ADDICTION AS A MARK OF ADULTHOOD: THE ENDURING FASCINATION OF DRUGS AND ALCOHOL AMONG ADOLESCENTS

Allan GUGGENBÜHL

Institut für Konfliktmanagement (IKM), Switzerland

Despite sound information and numerous campaigns, drinking, smoking and drugs fascinate many young people. This can be understood in the context of adolescent psychology. The addiction may represent an initiation path into the adult world, because it breaks taboos and allows excessive experiences. It is important from the side of the adults to take a counter stance to the positions of adolescents. In this way the adolescents can notice attention paid by the adults. Moreover, to take problems of addiction as mutual challenge for both adolescents and adults can bring forth the reductions of symbolic meaning of the addiction for the adolescence.

Key words: addiction, adolescence, adulthood, preventive work

“Those guys are really cool. That’s also a place where you can experience true friendship and closeness; people help each other irrespective of their backgrounds!” This fifteen year old is not talking about a boy-scout camp. He is describing ‘Needle Park’, the worst and most despicable spot of Zürich. Before the police raided the area hundreds of weary, appalling drug addicts sat huddled on park benches, lay drowsily on the ground or aimlessly wandered around not knowing whether it was day or night. Pale young women with bloodshot eyes were begging or offering their services in order to buy ‘dope’, whilst confused young men were emptying rubbish bins, hoping to find something to eat. What was an absolutely horrendous scene that thousands of people considered to be a public disgrace was an object of fascination for this adolescent. He dismissed the adult arguments and stuck to his own version: “Yes of course they are drug addicts, but that was because of the system.” These poor souls were all victims of society. According to the adolescent they were being punished for being ‘John Average’. Amazingly, he glamorised life on the streets. In his eyes the scene radiated a special quality. These people symbolised life in the underground. He believed they were an antidote for society. Where most people would react with sadness and disgust, this young man saw a hidden answer. Trying to persuade him of the misery and desolation of the ‘junkie’ was a vain endeavour. He was convinced that ‘Needle Park’ was a valid alternative to the stress and strivings of a boring life in normality!

The perception of this fifteen year old is of course an extreme one. Most young people are not so naïve and they do not romanticise the heroine drug scene. “Heroin is for looser” is the word. However, the psychological trap behind the words of the young

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Allan GUGGENBÜHL, CH-8001 Zürich, Untere Zäune 1, Switzerland (e-mail: info@ikm.ch).
man is widespread. Behaviours and scenes that horrify adults are frequently attractive to young people. They often exhibit a strange fascination for the unusual, bizarre and dreadful. This is also common with addictions. Although teachers, psychologists, psychotherapists, parents and politicians warn adolescents of the dangers of drug and alcohol abuse, the risks are often discounted. Ecstasy (MDMA), cocaine, ‘poppers’, ‘crack’ and ‘speed’ are considered to be ‘cool’ and are commonly part of the ‘party scene’ in middle Europe. Despite sound information and numerous campaigns, drinking, smoking and drugs fascinate many young people, provided they are presented to them in a social context. For many young people warnings about the dangers of drugs and alcohol seem to heighten their interest in them, a group of youngsters informing the author that “to party, drink and get drunk is definitely cool” and “only sissies don’t smoke!” Furthermore one young person indicated that at his school smoking was a question of survival, commenting that the designated smoking zones were the places in which to meet all “the interesting women”? This was obviously not what the teachers had intended. Following the imposition of restrictions on advertising, the percentage of adolescents who smoke has risen. In Switzerland and Austria 15% of 14 to 24 year old young people regularly drink alcohol and 22.1% of 15 year old young people smoke. 15% have experienced taking cannabis. The consumption is rising and young people continue to be attracted to cigarettes, alcohol and drugs. Warnings and more and more stringent laws appear not to have the desired effect. Many young people are determined to indulge in everything their teachers and parents fear, commenting that “booze and drugs are great”, despite the fact that those in authority relentlessly advocate a life without drugs and modest alcohol consumption. (Sielbereisen, 1997). In one school in Berne nearly all the students of a particular class met before their lessons in order to share a ‘joint’, and in a Grammar School in Basel everyone met during breaks for sessions of champagne drinking. This is not exactly the traditionally advised preparation for lessons!

The comments of young people and the behaviours mentioned above raise important questions about the deeper reasons for the enduring fascination for drugs, alcohol and smoking among young people, and the reasons why adolescents continue to harm themselves and dismiss the warnings of the health experts.

**ADOLESCENCE**

Developmental psychology divides our lives into different phases (Trautnerm, 1991). A phase is a period in life in which certain challenges and qualities dominate. Thinking in terms of phases is an intellectual tool that helps one to understand the situations and problems of people of different ages. In defining phases typical challenges and tasks, personality traits, interests and situations characteristic of the particular age group are generally identified. However, thinking in phases can be problematic, particularly when individual traits and personality factors are disregarded. Individual traits remain the single most influential factor in the personal growth on young people. In order to understand the deeper meaning of the attraction of drugs and smoking it is necessary to reflect on the
developmental challenges adolescents face. In order to understand the fascination for drugs and alcohol, a full and comprehensive consideration is required.

Developmental psychology defines adolescence as a ‘transitional phase’ (Krampen and Reichel, 2002). The adolescent has left childhood and is redefining their relationships with and perspectives of their parents and teachers. They do not yet have a definitive place in society, and essentially live in two worlds: childhood is emotionally close and participation in the world of adults is emerging. The young person usually lives at home and is fed and taken care of by parents whilst simultaneously wishing to join life “out there”. Either willingly or begrudgingly the typical adolescent attends school or college and learns a profession. However their hearts are “somewhere else”. Their situation demands adaptation and they are compelled to adapt to the rules, regulations and rituals of the system or institution to which they belong. Mentally the adolescent is set for autonomy and it is not surprising that they usually perceive themselves as the ‘underdog’ in the conflict between external demands and internal wishes. In essence the adolescent is not yet really allowed to move freely in the world of the adult. They still have to prove that they are eligible for real life, though they may psychologically and physically be ‘grown up’. Sexual maturity develops during adolescence and the adolescent’s cognitive abilities enable sufficient comprehension of most issues (given the appropriate education). Adolescents therefore perceive themselves as ‘adults in waiting’. They want to participate in the activities around them, and judge the actions of others, yet they are bound back. They are capable of personal opinions, views and perceptions, but are forced to live in dependency. Rationally the adolescent may understand the situation, but emotionally it is difficult to accept. Adolescents detect the gaffes of their parents, the blunders of their teachers and the inadequacies of institutions, but are forced to remain mute. They fantasize about challenges, dangers and experiences, but most of them are beyond their reach. Their lives are restricted by the boundaries of school and family. However, the family and school codes cannot impede their thoughts and adolescents tend to visualise what they would do once their lives ‘take off’. The author was graciously informed by a fourteen year old that they were going to be “the greatest Swiss-speaking Reggae Star of Zürich!” whilst a sixteen year old girl was convinced that she would “open a school for the starving children in Somalia”. Adolescents often imagine themselves joining the crowd, having fun or confronting challenges. The healthy adolescent wants to distance themselves from home and school and to step into what they believe to be “real life”. They no longer just want to be the son or daughter of their parents.

The deeper reason for this wish is the need for the adolescent to construct an identity of his or her own during this transitional phase (Fend, 1991). They have to broaden their individuality and gain a distinctive profile. It is no longer sufficient to be someone’s son or daughter. The adolescent wants to be listened to and recognized by others. They no longer wish to be the annex of a family, but are searching for a distinct ‘persona’. Adolescents are very rarely convinced of the achievements and life style of the older generation. They have to refuse some of their parent’s values because they are trying to be different. As a result of this desire they begin to interpret society and their personal surroundings anew. Their aspiration is to reinvent the world around them and to develop a
new lifestyle. They are pushed by an archetypical desire to differentiate themselves from their parents and teachers, even though they may consciously agree with the opinions and principles of the adults. They have to follow the deep urge to prove themselves and to be distinct.

Compliance in school and at home becomes difficult as a result of the archetypical longing for detachment. The adolescent’s relationships with parents and teachers become increasingly ambivalent. Although the adolescent may appreciate their parents or teachers and want them to ‘be there’ and take care of them, these understanding considerate adults are simultaneously considered to be a pest. The adolescent’s compulsion is to be different (Baacek, 1994), and they do not want to be understood. It is the adult’s duty to adopt an adversary role. Over-attentive adults jeopardise the adolescent’s quest for autonomy. Adolescents want the adults in their lives to act as ‘oldies’ so that they can distance themselves from them. In the adolescent’s eyes, adults represent history and have outdated attitudes (Guggenbühl, 1993). Adults who present themselves as tolerant and understanding are viewed with suspicion. In the adolescent’s perception they lure young people into their world and force them to comply with their values and life styles. Unless adolescents at least partially refuse the ideas of adults, their fragile autonomy is endangered.

For adults the situation is neither easy nor simple. It is natural to want to pass on accomplishments and to have the next generation consent to the values and goal of the previous generation. Everyone hopes to leave some mark on this world. The problem is that many adolescents start to provoke in response to any adult attempt to impose their values. This is exemplified by the comments of a sixteen year old girl who said “All I wish for is to find a sexy man with loads of money to take care of me”, in response to her teacher praising the achievements of feminism. In the adolescent view it is only ‘bores’ who identify with adult’s ideas and follow their rules meticulously. For the adolescent it is important to reinterpret society and to respond to the call of ‘the world out there’. This wanderlust or longing to indulge in new experiences is also the reason why adolescents decorate their rooms with idols and pictures from distant countries, and dream of travelling to Australia, the Sahara, Siberia or South America!

**SYMBOLS FOR AUTONOMY**

What the adolescent is actually looking for are scenes that convey *independence*. They *project* their quest for autonomy onto groups, scenes, trends and fascinating places. They become *projection carriers*. They live out their oppositional tendency by choosing a compatible scene in the outside world. These scenes become *symbols for autonomy* that help them to redefine themselves, and they hope that they might strengthen them in their oppositional tendencies. The adolescent therefore chooses scenes that guarantee a reaction from adults. The scenes and behaviours are intended to provoke, to aggravate and annoy parents and teachers, and their reactions provide the proof that one has gained some autonomy.
Friends and colleagues constitute an important reference group in the quest for autonomy. Young people want to empower themselves and orientate themselves to their peer groups through their dress code, interests and use of jargon of the age group. Friends generally face similar psychological dilemmas and provide important source of support for the adolescent. This archetypal need leads to collective trends and makes it easier to gain some distance from parents and teachers, and to develop a distinct and independent personal perspective. The orientation towards peers periodically results in a movement. Young people come together in order to share mutual ideals and a vision. These youth movements sometimes develop a new life style and a common approach to the predominant challenges of the period. Traditionally youth movements are not quiet and unpretentious, - they strive for attention. Unless they are seen, heard and talked about they are not considered to have served their purpose. They usually develop outside of the mainstream culture because of the drive to redefine the core values of society. Some youth movements perceive themselves as an antidote to the problems of society whereas others are happy just to draw some attention or disturb everyone a little.

**Some Examples of Youth Movements**

More than a hundred years ago the possibility of steel and technology was greeted with great enthusiasm in Europe. The potential achievements of steel were considered to be limitless. The Eiffel Tower was built, huge ships were constructed and trains connected the major cities of Europe. Many even believed that increased mobility brought eternal peace closer. Urban societies started to develop and the narrowness of the Victorian and Biedermeier life styles was gradually left behind. Interestingly adolescents largely ignored this fervour. Instead of rejoicing with the adults they gathered in forests, sat in dirty places, gazed at trees, sang songs and cherished nature! The Youth Movement (‘Jugendbewegung’) that believed in nature and ordinary life was born. Thousands of adolescents met in remote spots, sang songs about Wanderlust and created formulae for peace and harmony. This movement was a clear antidote to the then dominant admiration of technology. These adolescents despised technology and haste and opted for an easier lifestyle (Nohl, 1970).

Some years later the Jazz generation emerged. To the horror of teachers, professors and parents, young people started listening to “atrocious Negro music”. This “noise” was considered to be morally damaging and pedagogical authorities voiced their fears that the core values of society were in danger. It was their belief that jazz music would seduce young people to move their hips and clap their hands in a morally hazardous manner. During this period many young people crept out of their parents’ homes and clandestinely listened to the music of Fats Waller, Duke Ellington or Louis Armstrong.

Wars can hamper young people in their search of identity or from defining their profile. When young people are sacrificed on the battlefields their need for history is fulfilled by the political agenda of the society. During the Vietnam War the young people’s need for their own identity was therefore satisfied by the protest movement
against the war. In the sixties the Hippy Movement became centre stage. Drugs, sex and ‘rock ‘n roll’ were the fashion and were advocated as the remedy against narrow-mindedness, intolerance and bigotry. “Make love not war” was the message and bright dresses and long hair the dress code. Youth movements thrive on the adolescent’s desire to differ from grown up society and it is this archetypal need which provides the deeper reason why the majority of adolescents have difficulties in adaptation. Of course they know that they should follow the rules and regulations of school and the codes of conduct of society, but emotionally they yearn to be something different. Even when they unconsciously agree with the values and life style of the adults, the adolescent longs to rehearse their own culture and live in their own myths. Normality seems unbearable to the adolescent because it would mean giving in to the demands of grown ups (Guggenbühl, 1998a).

**THE ADOLESCENT REBELLION**

The adolescent’s wish to be distinct makes it inevitable that they will disrespect boundaries. Everything of which parents and educators warn is bound to ‘be cool’, because this offers the possibility of creating a separate identity. Adolescents are constantly on the lookout for behaviours that will allow them to create their own identity. The primary adolescent task is to rehearse a modest rebellion and they are therefore unable to comply with the rules of ‘normality’. While they may consciously agree with the core values of their parents and teachers, they are also forced to disrespect these axioms. Development in adolescence requires the breaking of some taboos. If adolescents followed all the conventions of society this would mean the end of their psychic development. They would fail to develop the story of their generation and be deprived of a distinct myth of their own (Guggenbühl, 1998b).

Drugs, alcohol and to a minor degree, cigarettes, provide the possibility of becoming more autonomous. The nice, predictable world that the adults are preparing for their offspring can be disrupted. Adolescents can identify with these scenes and their respective behaviours because it provides them with the chance to develop and irritate. As a result they might dive into the ‘party scene’, ‘rave’ all night and possibly swallow ‘speed’ or ‘ecstasy’. “Everybody does it!” is the chant, and being ‘high’ also offers an existential quality to life. To lose the senses, feel dizzy and dive into a Dionysian frenzy belongs to life, and life can be unbearable if one is not able to forget oneself and relinquish self-control. Most adolescents conclude that a life without ‘mind-blowing experiences’ is not an option. They are on the look out for the extreme and therefore dismiss the considered warnings of the grown up bores. This fascination for astounding, excessive experiences is the core of the problem of drug and alcohol abuse.

Drugs, cigarettes and alcohol promise an extra bonus: these addictions belong to the adult world. Adults are entitled to smoke, drink and they may even illicitly take drugs. In our society adults seem to be legitimated to engage in “bad behaviour”. Grown ups allow themselves what they outlaw for their children and teenagers. The result of this seeming
contradiction is highly problematic. Alcohol, smoking and drugs become an *initiation path* into the adult world. When society offers few distinct initiation patterns, (Van Gennep, 1986) consumption of alcohol and smoking offer a route through which to acquire adult qualities: “I smoke therefore I am an adult”—by demonstrating such behaviours the adolescent obtains a ticket to enter the adult world. Naturally parents and teachers warn about the dangers of smoking, drinking and taking drugs. They may even impose laws and regulations to prohibit these activities. However, as many adults have already fallen foul of these addictions the message is ambiguous: “Refrain from that behaviour,… but actually it’s great!” As a result adolescents become suspicious, thinking that the adult wants to cling to some kind of privilege. This double meaning make drugs immensely attractive and young people take on the behaviours in order to break the rules of childhood and become an autonomous adult. When adolescents are warned about the dangers of alcohol, drugs and smoking, the message is heard with two ears: “Yes of course you are worried, because smoking and too much alcohol is definitely despicable, but aren’t you just trying to define the boundaries? Perhaps you just want to prevent us from becoming ‘real adults’ If we want to enter adulthood we have to break the rules. Drinking and smoking makes us adults and gives us a distinct, fearful identity. Your warnings provide us with information about how to be initiated into society.”

The quest for autonomy is strenuous and ephemeral. Adolescents want to demonstrate independence, but parents and teachers remain important and influential. Young people hear the warnings and understand the dangers, but the urge to join in the interesting scenes and the ‘wild side’ of life is often stronger. They long to disobey, but at the same time they do not want to cut themselves off completely from adults. Most adolescents are still very much related to them, are eager for their advice and want to be assured that the adults will ‘be there’ for them when times get hard. Parents and teachers play a vital role in the lives of the majority of young people. The difficulty is that their wish to keep close emotional ties *contradicts* the desire for autonomy. It is difficult for the adolescent to openly admit that they are still hoping to get attention. Autonomy is the primary agenda item, and the adolescent is confronted with the dilemma of how to act autonomously without losing the love and care of their parents and the support of their teachers.

**ATTENTION THROUGH PROVOCATION**

The answer to the adolescent’s dilemma is *provocation*. Adolescents get their emotional attention by infuriating or irritating adults from time to time. When parents and teachers get annoyed it means that they are still connected to the adolescent and care about them. Their anger proves their *relatedness*. Adolescents will often *deliberately* ‘madden’ the grown ups in an attempt to ‘feel them out’ and cast an eye beyond the adult’s persona or mask. An adolescent can provoke when he takes drugs, joins the party scene and smokes. When parents and teachers get nervous, start to worry and perhaps even rant, this signals to the adolescent that something important has happened: Finally they are being
recognized because the adults are paying attention to them.

This is exemplified by the story of a student in a secondary school in Fribourg who pressed past a teacher in the corridor, and pushed him slightly. The teacher immediately informed the student that he could at least apologise; instead, the student spat on the floor. Understandably the teacher was enraged and demanded that the young person should follow him to the headmaster’s office. After some strong, loud words the interaction between the teacher and student began to develop satisfactorily. It turned out that the young man needed an emotional reaction from an adult in order to stabilize himself. The student was actually checking out whether or not his teachers cared.

It is the duty of parents and teachers to get annoyed with adolescents from time to time. When young people want adults to be angry it is important that the adults play their role by showing their discontentment and perhaps their anger. Adolescents don’t want agreeing ‘goody-goodies’. They need potent counter figures. Grown ups need to show their feelings periodically if they wish to maintain their relationships with their children or students. Aloofness or a detached attitude is not inappropriate. During adolescence red faces and loud voices are part of normality. Disagreement with young people communicates to them that they are important. When adolescents choose an addiction they might therefore also be hoping for distinctive reactions form the adults in their lives.

**The Right to be Misunderstood**

Adolescents want to develop a distinct identity and cherish alternative myths. The danger is that they may choose scenes or behaviours that are destructive and may lead to addiction. It is the duty of adults to prevent them from becoming victims of alcoholism, and drug and tobacco addiction. In order to fulfil this duty it is important that adults play the psychologically important role of disagreeing. Adults need to take a counter stance to the positions or opinions of adolescents. Adolescents do not want adults to agree with their life styles and interests. There is nothing more annoying for young people than to be surrounded by adults who tolerate everything. Remarks like “I know how it is, during the sixties we were also really outrageous” are unhelpful for the adolescent who is justified to retort “It’s my turn to differ, move on Dad”! The adolescent wants adults to oppose their views, and adults are required to play their role as ‘oldies’. No longer is it their task to interpret the world. The adult is required to reflect and scrutinize the behaviour of young people before drawing conclusions according to their own world-view and taste. In many cases the adult may have to shake their head and start a dispute. On other issues they may agree. The adolescent is seeking autonomy in opposition and needs opposing adults. Adolescents want to create their own myths and construct their own identity. They strive for a distinct profile, and often choose behaviours that are revolting for adults. The adult’s task is to frown, to be amazed and to not understand the behaviour of the adolescent.
Addictions are a serious problem. In undertaking preventive work young people should not be singled out for an exclusive focus. Drugs and alcohol remain a mutual challenge. We all need to fight alcoholism, drugs and smoking. Programmes and laws that merely focus on the adolescent are in danger of producing a counter-effect and promote addiction as a mark of adulthood. It makes no sense to forbid alcohol consumption in pubs for young people under the age of 18 (as in Britain) because it classifies alcohol consumption as an adult privilege. Such condescending adult positions often persuade young people to opt for the forbidden, because these behaviours and activities are seen to make the adolescent important, mature and supposedly autonomous. It is a prerequisite of protecting young people that they should share adults’ ambivalence, struggle and fears. When adolescents realize that addictions are a reality and a constant existential challenge the issue may be dissociated from the quest for autonomy. Preventive work does not mean just laws and regulations, but should also strengthen the psychological defences which adults have to mobilize in order not to fall foul of addiction. This can be made possible by offering programmes in which adolescents themselves develop ways and means of prevention. Schools should be invited to participate in programmes where students think of and instigate preventive steps. Such ‘bottom-up’ programmes have been shown to be most effective (Guggenbühl, Boström, Hersberger, & Rom 2003). Such programmes are more likely to be accepted by adolescents because they elude the psychological dilemma caused by the quest for autonomy. This type of preventive work is less affected by the ambiguous, antagonistic relationship between adults and adolescents. In Switzerland, Sweden and Germany the Institute of Conflict Management and Mythodrama (www.ikm.ch) demonstrates some evidence that using this approach offers the hope that drugs and alcoholism do not spread and that addictions decrease.

REFERENCES


*Manuscript received December 1, 2008; Revision accepted December 20, 2008*