

RESOURCE GUIDE:

Best Practices for Effective Adolescent Substance Use Disorder Services



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 **NASADAD** National Association of
State Alcohol and Drug Abuse Directors

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This resource guide offers information about evidence-based best practices tailored for adolescents struggling with substance use disorders (SUDs). It addresses the urgent need for specific interventions for youth during this critical developmental stage by presenting best practices designed to respond to their treatment and recovery needs. Emphasizing a holistic approach, this resource provides guidance so that service providers and caregivers are equipped with the tools to support adolescents through every stage of recovery and toward a healthier future.



Understanding the Need

Initiation of substance use often occurs during adolescence, with adolescents reporting using substances to feel good, get high, relieve pain or aid with sleep problems. Adverse consequences of adolescent substance misuse include overdose, risk of developing SUD, negative impacts on brain development and even death.¹

Studies have shown that the majority of SUD and mental disorders emerge in teenage years with half of all lifetime cases presenting by age 14 and three-quarters by age 24.² Among adolescents aged 12-17 in 2021, 7.6% (2 million people) had an SUD in the past year. Additionally, the percentage of people needing substance use treatment was highest among young adults aged 18-25 (25.1%, or 8.4 million people).³

Youth with SUDs experience higher rates of physical and psychiatric illnesses, which diminish overall health and wellbeing. Major depression and anxiety disorders typically emerge during adolescence and can be exacerbated by SUDs, leading to self-injury, academic failure, violence, and suicide.⁴ Additionally, youth engaging in substance misuse face heightened risks for physical health problems, including increased risk for injury, HIV/STD-related sexual risk behaviors, cardiovascular issues, liver damage, respiratory complications and compromised immune function.⁵ These health consequences underscore the critical need for targeted intervention and support to mitigate these health disparities.



Meeting the Need for Comprehensive Services

The age and developmental stage of adolescents with SUD requires that their psychosocial and emotional needs are treated differently from adults. Essential to the effective treatment of youth is providing wrap-around, age-appropriate services that address their holistic needs. Comprehensive services may include active outreach, assessment, withdrawal management, harm reduction services, psychosocial interventions, individual and family behavioral therapy, medication, connection to primary care, and recovery support services. This comprehensive approach ensures that adolescents receive the support they need at every stage of their recovery process. The following identifies several best practices for effectively serving adolescents.

Best Practices

Best practices play a crucial role in addressing SUDs among youth and promoting successful treatment and recovery outcomes. For example:

- **Screening tools** allow for timely intervention, reducing the risk of SUD progression by identifying at-risk individuals.
- **Comprehensive clinical assessments** provide vital insight into substance use patterns and severity, as well as co-occurring disorders, to inform personalized treatment plans.
- **Engagement strategies** help with treatment initiation, commitment and retention, fostering trust and motivation for services.
- **Treatment services** mitigate the long-term consequences of addiction by offering prompt and effective care.
- **Family-focused programs** address the broader impact of SUDs, promoting healing and recovery for both individuals and families.
- **Integrated care models** address interconnected needs, ensuring holistic treatment for youth with SUDs and co-occurring issues.
- **Recovery support services** offer ongoing assistance for maintaining health and wellness, sobriety, and preventing relapse.

Screening tools

Screening tools for youth are brief instruments designed to quickly identify who may be at risk for substance use problems and may need further assessment to diagnose an SUD.

[A Pocket Guide for Alcohol Screening and Brief Intervention for Youth](#)

This concise tool, Alcohol Screening and Brief Intervention for Youth: A Practitioners Guide, helps identify youth aged 9–18 at risk for alcohol-related issues, aiding in quick and effective screening and interventions during primary care visits. This pocket guide includes two screening questions and offers tips and resources on when and how to use the alcohol screen with youth.

[Adolescent Drug Involvement Scale: ADIS](#)

This screening tool is used to assess the severity of drug involvement in adolescents. It provides information on an adolescent's drug use patterns, including the frequency, quantity and types of substances used. It also evaluates associated problems or consequences, such as legal issues, school performance and interpersonal conflicts. It determines the need for a full assessment of an adolescent's use of drugs.

[The CRAFFT 2.1 Manual](#)

This manual provides a comprehensive overview of how to use the CRAFFT (Car, Relax, Alone, Forget, Friends, Trouble), including administration protocols, risk level determination, and other diagnostic resources. The CRAFFT consists of six questions aimed at assessing adolescents' substance use behaviors, identifying potential substance use problems, and determining if further assessment or intervention is necessary.

[Adolescent Substance Abuse Subtle Screening Inventory \(SASSI-A3\)](#)

This screening tool identifies adolescents, aged 13–18, who may have or are at risk of developing an SUD. The SASSI-A3 questions assess various aspects of substance use behavior, attitudes and consequences, helping identify high or low probability of SUDs.

Assessment tools

Assessment tools designed for youth are comprehensive instruments used to evaluate substance use patterns, history, severity of symptoms and related factors to effectively guide treatment planning and interventions. These can include interviews, questionnaires and observation.

[Teen Addiction Severity Index \(T-ASI\)](#)

This assessment tool is designed to evaluate substance use and related issues in adolescents. The T-ASI covers domains such as substance use history, health, family dynamics, education/employment, legal matters and social functioning.

[Global Appraisal of Individual Needs \(GAIN\) Instruments](#)

This website provides an integrated family of assessment instruments with a series of measures and computer applications designed to support several treatment practices. The GAIN-I is a biopsychosocial assessment tool designed to evaluate substance use, mental health, physical health, legal and social domains. It helps identify treatment needs, guides intervention planning and monitors progress over time.

[National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey: Mobile Examination Center Interviewers' Procedures Manual](#)

This instruction manual describes the structure and conventions of the National Institute of Mental Health Diagnostic Interview Schedule for Children (DISC-IV), provides information on the procedures an interviewer should follow during administration, and offers strategies for overcoming potential difficulties. The DISC is a comprehensive structured diagnostic tool used to assess a wide range of mental health challenges, including mood disorders, anxiety disorders, behavioral disorders, SUDs and other psychiatric conditions in children and adolescents aged 6-18 years.

[Comprehensive Adolescent Severity Inventory \(CASI\)](#)

This structured interview tool includes Breathalyzer™ and urine drug test results for an in-depth assessment of the severity of an adolescent's substance use and related problems. The CASI evaluates a wide range of problems and needs among adolescents — including substance use, psychiatric symptoms, family and peer relationships, legal issues and educational status — to assess the overall impact of substance use on an adolescent's life.

Engagement and Retention Strategies

Engagement and retention strategies help connect and motivate youth to access, and remain in, treatment services. Multiple strategies can be combined to engage youth, including family support, peer support, technology and counseling.

[Getting Engaged: Practical Strategies to Connect With Transition-age Youth](#)

This interactive workshop integrates research findings and real-world lessons on engagement strategies learned through national research and programming for transition-age youth (TAY) such as, a full continuum of services for TAY and training and technical assistance for TAY providers and state systems.

[A Review of Effective Youth Engagement Strategies for Mental Health and Substance Use Interventions](#)

This literature review evaluates opportunities to improve youth engagement in mental health and substance use programs, aiming to identify best practices that enhance engagement and improve clinical outcomes for local program development. The review covers 40 studies and reports focusing on youth aged 12-18 years old. The studies were grouped into six themes including youth participation in program development, parental relationships, technology, health clinics, schools and social marketing. It discusses various tools that intervention developers can use to enhance youth engagement in prevention or treatment programs.

[Effective Strategies and Interventions for Engaging At-risk Youth: A Rapid Systematic Review of the Literature](#)

This systematic review evaluates recent literature on strategies to engage at-risk youth facing family violence, mental health issues or SUD. It reviews 13 studies involving 2,527 high-risk youth, categorizing strategies into five themes: technology-based, experiential therapy-based, counseling-based, program-based and other engagement methods.

[Evidence Summary: The Effectiveness of Motivational Interviewing for Young People Engaging in Problematic Substance Use](#)

This practical summary describes motivational interviewing and its effectiveness in engaging youth with substance use problems and co-occurring mental health problems. A guide for service providers, it highlights research, evidence-based strategies and techniques, and best practices for caring for young people and supporting behavior change and recovery.

SUD treatment services

SUD treatment services help youth stop or reduce harmful substance misuse, improve their health and social function, and manage their risk for relapse. Treatment helps youth build skills to resist and refuse substances and deal with triggers or cravings, replacing drug use with constructive and rewarding activities and facilitating better interpersonal relationships.

[The Adolescent Community Reinforcement Approach \(A-CRA\): An Evidence-based Practice for Treating SUD Among Young People](#)

This presentation provides an overview of the A-CRA, an evidence-based behavioral intervention that seeks to replace environmental influences that support alcohol or drug use with prosocial activities and behaviors that support recovery.

[The Assertive Continuing Care Protocol: A Clinician’s Manual for Working With Adolescents After Treatment of Alcohol and Other Substance Abuse Disorders](#)

This manual describes the Assertive Continuing Care (ACC) intervention specifically designed for adolescents following a period of residential treatment. The ACC has two components — the A-CRA (as discussed in the previous resource) and case management — and is delivered in the home environment.

[Trauma-informed Guiding Principles for Working With Transition-age Youth: Provider Fact Sheet](#)

This fact sheet outlines information for service providers to support TAY with trauma. It describes TAY, their unique experiences and six trauma-informed guiding principles to better support youth in their journey and recovery.

[Guided Self-change Model of Treatment for Substance Use Disorders](#)

This article reviews the development and evaluation of the guided self-change model of treatment for SUDs. Guided self-change treatment is a brief, cognitive-behavioral, motivational intervention first developed for people with alcohol use challenges. It has been evaluated as an effective model for individuals with SUDs, adolescents and Spanish-speaking individuals with alcohol use disorder.

Family-focused Programs and Therapies

Family-focused programs and therapies increase family understanding and support of youths' retention in treatment. They help the whole family recover.

[Brief Strategic Family Therapy for Adolescent Drug Abuse \(Therapy Manuals for Drug Addiction\)](#)

This treatment manual provides information to aid SUD treatment practitioners in providing effective care by describing scientifically supported therapies for addiction and offering guidance on session content and the implementation of specific techniques related to this therapeutic approach. BSFT is an evidence-based intervention for treating adolescents with behavioral problems, including acting-out, alcohol or substance misuse, delinquency, associations with antisocial peers, and impaired family functioning.

[The Strengthening Families Program](#)

This website provides an overview of the Strengthening Families Program (SFP), an evidence-based family skills training program designed to enhance family functioning and reduce the risk of substance misuse and other behavioral problems in children. It typically includes sessions for parents, children and the family as a whole, focusing on improving communication, parenting skills and family relationships. SFP aims to increase family strengths, develop resilience and promote healthy behaviors through structured activities and interactive lessons.

[Treating Adolescent Substance Abuse Using Multidimensional Family Therapy](#)

This clinical guide summarizes Multidimensional Family Therapy (MDFT), a family-based therapy with empirical support for its effectiveness in addressing teen drug misuse and delinquency. MDFT uses three frameworks: risk and protective factors, the developmental perspective and the ecological perspective. MDFT is an intensive, in-home model that is a family-centered, comprehensive treatment program for adolescents and TAY with substance use problems, delinquency issues and emotional problems.

[Functional Family Therapy for Young People in Treatment for Non-opioid Drug Use: A Systematic Review](#)

This systematic review evaluates the effects of Functional Family Therapy (FFT) on reducing drug misuse among young people in treatment for non-opioid drug use. FFT is an intensive, short-term therapeutic model that offers in-home family counseling designed specifically to address substance misuse and related issues within the context of family dynamics.

Integrated Care

Integrated care addresses SUDs, mental health, and primary care concerns to address youth holistic needs.

[Improving Access to Screening, Brief Intervention and Referral to Treatment \(SBIRT\) in Primary Care for Adolescents: Implementation Considerations](#)

This brief provides an overview of Screening, Brief Intervention and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) principles, practical guidance, and evidence of effectiveness to support its implementation in various healthcare settings with adolescents. SBIRT is a comprehensive, integrated, public health approach to delivery early intervention and treatment services for people with SUDs and those at risk of developing these disorders.

[Guidance to States and School Systems on Addressing Mental Health and Substance Use Issues in Schools](#)

This letter provides guidance to states and school systems about addressing mental health and substance use issues in schools using Medicaid funding. It provides examples of approaches for treating youth in schools and describes Medicaid state plan benefits that may be used to cover mental health and SUD-related treatment services. Additionally, the guidance summarizes best practice models for providing quality, evidence-based comprehensive mental health- and SUD-related services to students.

[Integrating Substance Use Care Into Primary Care for Adolescents and Young Adults: Lessons Learned](#)

This retrospective evaluation reviews a primary care-based, multidisciplinary outpatient program for youth who use substances. Components of the program include primary care, addiction treatment, harm reduction, naloxone distribution, psychotherapy, recovery support and addressing social determinants of health.

Recovery Support Services

Recovery support services provide emotional and practical support (e.g., peer support, child care, recovery housing) to help youth progress from recovery initiation to stable recovery.

[Providing Youth and Young Adult Peer Support Through Medicaid](#)

This report explores options for providing youth and young adult peer support through Medicaid. The report defines youth peer support, describes key considerations before becoming a Medicaid provider, and reviews workforce considerations such as training and credentialing to meet Medicaid reporting requirements. Brief descriptions of youth peer support programs in Georgia, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Oregon and Pennsylvania are included.

[The Youth Peer Mentor Program](#)

This report provides an overview of the Youth Peer Mentor Program (YPMP), which supports justice-involved and TAY populations. The YPMP is a four-tier model (Mindfully Exploring Substance Use, Mindful Peer Mentor Training, Become a Registered Alcohol and Drug Technician, and Become a Certified Peer Recovery Specialist) designed to address California's substance use crisis by providing SUD education to young adults aged 16-25. The program prepares youth to become certified peer specialists.

[Al-Anon Guidelines: The Shared Experience of Al-Anon and Alateen Members](#)

This resource offers tips for Al-Anon members interested in starting an Alateen meeting in a school. Alateen, a part of Al-Anon, and is a fellowship of young people (mostly teenagers) who have been affected by someone else's drinking. Alateen teenagers meet other teenagers in similar situations and provide understanding and support.

[Best Practices for Working With Transition-age Youth Experiencing Homelessness](#)

This resource reviews the unique service challenges, best practices and strategies for service providers working with TAY experiencing homelessness.

Other Resources

[Advisory: Screening and Treatment of Substance Use Disorders Among Adolescents \(Based on TIP 31-32\)](#)

This advisory includes recommendations for engaging adolescents in SUD risk assessment, screening, and treatment. It provides an overview of the Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) approach and summarize key messages and considerations for screening and treating adolescents with SUDs.

[National Guidelines for Child and Youth Behavioral Health Crisis Care](#)

This resource offers best practices, implementation strategies and practical guidance for the design and development of services that meet the needs of children, youth and their families experiencing a behavioral health crisis. Additional technical guidance is provided in [A Safe Place to Be: Crisis Stabilization Services and Other Supports for Children and Youth](#), a companion report produced by SAMHSA. <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/nasmhpd-a-safe-place-to-be.pdf>

[California Department of Health Care Services Adolescent Substance Use Disorder Best Practices Guide](#)

This guidance incorporates scientific research and the best clinical practices from California's children's service systems and SUD treatment files. The document discusses principles of care, service elements, recovery services and administrative considerations. It is also based on the American Society of Addiction Medicine criteria for determining the appropriate intensity and length of treatment for adolescents with SUDs.

[Facing Addiction in America: The Surgeon General's Report on Alcohol, Drugs and Health](#)

This report discusses opportunities to bring SUD treatment and mainstream health care systems into alignment to address a person's overall health, rather than solely addressing substance misuse or a physical health condition. It discusses evidence-based prevention and treatment practices for youth, as well as recommended actions everyone — individuals, families, community leaders, law enforcement, health care professionals, policymakers and researchers — can take to prevent substance misuse and reduce its consequences.

Conclusion

Through the adoption of these best practices designed to address youth SUD needs, stakeholders and providers can develop a comprehensive and effective approach to SUD treatment and recovery support, ultimately improving outcomes and fostering healthier futures.

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