

# Young Drug Addicts' Perceptions on Family Relations: The Case of Esenler - Bağcılar, Istanbul

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## Abstract

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in drug use and addiction in Turkey, especially among young people aged 15-25. This study focused on young drug addicts and their families, examining young drug addicts' perceptions about family relationships. Using qualitative research methods, data were collected from 10 young people as well as 2 individuals who do not use drugs and who reside in the same neighborhood through semi-structured interviews. The data were processed using a descriptive analysis according to predefined themes. The findings of the study revealed that the problems young people face with their families may either trigger or increase current substance abuse. A troubled relationship with parents is also a basic determinant of such behaviors as running away from home or a tendency to commit crimes in young people. In addition, if a young individual's substance abuse is noticed by parents, family relationships face may become even more strained. It was observed that parents exert a high level of influence over their children both during and after adolescence, and that genuine communication with young people was found to be an important factor in their choice to refrain from substance use.

**Keywords:** Drug addiction • Substance abuse in youth • Family relations

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Many studies have been conducted on young drug addicts of different age groups (15-25) and their families in Turkey. Two major themes are observed in these studies, the first theme being substance use of young people whose parents also use such substances Özcan's study (2006, pp. 119-129) asserts that those young people who witness substance use within the family tend to use drugs and display both risky and deviant behavior. The second theme, which is also the subject of the current study, is the impact of troubled relationship with parents on young people's drug use habits. In fact, previous studies carried out on young drug addicts (Tamar Gürol & Ögel, 2014) have shown that the two main factors underlying addiction in young people are (1) problematic family relationships and (2) unhealthy communication with parents.

Research conducted in countries other than Turkey shows that a well-functioning family coupled with strong parental support is effective in preventing young people from becoming drug addicts. The choice of problem-solving methods in the family combined with an understanding and sympathetic approach toward adolescence problems (Krank & Goldstein, 2006, p. 440; Wills & Yaeger, 2003, p. 223) also helps to reduce the risk of drug dependence. In another study, low school achievement and poor social environment, in addition to the lack of communication channels in family relationships (Lopez et al., 2008, p. 827), was shown to influence young people's substance use, especially in early adolescence.

The number of academic studies conducted in Turkey on young drug addicts and their families started to increase beginning in the mid-2000s. In this context, a significant study conducted by Ögel, Taner, and Eke in 2006 on alcohol and drug use patterns of 10th grade students in Istanbul suggest that substance use is more prevalent in particularly low-income families as compared to high-income families (Ögel et al., 2006, p. 20; Ögel, Taner, Eke, & Erol, 2005); which underlines the impact of negative processes in the family, migration, and poverty.

Another study carried out by Görgün, Tiryaki, and Topbaş in 2010, measures the relationship between university students' drug use and attachment styles to their parents. Among the research findings, the status of the

father figure at home, the proximity of the young person with his father, a developed sense of self control stand out as elements in preventing young people from using drugs (Görgün et al., 2010, p. 311).

A field study in 2011 focusing on adolescents using drugs was carried out by Evcin (2011). Evcin's study focused on 15-19 year old high school students in Istanbul. Evcin suggests that the amount of time one spends with his or her family, the social activities they do together, and parental supervision on the young person are very efficient in preventing a young person's from abusing drugs (Evcin, 2011, pp. 74-90).

The most recent study concerning young people's drug use is Özmen and Kubanç's qualitative research on high school administrators and teachers. Among the research results, the two major factors that are mentioned to push young people toward drug use are "parents' indifference as well as parents' lack of love and compassion toward their children" and a "young person's pursuit of happiness outside the home due to family problems" (Özmen & Kubanç, 2013, p. 364).

In addition to the studies mentioned above, this study has implemented a different method. The study was integrated into the daily lives of young people who use drugs, and attempted to address the causes of drug abuse within the context of their family relationships. The study also included interviews with volunteers in the neighborhood who help young drug users cope with their issues or seek rehabilitation, which thus draws attention to a different social dimension.

The young people interviewed will be referred to as both drug users and substance users in the study, due to the duality of the term in the literature. Both concepts will correspond to any toxic drug other than tobacco and alcohol.

## Method

### Research Model

This study used the qualitative research method to provide an original contribution to the literature and a more flexible and integrated approach to the lives of young drug addicts. In this context, a small number of young people were interviewed and asked in-depth questions about substance use as well as the details of their family relationships.

### Population of the Study

A total of 10 young people aged between 18 and 24 who actively use drugs or who had quit using drugs after a long period of use were met in Esenler and Bağcılar's basement cafes (both areas within the European side of the Metropolitan Municipality of Istanbul [İBB]) and interviewed between December 2013 and February 2014 (Gürel & Balta, 2011, pp. 1-15; Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, 2013). In-depth interviews were recorded with a voice recorder and then converted into text. The text was thematically classified and transformed into the final text<sup>1</sup>. In order to respect the privacy of participants, participants' real names were not used and false names were given in parenthesis along with the participants' age in the following format: (Veli, Drug Addict, 20).

### Validity and Reliability

In this study, reliability and validity were increased by implementing several methods; for example, two local residents who both know the participants and who are involved in the research were asked to check for both exaggerations and either missing or incorrect expressions in the teenagers' responses to the interview questions. Finally, sound recordings and transcripts have been kept by the researcher.

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<sup>1</sup> Some excerpts from the researcher's study in Esenler performed between 2010 and 2013 and which was published as a book entitled "Apaçi Youth: A qualitative study on Social Behaviour and Orientations of Youth and Apaçi Subculture" (Yaman, 2014) was used in the writing of this article.

## Findings

### Drug Addicted Teens' Family Structures and Relations with Parents

The most difficult point about interviewing how young people with a substance addiction perceive their family structures and their relationships with their parents is they are unwilling to share information about their family. While being interviewed, young people often expressed “they have caused [their families] too much pain” (Ali, Drug Addict, 22) and refrained from using a critical style. Indeed, although they complained that they had not received sufficient interest or support from their families, they still stated that they did not want to “do them injustice” despite the financial and moral damage that they may have caused their families. Therefore, they used a controlled and protective language when talking about their families.<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Levent, a resident in the same neighborhood stated that parents of young drug addicts have a very low level of education. His observations seem to reflect the outcome of the post-1980 immigration wave into Istanbul when the two districts of Esenler and Bağcılar emerged as a result of this immigration. Aksit (2004 as cited in Tekeli, 2011, p. 50), analyzed immigration from rural to urban areas in Turkey, identifying three breaking points. The third and last one of these immigrations occurred between 1985 and 1990 with immigrants stemming largely from Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia (Kurban, Yürkseker, Çelik, Unalan, & Aker, 2008, p. 22). The family structure mentioned by Mr. Levent consists mainly of troubled families settling mostly in urban areas post-1980, with most families having experienced both material deprivation and social traumas. Findings regarding the employment status and occupational choices of parents of young drug addicts show resemblance to young drug addicts' accounts. According to a study by Temel (2011), the fathers of 50% of young individuals with drug addictions who commit crimes are either self-employed or do not hold a regular job (Temel, 2011, p. 66).

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2 According to 2013 data, 92.7% of drug addicts who received treatment in a rehabilitation center continue living with their parents/families (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2013).

Yet another important issue raised by young people is family relations. Relations with one's mother, father and close relatives are corrupted in urban areas, a situation which tends to lead one to experience a lack of self-control. In Akman's research on families (2006, pp. 61-63) who have migrated to Istanbul, 60% of the participants emphasized that people's loyalty to traditions, good neighborly relations, and family relations were far better in the rural areas from which they originated, and that the urban lifestyle has eroded most of these characteristics.

All young people interviewed expressed similar opinions about having a regular job. Bringing home money to family members and becoming the "bread-winner" of the household result in dropping out of school for these young people who are already disadvantaged in the educational process. In addition, since the financial means necessary for obtaining drugs are procured through working, such a situation causes young people to drift further apart from schooling.

### **The Fear of Abandonment**

Over the course of time, young drug addicts' relationships with their families deteriorate due to a number of complaints from their school and neighbors. In order to obtain the funds necessary to provide drugs, these youngsters turn into unskilled workers doing any job they can find. As their drug addiction deepens, so does the amount of money needed to obtain a satisfactory amount of drugs increase, thereby causing such young individuals to resort to illicit methods of gaining money, such as games of chance, gambling, theft, drug trafficking, etc. This process inevitably leads young people to crime and violence, increasing the likelihood of ending up in judicial processes and imprisonment. As a result, the inadequate emotional bond between the young person and his family becomes more problematic than ever since the family initially reacts with a strong response and harsh discipline followed by withdrawal and acceptance of the situation as it is.

Another important point frequently expressed by young drug addicts is that they do not receive any recognition from their immediate family or social circle. When a young person does not feel reassured or as if he or she is accepted as an individual in his or her own right, s/he experiences a loss of self-esteem and establishes a negative attitude toward him/herself (Ulusoy, 2006, p. 22). When it is the parents who do not show their child the recognition and acceptance s/he needs, it will lead him/her to behaviors such as committing crimes and/or acts of violence which will attract the attention of his/her family. During his interview, Ahmet (Drug Addict, 22) explained that the first time his parents were genuinely interested in him and showed affection was when he spent the night in jail for the first time. These words appear to be a brief summary of young people's need for recognition and attention.

### **Running away from Home or Breaking Contact with Parents**

The troubled relationship between young drug users and their family takes a much more problematic turn after the addiction is noticed by parents. According to research, substance use among young people who run away from home is generally high. Şimşek's research found that the rate of substance use among young runaways in Istanbul in 2013 was 32.5% (Şimşek, 2013, p. 40). It is reported by young drug addicts that once their drug addiction is noticed by parents, they go through three stages: (1) violence and beating, (2) suggestions and advice, and (3) desperately seeking a solution and accepting the situation. Indeed, during the field research, almost all drug addicts reported that they had gone through these stages.

Violence and beating seems to be a childhood story revisited during adolescence for these young people because all participants had been exposed to intensive domestic violence or had spent time among those exposed. Nihat, one of the participants, mentioned that he first ran away from home when he was 16. This is generally the age when many teens run away from home. Zengin's survey in 2013 concluded that 44% of

runaways are 15 years old, followed by 16 year olds (29.7%), 17 year olds (24.8%), and 18 and above (2%) (Zengin, 2013, p. 105). Running away from home decreases as age increases partly because 17-18 year olds tend to break contact with their families and never come back home again, either settling down somewhere else or becoming involved in criminal acts.

## **Results and Discussion**

One of the common results encountered in the studies conducted on young people is when teenagers regard family relationships as healthy and sufficient, they feel internally and externally more secure and protected (Çataloğlu, 2011, p. 165). In this sense, during adolescence, which is the most turbulent phase of human life, young people who have healthy communication and who spend quality time with their parents tend to have less risk of falling into substance use. According to Evcin's study on high school students between the ages of 15 and 19, the rate of alcohol use is 2.4, and cannabis use is 10 to 15 times less as a result of the time spent with parents during the week and weekends (Evcin, 2011, pp. 76-77).

One of the important outcomes of the field research conducted is the significance of a strong family structure and active parental role in order to keep young people away from addiction. The findings obtained in this study support the findings of a study by Çavuşoğlu and Bahar (2010) which concluded that the effective use of a family support system helps to prevent young people from falling into substance abuse (Çavuşoğlu & Bahar, p. 77). The interviews with young addicts revealed that the absence of a strong father figure has critical consequences.

Gezek's study on homeless drug addicts and their families in Istanbul suggests that these young people have cut ties with their families and have turned to illegitimate ways of making money and criminal acts for survival. In time, they turn into individuals who are completely excluded from social life and relations (Gezek, 2007, pp. 87-89). In this context, it seems essential to analyze the successful examples and best practices

applied in other countries and to develop a model to incorporate school, friends, and social environment into the family (Pilař, 2008, p. 11).

While planning the treatment and rehabilitation processes to be implemented for young drug addicts, knowledge about their family structure and family relationships<sup>3</sup> will contribute to the process.

Young addicts state that the support they will receive during their educational life and through involvement in social activities will keep them away from problematic peer relations. An ordinary weekend trip or shopping with the family may mean a lot for a young individual. What young people have expressed in this study resemble the findings of previous studies which emphasize the significance of healthy attachment relationships (Morsünbül, 2009, pp. 233-234) in the prevention of risky behavior.

Family's suddenly increasing interest in the young person after discovering substance use may be perceived as "overwhelming" or "overbearing" (Selim, Drug Addict, 23) by young people. Although this increased interest is welcomed by young people, they think parents should expect neither an immediate change nor a quick recovery. One of the addicts expressed that "after a long period of neglect, I have become an addict, and now they expect me to return to normal life and to detox immediately" (Nihat, Drug Addict, 21). This approach can be perceived negatively by the young person and may cause further separation from the family. Although both parental supervision and commitment play an important role in addiction prevention (Peltzer, 2009, p. 382), it is more useful before the addiction even begins. Once the young person becomes addicted, this supervision should be applied cautiously.

One's social environment has been expressed as a risk factor for drug addiction in studies on adolescent substance use (Whitesell, Bachand, Peel, & Brown, 2013, p. 4); however, it has not been expressed by any of the participants in the current study. Whereas a negative social environment may act to increase the risk of substance abuse, a negative family environment and relatives were not considered to be a determining factor in this regard.

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3 For a detailed study on substance using young people and their families, please see Ögel, Eke, Taner, and Topuz (2004).

Almost all of the young people interviewed are members of families who had migrated from rural areas to the big city (Istanbul), which causes some deprivations in and of itself. Indeed, youngsters growing up in a different culture in rural areas encounter different socialization channels than they do in the city and their insufficient social background cause them to lack certain social skills and qualifications considered necessary for individuals living in the city (Wacquant, 2011, p. 33; Walther & Pohl, 2005, p. 5). The participants stated that they felt hesitant about returning to their previous lifestyles and peer relations after recovering from their addictions and that they needed government support to find an occupation since they are already stigmatized as “substance users” by society and since being unemployed will make it easier for them to return to their old days of substance abuse.

Young addicts express their expectations in the rehabilitation phase after their treatment as returning to school or attending an open education program, and being placed in a job after receiving some vocational training. In this regard, the coordinated work of the Ministry of Family and Social Policies, AMATEM and the Turkish Labor Agency (İŞKUR) (Yaman, Tuna, Köroğlu, Seylan, & Yılmaz, 2014, p. 115) is envisioned to yield positive outcomes.

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