

World Children's Day – November 20th, 2021

Statement by WFAD Gender Working Group

WFAD commemorates the two international days highlighting Children Rights: the World Day for Prevention of Child Abuse, on November 19th, and the World Children's Day today, on November 20th. This day marks the 62nd and 32nd anniversary of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The latter convention was adopted by the United Nations and widely ratified by 196 countries. The CRC ensures the right to protection, safe development for children, children's participation, while it being free from discrimination. The ratification of the CRC, mirroring the recognition to ensure children and adolescents that their human rights are met, leads to an obligation for states to incorporate these rights into their national policies and strategies. Out of the 54 articles in the Convention, Article 33 specifically emphasises the importance of protecting children from the illicit use, production, and trafficking of substances. Not only through prevention mechanisms but also by offering treatment for those having developed a substance dependency.

Drug use among young persons

Drug use among children is increasing throughout the world. The World Drug Report of 2021 estimates a rise of drug use of 11% by 2030, which is solely based on the reflection of the current drug use and the projected global population growth. The increase of drug use will mainly appear in lower-income countries, estimated to be 40%. At the same time, drug use among girls/women is growing and closing the gap between men and women, increasing general drug use and leading to more and new risks¹. Since the World Drug Report of 2018 already concluded that "the extent of drug use among young people remains higher than among older people", the estimated rise is worrisome.

Adolescents (12 to 17 years old) are at particular risk for the initiation of dependency in their adulthood resulting from experiences in their childhood. During this period, a person faces changes in their social environment and receives more responsibilities. At the same time, their brain, especially the prefrontal cortex, is not yet fully developed and is affected by drug use. Therefore, high levels of drug use at a young age can have severe long-term health effects. When looking at marijuana specifically, a drug often used among youth, harmful effects are proven. The World Drug Report of 2021 reported that the current lively discussion around medical marijuana and the legalisation of marijuana has led to a vast global normalisation of the drug among youth. Resulting in the substance being understood as rather safe among young and an increase of use. However, the risks are still very much apparent, especially since the drug potency has increased fourfold between 1995 and 2019. Without taking the increased potency in mind, marijuana already leads to various proven negative health effects. Examples of poor health outcomes include the decline of IQ points, risk of psychoses, development of schizophrenia, depression and suicidal thoughts, and decline of social relationships².

To protect young persons from the initiation, production, or trafficking of drugs, there is a need for a stronger focus on evidence-based prevention. Currently, there is a lack of funding and scaled

¹ The WFAD Gender Working Group has published several statements on the issue of drug use among women. Read statements and get access to more information [here](#)

² WFAD has published a White Guide, which is a collection of articles written by researchers on the risks of marijuana. Get access to the White Guide [here](#)

programmes in evidence-based prevention practices. Overall, prevention science have shown that it is necessary to ensure and increase the protective factors of children and decrease risk factors to prevent the child from using substances³. Risk factors include, according to the [World Drug Report 2021](#), “early mental and behavioural health problems, poverty, lack of opportunities, isolation, lack of parental involvement and social support, negative peer influences, and poorly equipped schools”. The [INCB report](#) showed that “every dollar spent on prevention can save up to ten dollars” in future costs in health care, such as treatment. The return on investment in prevention (besides the 1 in 10 yield) is the healthy and safe development of children and youth. Effective and evidence-based prevention methods significantly contribute to the positive engagement of children, youth, and adults within their families, schools, workplace, and community.

Treatment among young persons

Conversely, for those children that require and want treatment, it should readily be available. This is also reflected in the Convention of the Rights of the Child. Several sub-articles (3.3, 24.1, and 27.1) showcase the necessity to provide children with a safe rehabilitation journey. Unfortunately, there is often a lack of a strong safety net for children to receive and during treatment. [Our study](#) on the accessibility to treatment for children, together with Fourth Wave Foundation in India, concluded that the lack of access to treatment services often relates to stigma, financial hardship, need for constant supervision, lack of a support systems, etc. Therefore, more awareness on treatment among children, but more so among parents, needs to be created to decrease parental denial, stigma, and a lack of support. Yet, most importantly, countries need to offer [in-house] treatment centres to ensure that the child is in a safe environment and can develop itself through education and away from a drug tempting environment while being followed up after treatment.

Prevention of Child Abuse

Not only should children be protected from substance use, but they should also be protected to be able to live in an environment free of substance abuse. Parental substance abuse is considered a risk factor of various forms of child abuse, including physical, sexual, emotional, and neglect. These forms of abuse and neglect have an immense impact on the development of a child, which also will affect them in later adulthood. This is also known as Adverse Childhood Experiences. According to [the American Addiction Centers](#), the children are “more likely to experience trauma, face difficulties with concentration and learning, control their physical and emotional responses to stress, and form a trusting relationship.” Most importantly, children with Adverse Childhood Experiences themselves tend to develop substance use disorder themselves in their adulthood. However, there are ways to prevent AC experiences, which are summed up in the following [booklet](#). At the same time, when offering treatment to parents, children need to be considered in the process. Treatment should be offered for all, focusing on trauma-informed treatment, treatment for women, and childcare services, while also working with the families. Helpful steps to create a safe environment and sustainable change are elaborated in the next paragraph.

Opportunities for Prevention from Today On

In light of these two important World Days for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Children's Day, we once again wish to highlight the importance of creating a sustainable and safe environment for children. More focus needs to be centred around evidence-based prevention mechanisms on every level possible, especially within policy and funding. Prevention focuses on strengthening the

³ WFAD and Carlton Hall Consulting LLC organised a five-piece webinar series on prevention, covering various aspects of prevention science, best practices, and aspects. Find the recording and summaries on [our website](#).

protective factors, which includes education, a safe family environment, strong social supports. It is therefore essential to work include communities in prevention. Prevention work involves the following aspects:

- a positive strength-based approach,
- gender-sensitive approach,
- alternative pursuit approach,
- family-based approach,
- community-based services,
- social normalisation,
- and an emphasis on parents that are struggling with substance abuse and neglects.

Furthermore, it is necessary to educate children and parents on the various protective factors while also empowering children to withstanding using substances in situations it is needed. At the same time, we need to build environments and relationships where children feel safe and comfortable to ask for support and help if they are experiencing abuse or neglect.

To create sustainable change, Safe the Children in Iceland has provided 5-steps for governments and communities to follow to learn, protect, and create a safe environment.

- 1) Know the facts and risks of [drug and sexual] abuse and what the necessary first steps are.
- 2) Stay alert and reduce risk factors while ensuring the creation of a safe environment.
- 3) Educate children by teaching them boundaries, their rights, and their bodies.
- 4) Listen, believe, and support children – believe their stories and encourage and support them in the process of opening-up.
- 5) React responsibly and appropriately to the knowledge.

Finally, it is crucial to adhere to the CRC by protecting the children from drug abuse and providing them with a safe development to adulthood. The CRC is a human right for the child that governments need to include and implement in their legislation. Children deserve to live a worry-free childhood and develop themselves into adults using their strengths, talents, and abilities. **Let's stop the generational cycle of [drug] abuse!**