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz, & Demirel, 2018).

Study Group

Ten different focus-group interviews have been conducted with two different groups of adolescents and their caregivers (a total of 87 people) in the scope of the research. The focus groups consist of eight adolescents and eight caregivers with no history of substance use, 18 adolescents and 13 caregivers with a history of rare substance use, and 16 adolescents who have used drugs and undergone treatment and their 24 caregivers.

Data Collection Tools and Procedure

This study uses a personal information form and six different semi-structured focus-group interview forms developed by the researchers. The focus-group interview forms have been applied separately to adolescents who have used substances and are receiving treatment, to the adolescents who have tried substances, to the adolescents who have never used any substance, to the parents of the substance-using adolescents receiving treatment, to the parents of adolescents who have tried using substances, and to the parents of adolescents who have never tried any substance.

The study data have been collected using focus group interviews that were held between August 15 and October 25, 2016 in Gaziantep Municipality's youth center. The interviews were conducted by two different interviewers, one being a psychologist and the other a counselor.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the focus group interviews were then decoded. Content analyses have been performed using the program MAXQDA.

Findings

According to the opinions of the adolescents who have not used any substance, goal setting, resisting the substance, decision-making, healthy relationships, social skills, communication skills, empathy, and emotional regulation are among the basic life skills that have prevented them from starting to use or even trying any substance. They also give preventative value to life skills such as problem-solving, planning and organizing, and the ability to make healthy lifestyle choices.

According to the views of adolescents who have tried a substance, among the skills they need more of are: decision making, goal setting, resisting the substance, healthy lifestyle choices, emotional regulation, communication, and healthy relationships.

Adolescents who have used substances and are receiving treatment list their reasons for using substances as having a friend who uses the substance; curiosity; sensation seeking; lack of self-confidence; desire to prove one's self; negative environmental conditions; having no goals in life; lack of skills like resisting substance, emotional regulation, problem-solving, and decision-making; domestic violence; and psychological problems. These individuals also seem to have problems in family and peer relations, health problems, failure at school, and overreacting families and hope for an understanding and happy family.

Adolescents who have used substances and are receiving treatment emphasized the importance of skills such as healthy relationships, social skills, concern for others, substance resistance, planning, problem solving, goal setting, and self-esteem in terms of protecting oneself from substance use. According to these adolescents, having a positive family life and a good environment, attending school, and resisting the substance are seen as protective factors.

The adolescents who have use substances and are receiving treatment think that resisting substance; having social skills, empathy, communication skills, and healthy relationships; setting goals; making decisions; managing emotions; and having self-esteem, character-building, resilience, and problem-solving skills are among the life skills they need.

According to the parents' opinions, the reasons for adolescents' substance use are negative friendships, family problems, and indifferent parents. Parents believe that establishing intimate and healthy relationships within the family, having discipline at home, domestic understanding, having family members with effective listening skills, a lack of domestic problems, choosing proper friends, taking responsibility, knowing the damage caused by the substance, moving from the neighborhood, checking the school environment, increasing the penalties for substance use, and checking parks and gardens are among the factors that will ensure that children are protected from substance use.

Parents also mention the skills their children should have in order to resist substance use to include social skills; communication skills; healthy relationships; problem-solving skills; resisting the substance; setting goals; being resilient; planning/organizing; managing emotions; and having self-esteem, character, and self-discipline.

The results of the study reveal that families and adolescents should be educated and supported on life skills from an early age. In addition, strengthening the individual using ecology in the fight against substance addiction needs to be the primary goal of prevention programs. One of the most basic ways to strengthen the individual and family is to equip them with effective life skills.

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