

# Reaffirming youngster's self-esteem the key to combating early abuse

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Jamie was born addicted to heroin, and for most of his 14 years he has fought addictions to other drugs and alcohol.

He used drugs, he said, to counter feelings of inadequacy around his friends and adopted family and to compensate for problems at school.

Jamie's history is typical of children who start drinking and using drugs in their preteen years, according to a Cobb psychiatrist.

The use of so-called gateway drugs, which include marijuana, cigarettes, wine coolers, beer and inhalants, is an indicator of deeper underlying problems, according to Dr. Antonio F. Blanco, director of adolescent and preteen services at Brawner Psychiatric Institute in Smyrna. The drug abuse is secondary.

And the trend of preteens using drugs is "more prevalent than we think," Dr. Blanco said. Although children's drugs of choice seem to be nicotine and alcohol, he has treated kids who have used LSD, cocaine and street stimulants.

"Middle school may be the child's first exposure to drugs and alcohol, their first exposure to a sexual experience. For a kid who is predisposed, in middle school the pressure is great to fall into using," Dr. Blanco said.

There is no such thing as a drug-free school, he said, and he calls the "Just Say No" campaign "a fantasy."

"It's only a deterrent depending on the family culture," he said.

But by arming themselves with more information than their children have, parents can minimize peer pressure and educate their children about the dangers of substance abuse.

According to Jeff Dess, director of the A & D track at Cobb Hospital & Medical Center's Child & Adolescent Program, most of the children ages 8 to 12 he sees in treatment also have parents who are users. And the key to treating those children is to treat the family.

"Education and treatment of the family are the keys to trying to solve the drug problem," he said. "But for every drug stopped at the border, kids will find something else to take.

"Kids who choose to use aren't getting their needs met," Mr. Dess said.



Jamie



## Survey of drug use among preteens

More than 73,000 students in grades 4-6 in 38 states were surveyed in 1988-89. Here are the percentages of students reporting use of drugs.

Substance	4th	5th	6th	Total
Cigarettes	4.8	7.4	11.8	7.8
Smokeless tobacco	3.1	4.4	5.6	4.3
Beer	12.6	14.6	19.6	15.3
Wine coolers	10.9	14.2	20.7	15.0
Liquor	4.2	5.7	10.1	6.5
Marijuana	0.8	0.9	1.9	1.1
Inhalants	5.3	5.3	5.7	5.4
Other drugs	1.7	4.5	2.1	4.7

Source: PRIDE.

Demographics of students: 69 percent white, 23 percent black, 8 percent Hispanic, Asian or Native American. Equal ratios of males to females with more than 95 percent between the ages of 9 and 12.

For them, security is an issue, self-esteem may be low, grades might drop and the child could develop discipline problems.

Treatment for these children includes play and expressive therapy for the younger ones, and groups based on the Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step program for teenagers.

Dr. Blanco said a 10-year-old can be treated much more easily than an 18-year-old.

He proposes educating parents and the community as the most practical deterrent.

"Parents need to know that if they have a vulnerable child, he's vulnerable to everything. He can be any child who is different, such as a diabetic.

"Then we need to train the community to identify its vulnerable children. We need the creation of a prevention system that would sensitize the community to the problems of children. We've got to start from the bottom," Dr. Blanco said.

Jamie is making it one day at a time at STRAIGHT Inc. in Marietta. He's been on drugs for three months, and said his family situation is much better.

Already facing convictions for burglary, car theft, forgery and grand larceny, Jamie also has another incentive to stay clean.

"I don't want to end up in jail," he said,