Mental Health and Substance Abuse in Suburban Adolescents

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Abstract

Minimizing the problems of rich kids is as ill founded as accepting death by guns as just what happens to inner-city youth (Luthar, S. S., 2013). The purpose of this paper is to examine existing research looking at the various factors that cause high anxiety, and depression levels correlated with increased substance abuse among affluent suburban adolescents. Implications will be examined in terms of the lack of healthy coping strategies and skills taught in schools to help eliminate or alleviate the problem.
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Mental Health and Substance Abuse Among Adolescents of Suburban Populations

In current societal trends, there is an idea that having wealth will bring great happiness and prosperity. Unfortunately, the opposite is occurring among many adolescents growing up in affluent, high socioeconomic communities. High school students of this demographic are experiencing immense pressures to achieve high standardized test scores. In our country today, the higher the test score is, the greater chance the student will have to get into the best colleges in the nation. According to Luthar, and Latendresse (2005) suburban teens reported significantly higher anxiety and somewhat higher depression than did inner-city youth. It was also found that among affluent, but not inner city youth, substance abuse was linked to anxiety and depression; leading to the ideation of self medication.

Researchers Lund and Dearing (2012) found that community studies have proven the theory that having wealth can heighten youth anxiety and depressive symptoms, as well as increase delinquency. Statistically, it has been found that among suburban girls in the tenth grade, one in five reported to be significantly clinically depressed, which is three times as high as those within a normative sample (Luthar, & Latendresse, 2002). When looking at clinically significant anxiety levels reported among students in a suburban high school, rates were somewhat higher than normative samples, closing in at 22 percent girls and 26 percent boys, as compared to 17 percent normative samples. Among girls specifically, the incidence of clinically significant anxiety symptoms increased over time, going from one in five to nearly one in three towards the end of high school.

The bottom line: Across geographical areas and public and private schools, upper-middle class youngsters show alarmingly high rates of serious disturbance (Luthar, 2013). It is clear that this issue is widespread, and is not being addressed in an effective manner.
Over time, adolescents are forced to face some difficult achievement pressures in order to climb to the top of the class, and to become the most successful. When this occurs, the child is rewarded and praised for being the best, or at the top of the class. Due to the high level of competition, this is no easy feat. When the pressures and high expectations of family, educators, and society are added into the equation, adolescents are beginning to weaken both mentally and emotionally. In fact, according to Luthar and Latendresse (2002) individuals who place high value on occupational success and prestige relative to gratifying personal lives have been found to be at escalated risk for emotional distress. The problem faced with suburban and upper class adolescents who come from families that place high value on achievement successes also place themselves at a higher risk for experiencing emotional distress, thus causing them to turn to self medication by way of substance abuse.

Among affluent (but not inner-city) youth, substance use was linked with depression and anxiety, suggesting efforts to self medicate; this “negative affect” type of substance use tends to be sustained over time, rather than remitting soon after the teen years (Luthar, & Latendresse, 2005). This is not only a substance abuse problem among today’s adolescents, but also a substance abuse problem that will be faced among adults of the future as these emotionally distressed adolescents age. Elevations in rates of adolescent drug use raise concern because early initiation of drug use and increasing use of drugs over the course of adolescence are particularly strong predictors of chronic drug problems and criminal offending in adulthood (Rowe, 2012).

Affluent adolescents are also faced with an increased availability, making it easier to access substances, so long as there is money to provide for the expenses. Luther (2013) states that moneyed adolescents generally have easier access to substances, ample money to purchase them, good entrée to providers, and the best fake IDs. With high familial pressures to succeed,
high levels of depression and anxiety, and an easy access to substances; there is no question that changes need to be made at the root of the problem, before substance abuse becomes a lifelong struggle for today’s youth.

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the research examining various causes of substance abuse among suburban adolescents. There is clearly an increased pressure to achieve success among family members and society surrounding adolescents today. Currently, there is much research to be found on the increase of adolescent anxiety, as well as reported levels of depression. Recent longitudinal studies designed to examine adult outcomes of adolescent depression give support to the notion that one does not outgrow depression experienced during adolescence (Bogard, 2005). Through a longitudinal study, it was also discovered that early adolescent substance abuse could predict substance abuse into late adolescence, as well as reports of experiencing maladjustment as an adult. Along with a high level of availability within the household, and social pressure within fellow peers of a higher socioeconomic status, there are many factors that can be seen as the root of this current problem.

Bogard (2005) stated in the study that the more affluent adolescents reported using drugs as a means to “escape from problems” or “relax”. It was also found in this study that students from high-income families are more often using substances to cope with feelings of distress, whereas students from lower income families tend to use it as a means to have fun or use based off of peer pressures. According to Humensky (2010) it is possible that teachers and administrators in the affluent schools may be less likely to recognize the need for substance abuse treatment programs, due to the main focus of these programs being on lower socioeconomic populations. This literature review will not only examine the different factors and
causes of substance abuse among suburban youth, but also it will look at a few implications for what school counselors can contribute and implement into the school system.

This literature review has great significance, due to the American School Counselor Association (2012) National Model stating that counseling services should be delivered to all students in a systemic fashion. This means that assistance should be provided to each student no matter how low or high the socioeconomic status. As Luthar (2013) states, we should be concerned about the problems of wealthy children because no child should be left behind, regardless of their household income or parental education. It is crucial that all children and adolescents obtain intervention services by way of adults when they are clearly struggling. The significance also lies in the fact that highly educated youth today will very likely hold high positions of power within the next generation. Throughout the future, these adolescents will “disproportionately shape norms in education, politics, and business,” according to Luthar (2013). If these adolescents do not get the help they need early on, there are many long-term costs that they will face into adulthood. During adolescence, it has been found that the depressive episodes heighten the risk of recurring episodes down the road. The problem needs to be addressed at the root or source, before it becomes out of hand later on.

As stated by Lund and Dearing (2012) evidence from community studies indicate that affluence has psychological consequences for youth, including heightened anxiety, depressive symptoms, and delinquency. It is not immediately clear whether growing up in an affluent family, or neighborhood, or both, is most harmful. This literature review will help to clarify which environmental and familial factors contribute to mental disturbance and substance use. Once these factors are identified, a comprehensive school counseling program can implement in-school interventions, focusing on these areas that are identified through previous research. With
research based information provided by previous studies, a school counselor could be able to identify key problems, and create a system change within their school’s environment and culture.

Throughout this literature review, it would be beneficial to identify and define terms that are frequently used, for better understanding. In terms of prescription drugs, misuse can include the use of medications not prescribed to the individual and using medications in ways other than prescribed. This includes taking larger or more frequent doses than prescribed or using someone else’s medication to enhance performance (Harstad, & Levy, 2014). The term substance abuse includes, but is not limited to, alcohol, tobacco products, marijuana, and other illicit drugs.

**Substance Access and Pressures**

**Increased Access to Substances**

While examining the problem of increased substance abuse among youth today, it is important to first discover both how and where they are obtaining the substances. In America, it is universally known that persons under the age of 21 cannot buy alcohol, as well as being under the age of 18, being unable to purchase tobacco products. Similarly, if one were not prescribed to be taking a specific medication, then theoretically they would not have access to ingest these medications. If legal prescription medications were being sold illegally to eager buyers, it is well known that these do not come at a cheap price. So how are so many adolescents continually abusing substances, purchasing them at a high price, and how simple is it for them to access the substances? First, we must look into the average adolescent’s home environment, under their own roof beginning with their parents or family members.

The Huffington Post posted an article examining a study conducted by researchers at the Mayo Clinic. This study found that seven out of ten Americans take at least one prescription drug. According to the article from The Huffington Post (2013), the most commonly prescribed
drug is antibiotics—taken by 17 percent of Americans—followed by antidepressants and opioids—each taken by 13 percent of Americans. These statistics are very telling for how available prescription medications are for adolescents who have a parent or parents on antidepressant or opioid medications. Adolescents in these households do not have to look far to find access for prescription medications when they are sitting in the bathroom drug cabinet or on a bedside table in the next room.

One study conducted by Zosel, Bartelson, Bailey, Lowenstein, and Dart (2013) found that the site of exposure was the adolescent’s own home the majority of the time. Zosel et al. (2013) state, “the most common means of acquisition of these medications is securing them from friends or family members, so perhaps adolescents are simply taking the substances where they are obtaining them” (pp. 6-7). It has been made clear through this study that most often adolescents are abusing in their own homes. Similarly, Maxwell (2011) conducted a study on prescription drug abuse and found that survey responses showed the major sources of access were friends and family who received their drugs from one prescriber. This study found that leftover medications were not being disposed of properly, and often end up in the hands of those choosing to abuse them. Zosel et al. (2013) also mention the rising occurrence of “pharming” parties, where adolescents come together at a party, exchanging and misusing prescription medications.

Researchers have also seen a rise in the misuse of stimulant drugs, such as methylphenidate (commonly known as Ritalin), and amphetamine (Adderall), due to the increased treatment of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in youth and adolescents legally prescribed to take such medications. Data from the American Association of Poison Control Centers’ National Poison Data System reports that prescription rates for adolescents and pre-adolescents increased
133% for amphetamines, 52% for methylphenidate, and 80% for both drugs together (Setlik, Bond, & Ho, 2009).

One study has found that adolescents and children legally prescribed to take medication for ADHD may not even need to have the medications, by seeking out mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) as an alternative to treatment (Haydicky, 2015). This study also revealed that by way of MBCT, parental stress was lower as well as an increase in mindful parenting. If more adolescents are seeking out research based therapy practices as a treatment for the ADHD, instead of medications, then this could eliminate the harmful substance abuse factors that come along with these commonly prescribed medications. This form of treatment also helps the adolescent and better yet the adolescent’s parent in terms of their style of parenting.

While it is now clear that adolescents are finding easier access to substances, these medications and drugs do not come at a small price. Not all adolescents have a steady personal income, and oftentimes have a part-time minimum wage job at most. One might think that this would make it difficult for them to afford drugs and substances purchased illegally. When examining substance abuse of suburban teens as compared to inner-city youth, Luthar, and Latendresse (2005) discovered that suburban teens reported significantly higher use of cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana, and hard drugs than did their inner-city counterparts, and also showed elevations in comparison with national norms. Adolescents of a higher socioeconomic status have been found to have greater financial resources indicating that the relative cost of substance use, may be lower than that of adolescents from lower socioeconomic statuses (Humensky, 2010). In a study based in Great Britain, it was found that adolescents with more spending money were more likely to engage in frequent alcoholic drinking behaviors, and more likely to binge drink and drink in public, where the drinking age is eighteen years of age, lower than that
of the United States at twenty one. When college students in the United States were examined, an obvious effect of having less spending money resulted in students engaging in lower levels of drinking and getting drunk. It is clear that the higher the funds, the higher likelihood of engagement in substance abuse behaviors with alcohol and other illegal substances.

Adolescents coming from middle to upper class affluence generally have easier access to substances, ample money to purchase them, good introduction to providers and the best fake IDs, according to Luthar (2013). The price of a false identification card can range from one hundred to four hundred dollars, making this difficult to afford for adolescents with little money. This could also explain the heightened accessibility of alcohol and increased alcohol abuse among middle to upper class adolescents with money to spend.

To summarize, it is universally known that age of consumption laws in America are disregarded and abused by adolescents. The youth of today have become quite creative in their means of getting substances illegally, and they also do not have to look too far to find them available. Many do not even need to look further from inside their own home to find some of these substances. From alcohol in a parent’s liquor cabinet, to prescription medications in the bathroom medicine cabinet, the access is limitless for many adolescents. There is also the influence of peers who are legally diagnosed to take medications, which has been proven to become a source of profit in selling to others who do not have a prescription but would like access to the drugs. Some adolescents are born into more wealthy circumstances, making the access much easier with the high price of substances being a non-issue. With money, comes more opportunity to spend, and many adolescents today are more willing to spend an extra allowance on any substance that they might be able to get their hands on.
Increased Pressures and the Family Structure

It is no secret that adolescents in the 21st century face increased pressure now more than ever before. Between teachers and school systems increased administration of academic testing and high achievement expectations, to the parental pressure of high achievement standards comparable to fellow classmates, the adolescents of today have no time to breathe. In America today, it is nearly impossible to make an honest living with just a high school diploma. Pursuing a degree post high school is no longer considered optional, but necessary. With more people pursuing post secondary education today, colleges and universities around the country have increased admission expectations, making it more competitive than ever to get into them. It is advised that high school students become involved in various extra curricular activities, in order to put them at an advantage over other applicants. With every high school student in the nation trying to achieve this, there is little room for edge over other candidates. This is where a fraction of the pressures begin to manifest.

Adam Strassberg, M.D. is a psychiatrist in a local private practice, with two teenagers in the Palo Alto Unified School District. When discussing the mental health implications of our overly pressured teenagers, Strassberg (2015) writes:

What a strange world we have when having your child only take the SAT once, not take advanced math, not play a varsity sport, not have a college coach, not take an AP class—what a strange world indeed when this is a type of bravery? Since when does it make sense that a 16-year-old’s weekly schedule should be twice as packed with meetings and assignments than his middle-aged parents? This is not normal. This could never be normal. (p. 3).
Adolescents of this generation are pushed to the maximum in terms of how to spend their time most effectively, leaving the pure joy of just living and being young, a figment of their imaginations. Luthar (2013) describes it as being as if the “pressure cooker is about to explode” (p. 66).

The pressure of getting into a highly ranked or competitive university is seen as being most strenuous among the middle to upper class suburban populations with money. Luthar (2013) explains, that the adolescents’ who come from money and wealth are used to growing up with nice things and a certain lifestyle that is only attainable with high paying careers. These adolescents feel the increased pressure of being able to achieve this higher standard of living in which they are used to, once they become adults just like their parents. In this population, it is believed that acceptance into a top nationally ranked school or Ivy League school, equals increased job opportunity of higher pay than most. With this high level of pressure comes trouble and internal hardships for these young adults. Adolescents who have placed a high value on a successful occupation and status relative to gratifying personal lives have been found to be at a higher risk of emotional distress (Luthar, & Latendresse, 2002). In fact, researchers Suldo, Mihalas, Powell, and French (2008) found that adolescents from high socioeconomic family backgrounds, more specifically adolescents with the highest amount of familial financial resources, are at a higher risk of substance abuse problems than those from average middle to lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

The pressure for middle to upper class adolescents to succeed and grow up sooner has transformed over the past few decades, and it is starting to begin in early childhood. During the 1960s, much changed in the world of parenting and providing educational opportunities. Parents were told that if their children did not start their education as young as early childhood, then the
“golden years” were essentially lost (Elkind, 2001). The pressure to achieve academically is instilled within today’s youth at such a young age, that the pressure is truly a lifelong endurance. While society hurries its children to grow up quickly and obtain high achievements early on, they still are not able to fully partake in adult behaviors such as consuming alcohol, or using tobacco products. This sense of urgency to get kids to behave like small adults reflects into their mindset, providing confusion and troublesome behavior when the nation’s laws prohibit them from partaking in adult substances (Elkind, 2001).

It should be noted that society’s children and adolescents need some amounts of stress, and some stress is important for adolescent development. Elkind (2001) writes that some amounts of pressure and stress are good, in fact healthy, providing children the ability to realize their own capabilities and powers. When pressure and expectation becomes inappropriate and insurmountable in a way that they are in today’s schools; the demands are too hurrying leaving the stress unhealthy. There are also many children who feel pressure that they put onto themselves, trying to be as involved as possible in various activities. Children can misread their parent’s support of achievement, and assume that their parents are only concerned with how successful they are in their activities; the need to achieve becomes addictive which adds to the personal pressures.

The family structure alone can be a major indicator for how well adjusted or maladjusted adolescents are, as well as how high their risk is for engaging in substance abuse behaviors. Researchers Cleveland, Feinberg, and Greenberg (2010) found that adolescents are less likely to engage in substance abuse behaviors when raised by parents who are warm and supportive, but also consistent with disciplinary techniques, and monitoring their children’s activities. It was also found that there was a decrease in risk of substance abuse among adolescents who spend a lot of
time talking openly with their parents. These parenting techniques are all positive ways of decreasing the risk of adolescent substance abuse, however these parenting techniques can also seem too time consuming for parents working long hours in high up, powerful career positions. Oftentimes, families of upper class wealth shift their focus on other priorities such as social activities, moving up the career power ladder, and maintaining overall status. Simple parenting duties, such as long open talks about their children’s lives, worries, friendships and academics can fall wayside. This is when the troublesome behaviors begin to erupt, also keeping in mind that parents who work long hours are unable to provide adolescent supervision. While still focusing on family structure, Branstetter, Low, and Furman (2011) found that analysis showed support from mothers towards their adolescent children predicted lower levels of substance use in the tenth grade (with the exception of tobacco), and also predicted decrease of hard drug use during the eleventh grade. Overall this study found that parental involvement showed consistency in being a strong protection of adolescents against abusing substances, and mental health distress. It is clear that the more supportive and involved parents are with their adolescent children, the more reduced the risk will be for substance abuse behaviors and emotional distress.

With all of the pressures from society, parents, and self for some, it is not hard to see why “self healing” is the easiest way for adolescents to cope. Luthar, and Latendresse (2002), revealed that suburban youth, more so than inner city teens have used substances to “self medicate” to alleviate personal distress. Without any healthy coping skills or decrease in pressure, it can almost be expected that adolescents turn to substance abuse to escape the heavy load. If parents could become more involved, and attentive to overly stressed adolescents, then some risk could be lowered for using illegal substances to cope.

Summary
The increased availability and access adolescents have to substances is astounding, and in the simplicity of their own homes, no less. This is a problem, and parents should not be naïve to the fact that their child might be using in the room next to them. Parents should also be aware of the friends that their children keep, as peers often play a role in the abuse of substances as well.

As a society, it would be wise to transform our high expectations for success in children and young adults today in order to lower the pressure. With high pressure from society, schools, and parents, comes stress and unhealthy mental states among many of the young adults in our nation.

**Mental Health Factors**

**Anxiety and Depression**

Interestingly enough, children in the lowest socioeconomic strata have reported the highest levels of happiness, whereas the most affluent of children within the highest socioeconomic strata reported the least happy (Luthar, & Latendresse, 2002). One common assumption would be that a child who comes from wealth with everything they need and more might be among happiest children on the planet. Contrary to popular belief, money does not make one less at risk for mental illness (Bogard, 2005). With the increase of academic and societal pressure, comes an increased amount of anxiety among youth today. In a recent study conducted by Quach, Epstein, Riley, Falconier, and Fang (2015) anxiety and depression symptoms were researched in Chinese adolescents experiencing academic pressures. These researchers discovered the parental pressures on children to be “high achievers”, was associated with the psychological distress in Chinese children.

According to the American Psychiatric Association (2013), generalized anxiety disorder is characterized by excessive anxiety and worry about a number of events and activities, with the intensity, frequency, or duration of the worry lasting out of proportion to the actual likelihood or
impact of the anticipated event. A study conducted by Lund, and Dearing (2012) found that girls living in the most affluent neighborhoods, reported higher anxiety-depression levels than girls who lived in less affluent areas. The boys in the most affluent areas were also reported as engaging in more delinquent behaviors than boys in less affluent neighborhoods.

A study that Luthar (2003) conducted resulted in clinically significant anxiety among both suburban boys and girls in high school at higher levels than the normative samples. There was also a higher incidence of substance use of suburban girls reporting to have ever used alcohol, in comparison with the normative sample. Similar to studies previously mentioned, this study also concluded that substance use by suburban high school participants was significantly connected to the anxiety and depressive symptoms, implying that these teens are using substances as a self-medication to reprieve symptoms. This same study found that suburban sixth graders reported low levels of anxiety and depression, as well as low instances of substance use. Unfortunately, by seventh grade, adolescents reported an increase in all three domains, and twice as elevated as the normative samples within the female samples.

One finding by Luthar (2003) is that among affluent families, children are expected to be high achievers participating in extra curricular activities, impressing their collegiate prospects later on. This in itself produces high stress, leading to high anxiety and/or depressive symptoms in adolescents experiencing the pressures. This research has also shown that affluent junior high students are frequently left home alone for many hours in a week, which contrary to their parent’s belief, does not promote self-sufficiency but isolation. This experience of isolation may begin with the decrease of quality family time spent together, due to the high demands of their wealthy parent’s career obligations, in line with all of the extra curricular activities the children are participating in after school. With feelings of isolation come feelings of depression or
loneliness, and a feeling of disconnect from parents or family members. Again, these youth of a high socioeconomic status often turn to substance use in search for a release to these emotional stressors, however this study did not find that to be true with their counterparts from the lower socioeconomic group. Within the study by Luthar (2003) developmental scientists looked at children of one affluent community commenting:

> We heard a lot about emptiness. Houses that were empty and devoid of supervision, adult presence, oversight. There was for far too many of the adolescents a fundamental emptiness of purpose; a sense that they were not needed, not connected to adults, to tasks, to anything meaningful other than the raw and relentless pursuit of pleasure. (p. 1583).

It is easy to see how emotionally damaged these adolescents can become, when they are seen to have little purpose or placement within the family structure. Over time, this can be very harmful for the emotional development of these adolescents.

One study conducted by Alegría, Molina, and Chen (2014) discovered that African Americans living in more affluent communities were at an even higher risk for only past-year depressive disorder, in comparison to non-Latino whites, likely due to race related stress. This is just one more factor that can play a role in the depression of a particular group of the affluent population, which should be taken note of.

**Summary**

It is important to realize the damage emotional distress can cause adolescents today, once they become adults in the future. Luthar (2013) states that adolescents experiencing depressive episodes are at a heightened risk for recurrent episodes, as they get older in life. The long-term affects of the anxiety, stress, and depression adolescents are going through can become detrimental to their daily functioning in adulthood. These prolonged stressors can physically
affect their health later on in life, as well as their productivity at work. Later on these distressed adolescents are at a risk of living an unhappy adult life, which comes with a fragile sense of self, focusing more on themselves than improving the lives of others. When adolescents are choosing to self medicate with substances, these habits are more likely to continue into their adult lives as well. These adolescents are unknowingly impairing their brain development, coping abilities, and impeding their everyday functioning. In order to avoid these long-term risks, the problems in adolescence need to be addressed at the beginning of their occurrence. It is smart to focus on the preventative strategies, and coping skills during the exact right time in a child’s life.

Interventions

According to an article by Anderson, Aromaa, and Rosenbloom (2006), research shows that a comprehensive approach including schools, family, and the community as a whole are the key factors in successful prevention efforts. In terms of the school system, over the course of time many programs have been developed and used for drug prevention. Most notorious, is the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program. This program was implemented in elementary through high school levels, providing information and skills needed to live a drug free life. Kanof (2003) conducted a study evaluating this program, and the results found that the program had no significant long-term effect on the prevention of drug use in adolescents who went through it. It was found that DARE students had a stronger negative perception on illicit drug use for about one year after going through the program, however these positive effects decreased over time. In theory, the DARE program makes a lot of sense; however it has been proven to be ineffective in the long term throughout many research studies. There are better approaches to drug and alcohol prevention in adolescents and one place to begin is with the school counseling program in the schools.
The frequency of drug abuse occurring within the adolescent’s home is already well known, providing a good place to start in terms of parent’s involvement in taking steps towards prevention. Parental education must be offered, teaching parents about the importance of locking up their “abuse-prone prescription medications”, which has been proven to effectively reduce their child’s access to harmful substances (Zosel et al., 2013). It should be noted that parental education is one of the better prevention strategies used today, and research is available to prove this. Parents should be educated and aware of how crucial their parenting style and relationship with their adolescent can be in the prevention of substance abuse. Cleveland et al. (2010) state that adolescents who spend a lot of time, and have open discussions with their parents are less likely to abuse alcohol and other substances. An association was also found with less adolescent substance abuse and parents who provide warmth and supportive parenting to their children. Adolescents are also less likely to use when their parents raise them by using consistent disciplinary techniques, and when they monitor the activities their children partake in.

One step a school counselor could take to begin their substance free drug prevention program at the parent level is to inform parents of this research based information. A presentation could be created with information for parents covering effective parenting styles, techniques, and research based strategies that have been proven to prevent substance use in adolescents. The school counselor might want to hold a few Parent Nights, where this presentation would take place. This would be a presentation strictly for parents and guardians, and children would not be included in this session. In this presentation parents should be informed of the importance of modeling responsible alcohol consumption, having a zero tolerance policy at home, abstaining from personal use of illegal drugs, talking to teens regularly about drugs and alcohol, knowing the signs of teen use, and clarifying the consequences for teen
use (Walsh, 2014). Providing parents with the correct information that has been proven to be effective would be the first step in approaching this issue.

A separate presentation could be formed by the school counselor, which includes both the adolescents and their parents or guardians. A presentation similar to this has been used in the Hopkins Public Schools, entitled Reduce the Use Family Forum: “Working together to stay chemically free”. This PowerPoint presentation covers the medical research on the developing adolescent brain, and the harmful damage done by substances during this time. Educating not only the parents, but also the children affected is a good way to provide information and also bring both parents and children together by viewing it as a family unit.

At the actual school wide level, the school counselor is able to set up a school culture when it comes to the perceptions of substance use in adolescents and young people in the community. It is up to the school counselor in the school to set the stage of a “drug free” environment within the school. Creating this widespread ideal through administration and staff can really set the tone for perceptions and expectations when students come into the school’s environment. If the community communicates the message that they believe in a substance free lifestyle, that expectation will permeate to students, setting the bar. This is where the school counselor must work hard to get many staff members on board, actively communicating this message to the school community and students. The school counselor as just one person will not be able to prove effectiveness without other team and community members setting the culture with them. School counselors must remember above all else, that the most important thing developmentally for adolescents is to abstain from trying substances for as long as possible. Delaying the onset of drug use and other risky behaviors is key to providing a healthier life, long term for these adolescent students that the school counselor works with.
At the community level, environmental policies like appropriate alcohol taxes, graduated
drivers licenses, and strict social host laws have been proven to be effective in reducing
adolescent use, according to Anderson et al. (2006). Many communities also have Drug Free
Community Coalition (DFCC) programs supported through Drug Free Communities (DFC)
grants from the White House, created to support prevention and reduction of youth substance
abuse. School counselors in communities without these programs would be wise to talk to board
members of their community, urging them to apply for these grants to begin their DFCC
programs. The DFC programs provide after school programs, youth mentoring programs, sports
programs, treatment services and facilities, drug courts, construction and landscaping and
neighborhood revitalization projects (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2015).

When a school counselor is forming their comprehensive drug free program for their
school’s students, they should also take resistance skills training into account. Most if not all
adolescents will be asked to try some form of substance by the time they reach eighteen years of
age. The opportunities for trying out substances are inevitable and at times, unavoidable. By
teaching adolescents the skills to resist these substances, school counselors and educators can
help make a difference in the likelihood of use. Role playing how a conversation might go down
with students, and practicing the best ways to say “no thank you” while still saving social grace
can be one method. Another effective way school counselors can help in the resistance training is
forming a “sober alumni” panel of several high school students, asking them to come back to
their junior high or middle school to talk to its current 6th grade students about their personal
choices in not using. These high school students can set the standard for these young adolescents,
proving that you can have a fun, and great high school experience while living a substance free
life. This panel helps to reinforce the norm of not using substances, and also models good
behaviors as well as older role models that the students can look up to as they approach high school.

When examining methods in which school counselors can address student’s anxiety and depressive episodes, coping skills must be taught in order to avoid self-medicating through substances. One program that has been studied is the ‘FRIENDS for Life’ program, which teaches kids how to cope more effectively with feelings of anxiety and depression (Kösters, Chinapaw, Zwaanswijk, van der Wal, Utens, & Koot, 2012). This cognitive behavioral therapy method has been proven to be effective in the treatment of childhood anxiety and depression. The techniques this program uses include psycho-education, relaxation exercises, exposure, problem-solving skills training, social support training and cognitive restructuring exercises. This program consists of 10 weekly sessions, including 2 booster sessions both one and two months after completion of the weekly sessions. Another important aspect of the ‘FRIENDS for Life’ program is that it includes two parent sessions during the 10 week session span. This type of program could easily be implemented into a comprehensive school counseling program within a typical small group form.

School counselors also could consider reinforcing and promoting the involvement of school athletics and activities. The Minnesota State High School League (MSHSL), the main association hosting all Minnesota sports at the high school level, has strict rules regarding participation and substance use violations. In the Official Minnesota State High School League Handbook (2015), bylaw 205.00 is put into place regulating use, consumption, having in possession, or buying, selling or giving away all forms of substances and chemicals including tobacco. Based on a number of violations, student participants lose eligibilities for different lengths of time depending on the amount of offenses. These rules help to reinforce the idea that
students will choose not to partake in any form of substance, avoiding the risk of losing any eligibility and the consequences that follow through from these violations. In 2013 statistically, Hopkins eleventh graders who play school sports are 4.5 less likely to report cigarette use and alcohol use, and 1.5 times less likely to report marijuana use. Hopkins eleventh graders who participate in school activities were 2 times less likely to report cigarette use, 1.5 times less likely to report alcohol use, and 1.75 times less likely to report marijuana use. School counselors should try to create a school culture that promotes involvement in activities, even if it is just one. If students are a part of a team, they will feel that they are held more accountable if they were to take the risk of using, putting their team and teammates in jeopardy as well.

School counselors should address the heightened pressures that adolescents are facing, and take action to alleviate this as much as possible. Providing individual support to those who suffer from anxieties and depression can help alleviate some of the pressure and stress. School counselors will also want to bring parents into this conversation about relieving the pressure, as well as forming a strong group of teachers who are aware of the stress of a high academic load put onto their adolescent students. School counselors need to work with the students, providing them with healthy coping strategies when their lives begin to get over booked and induce anxieties and stress. The key idea here is to address the societal, academic, and parental pressures in a school wide response, instead of “brushing it under the rug” or ignoring it.

**Adlerian Perspective**

The Adlerian concept of social interest plays a large role in the use or nonuse of adolescents and substances. According to Green (2012), Adler believed that humans naturally have a basic desire to form groups and to be a part of the larger community. Along with this, humans are naturally inclined to always strive for a sense of belonging to a larger group and
social network, while also having the desire to strive for service to their group helping to improve its cause. In the adolescent stage of development, the desire to belong could not be more profound. Lund and Dearing (2012) remark that the adolescent years are time of increasing social connections to community peers and the neighborhood at large. Adolescent’s social world revolves around peers and peer groups, as well as following the trends and doing what friends do to fit in the social dynamics of school. Problem behaviors such as substance abuse characterizes many adolescents, especially those who are experiencing high levels of social disadvantage, with little “social capital” to maneuver (Lo, & Cheng, 2013). It is important for school counselors to be aware of the fact that students who struggle more socially than others are at a higher risk for engaging in harmful behaviors. Engaging these students socially is one way to combat this issue, by helping them to find a good group giving them that sense of belonging.

School counselors should know about the importance of getting as many students to live sober, substance free lives which will in turn spread throughout all social groups and peers. If an adolescent is involved in a social group that is using substances, they are extremely likely to follow suit trying these substances to feel their sense of belonging. Again, reinforcing the norm of not using as a school wide standard can help guide all of the various peer groups within the school. School counselors can also help to foster friendship groups that prioritize healthy choices and healthy decision-making skills.

When discussing maladaptive behaviors and social interest, Ansbacher, and Ansbacher, (1964) state that every human being strives for significance, however people often make mistakes if they do not see that their whole significance consists of their contribution to the lives of other people. School counselors can tap into this aspect of Adlerian theory, encouraging their students to get involved in community outreach. Adolescents who give back to their community
through service will hopefully discover their significance, and will also be busy engaging in positive activities which keep them away from partaking in substance abuse due to boredom or spending time with the wrong group of peers. The Drug Free Community programs can also help with this idea of social interest through their after school programs, and other community activities.

With the desire to belong, often comes what Adler called, the feelings of inferiority or the feeling that one is not good enough, or of superiority. Socially, many adolescents strive to be superior or seen as superior in the eyes of their peers. What adolescents might believe to be superior in the eyes of their peers might be making bad choices, or partaking in substances to “look cool” or “fit in”. Green (2012) remarks that Adler believed children and adults can be educated by ways of therapy, teaching, or parenting on the ways in which their behaviors and thoughts can be maladaptive. Healthier strategies can be learned in order for them to overcome feelings of inferiority and to develop a more productive lifestyle. Again, this is where parenting education is crucial, as well as the education of the harm substances and poor choices can make in an adolescent’s life.

School counselors also need to become sources of encouragement for students who are enduring the stressors of adolescent hardships. Adlerian theory states that the most important task of an educator is to be sure that no child is discouraged at school, and that a child entering school already discouraged has the opportunity to regain confidence through their school and teachers (Ansbacher, & Ansbacher, 1964). It is vital that school counselors build up their student’s confidence via encouragement, creating the mindset that the students lives are so valuable and that they are capable of accomplishing so many wonderful things in their lives. If an adolescent has this positive, and encouraged outlook on their own lives, they will take greater
value in it. This forms the desire to avoid harmful behaviors, and make positive, healthy, and productive choices.

**Summary**

School counselors, educators, and parents of adolescents in school today must be aware of the importance of social interest, desire to belong, and the benefits of encouragement. Parents need to have frequent conversations with their children, knowing what things their groups of friends are involved in and what choices their friends make. Parents also need to be aware of how crucial healthy friendship groups are, and how important it is for their children to belong in a social circle. Educators need to know that encouragement is key when it comes to their students, creating a safe and positive environment for their students to learn the value of themselves. School counselors should help to educate parents and educators on the importance of their role, and in what ways they can truly make a difference in their young person’s life. Creating positive peer and friendship groups should also be considered within the school counselor’s program.

School counselors would be advised to inform parents with high achievement expectations to understand the Adlerian concept of inferiority and encouragement. When parents set high standards and pressures on their children to accomplish specific goals, there is no room for failure. These adolescents are often held to the standard that failure is not acceptable, and if they do not achieve the expectations then they are seen as inferior. This concept needs to be eliminated immediately, and encouragement should take its place instead. Adolescents need room to fail or to not achieve every single goal they set out to do—this is how they learn. When an adolescent does not quite make the goal they have set for themselves, it is vital that their parent or adult is right there with them providing positive encouragement to try again next time.
A supportive, encouraging parent or adult helps to alleviate the stress and pressure that adolescents put on themselves, knowing that they have room for error. By fostering these basic principles, a strong parent and child relationship is formed, including respect and admiration. When an adolescent has high respect for their parent, they might be more likely to respect their parent’s standards of a substance free rule and expectation as well. With high respect comes the avoidance of disappointment, and if a parent makes it clear that they would be disappointed in their child using substances, these potential harmful behaviors could likely be avoided.

**Conclusions and Implications**

It is very clear that middle to upper class adolescent drug use is on the rise, as well as levels of anxiety and depression among suburban youth today. Many schools in suburban and wealthy areas have seen these issues come up at increasing speeds, however they either do not know what to do, or they choose to turn a blind eye to the problem. In our society, it is often seen as though being raised in wealth eliminates all problems, and some may go so far as to say that it is a blessing to live with ample amounts of fortune. However, money does not equal a problem free life in fact it is nearly the opposite. Some may know of the phrase, “more money, more problems” and this is seen to be true for a lot of wealthy American families. Socially there is a stigma to having problems whether it is mental illness, or substance use. If a family member is in treatment, it is not openly talked about in fact it is sometimes kept a secret among social groups. Sometimes, students might bring substance use or mental health struggles to their school counselor’s attention. At this point, some school counselors might be nervous to discuss this with the student’s high status, wealthy family member due to the social stigma. It is easier to turn a blind eye, and provide simple recommendations to send the students on their way.
Schools today cannot keep up this blasé attitude about how serious a problem substance abuse is to the suburban population of adolescents. Just because they have a roof over their heads, and money to get them through life does not mean that this issue is not important or minor to their lives. School counselors need to not only address these issues when they come to their attention, but to also take preventative actions school wide. Parental education is vital to addressing a source of the problem. The harm of parental pressures should also be addressed, and talked about openly with families. While we want to harbor future success for our adolescents, we need to cut back on the pressure, and also provide them the freedom to enjoy their young lives in a healthy way. It is also important to create a school wide movement of promoting a substance free environment and mentality. The more school counselors are able to reinforce the norm of abstaining from using substance, the higher likelihood students will abstain from risk taking behaviors.

It is important for school counselors to create an open environment for discussion with both parents and students. One of the biggest problems within this population is the avoidance of discussion when it comes to substance abuse and mental illness. Schools need to have Parent Nights or Family Nights where the education on substance use and risks can take place. Parent presentations should focus on what they can do to be most effective in prevention, how they can push back the age of consumption, and empowering them to have open discussions with their children. In these discussions, it is important for parents to talk to their children about how they perceive the use of substances, so that there is a standard and expectation for the adolescent to follow. It is key that parents follow through with how they perceive the use of substances, by modeling sobriety to drugs and limited, controlled alcohol consumption.
Adlerian principles are so valid to the explanation as to why adolescents explore the world of substance usage. Feeling a sense of belonging to a social group is one of the biggest concerns in an adolescent’s life. That stage of development is very social, and getting into the right healthy friend group is crucial. This is why a school wide initiative needs to take place, making it clear that substance use behaviors are not accepted, or the “cool” thing to do. If this concept or ideal spreads to all friend groups, then healthy choices will likely be had by all thus lessening the occurrence of substance use. Adolescents can find ways of belonging through community programs, or providing service to their community. School counselors should also promote joining athletics and school activities to help create the social network in a healthy, and sustaining way.

It is up to school counselors to work with students, teaching them how to obtain coping skills during times of high stress and anxiety. When adolescents become stressed due to all of life’s pressures, they do not know how to cope or alleviate the pain. This is when they turn to substance use, or hear of a recommendation from a peer who claims that it has helped them to self medicate. This practice needs to be stopped, and students must be informed as to how they can release their stress and pressures in a healthy way. This is where some sort of practice such as yoga calm techniques could be implemented in the school counseling curriculum. With healthy, effective research based coping skills, adolescents will be less likely to turn to substance use.

Future research beyond this literature review could explore in more depth, the effects of peer pressure and friend groups who abuse substances. It is clear that peers and friendship groups are a massive part of adolescent’s lives, leaving this influence to be strong and sustaining. Quite often, once children reach adolescence they seek out independence from their parents and latch
onto friendships for support and guidance. While this can be positive, it can also be harmful if friends are not offering the right advice or direction. This is why parent connection is still so crucial during the adolescent stage. Exploring the statistical influence of peers can help to paint a more full picture of what needs to be done for interventions and preventative strategies. It could also help school counselors to know how to effectively base their school counseling program school wide.

Other future considerations include an in depth look of several different types of substance and drug education programs that have been implemented in schools already. There are many different types of programs being used, some that are effective and some that are not so effective. This literature review briefly discussed the ineffectiveness of the widely used D.A.R.E program, however other effective programs in use today were not discussed. Research based interventions and programs that are being used in schools and school counseling curriculums should be explored further.

Lastly, a future consideration for this literature review could be exploring research that looks into the development of adolescent brains. The stage in which the developing adolescent brain is in can hold a lot of useful information in a medical standpoint. The effects that alcohol and other substance use can have on this developing brain are so detrimental. Exploring the research of the effects and damage that substance use can cause would be very beneficial beyond this literature review.

To conclude, society must not only be aware of this issue with its suburban youth but also willing to openly discuss and implement strategies to help fix the problems. This is why school counselors can be so important in this, because they are not only working directly with students, but parents and the community as well. Wealthy kids have problems and struggles too, and this
simply cannot be ignored any longer. By all members of the community coming together, a movement can be created. Less pressure to achieve perfect expectations will need to happen in order for substance use rates to drop among these adolescents. It is up to adults in the society to reduce these expectations and pressures, thus creating a healthier and happier environment for our nation’s future leaders.
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