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Special Issue on Addictive Behaviors

Editorial

## Preventing Childhood Addiction and Caring for the Child with Addictive Behaviors: Implications for Clinical Practice, Education, Policy, and Research



Most pediatric nurses have been challenged when caring for youths struggling with an addiction. The news is replete with reports of children succumbing to one addiction or another, always ending in tragedy for the family and wider community. As pediatric nurses, we have found ourselves wondering which factors lead some youths to become addicted. How does peer pressure, co-existing mental health issues, or family history contribute to additive behaviors? Why do some youths seek comfort in addictive activities while others do not? Or why do some youths openly choose to engage in high risk behaviors, despite knowledge that their participation may endanger their well-being? And did our prescribing practices in some way contribute to the rise in childhood addiction? Regardless of the antecedents, addictions are rarely due to a single cause, but rather to a complex interplay of biological, social, and behavioral factors. A plethora of new evidence is emerging, but clear answers remain evasive.

Addiction is a chronic condition in which individuals engage in the use of a substance or in a behavior for which the rewarding effects provide an incentive to repeatedly take part in the behavior despite the potential for physical or psychological harm incurred or exacerbated by use. We often think about addictions in terms of drug, alcohol, and tobacco misuse or abuse. However, a wide range of addictions exist including but not limited to problematic vaping, gambling, gaming, eating, shopping, and engaging in social media and other electronic activities. Addictive behaviors are repeated to the exclusion of all other activities, even those activities that were previously considered pleasurable. When the individual engages in the activity repeatedly, the neuronal pathways become reorganized to support these activities through neuroplasticity. Young brains are more vulnerable than adults' to addictive behaviors - the rapidly developing brains of children and youths make childhood a time for considerable vulnerability. The clinical significance of these neurologic changes is that addiction, once established, becomes a chronic disorder with relapses and remissions. Fortunately with targeted interventions, the brain can be retrained and new pathways can be developed. But this requires careful surveillance and timely intervention.

Quite frankly, addiction in children is a major global public health problem. This year, the World Health Organization (WHO) held its' Second Forum on Alcohol, Drugs and Addictive Behaviors to bring a new impetus to international activities designed to reduce the health and social burden associated with substance use and addictive behaviors. Individual countries have also launched their own prevention and treatment initiatives. And while helpful, these activities alone will not solve the problem of addiction.

As nurses practicing in a global community, we have the moral imperative to prevent addiction, to identify at-risk children and youth and intervene early so that they can reach their fullest developmental potential. The goal of this special issue entitled "Preventing Childhood Addiction and Caring for the Child with Addictive Behaviors: Implications for Clinical Practice, Education, Policy, and Research" is to heighten pediatric nurses and other health care professionals awareness of addiction in children and youths. The diversity of topics, study designs, methodologies and samples demonstrate the importance and scope of this international phenomenon in children.

There are a total of eleven papers included in the special issue; seven papers are original research, two are quality improvement projects, one is a case report and one is a clinical paper. The papers represent an international perspective with the authors hailing from the United States, Malaysia and South Korea. Two articles examine the relationships between personal factors and high risk behaviors. In a paper entitled "Personal and Family Factors Associated with Risky Health Behaviours among Malaysian Adolescents" Cheah, Lim and Kee examined the relationships between personal factors and high risk behaviors including physical inactivity, smoking and alcohol consumption. In addition, Neuman, Simonovich and Amer conducted a pilot study exploring the potential effects of religious beliefs on high risk behaviors in college aged young adults. In another study, "Listening to Adolescents: Their Perceptions and Information Sources about E-cigarettes," Park, Kwon, Gaughan, Livingston and Chang conducted semi-structured interviews to elicit students' perceptions of e-cigarettes and where they obtained information about e-cigarettes.

There were three papers that reported on the effects of novel interventions. In the article entitled, "Interactive Computer Simulation for Adolescent Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) for Substance Use in an Undergraduate Nursing Program", Burmester, Ahluwalia, Ploutz-Snyder and Strobbe described a successful process for improving substance use screening for nursing students through computer simulation. Another paper, "Engaging Youth to Change Frequent Marijuana Use: Motivational Enhancement Therapy (MET) in Primary Care" describes the use of an intervention to assist youth in decreasing marijuana use. Also included in this special issue is a pilot study, "Effectiveness of School-based Health Center Delivery of a Cognitive Skills Building Intervention in Young, Rural Adolescents: Potential Applications for Addiction and Mood" examining an intervention delivered by school nurses to enhance aspects of executive function linked with addiction and coping, such as behavioral regulation.

Another descriptive study, “Depressive Symptoms, Emotional Aggression, School Adjustment, and Mobile Phone Dependency among Adolescents with Allergic Diseases in South Korea” compared the effects of depression, aggression and school adjustment on phone use among middle school students with and without allergic diseases from South Korea.

Two studies report on quality improvement projects related to the care of infants exposed to substances either during pregnancy or while hospitalized as a part of critical care. A team from Wellspan Health York Hospital reported a decrease in length of stay and medication exposure as a result of rooming in and standardized care. A team from Boston Children’s Hospital reported improvements in care while weaning patients from sedatives after a critical illness using a standardized and evidenced based approach to weaning in hospitalized children.

In a paper, “Opioid Seeking Behaviors and Diversion among Pediatric Patients in the Hospital Setting: A Case Report” two case reports of hospitalized adolescents with chronic illnesses who diverted significant amounts of intravenous opioids were described. The paper includes guidelines for improvements in monitoring and recognition of opioid diversion as well as guidelines for hospitals for ways to prevent or for early recognition.

Lastly, the importance of educating adolescents and their families about Naloxone was highlighted by Carson as an intervention to

prevent opioid related deaths. Collectively, these papers enhance our understanding of addictions while helping delineate trajectories for future research and evidence-based practice.

In order to provide holistic care, pediatric nurses must first appreciate the breadth and depth of addictions, remembering that addictions are highly problematic in children and youths as they influence the total nexus of biological, psychosocial and cognitive components of development. Nurses need to understand the interplay of the developing brain and environmental influences as they actively engage in prevention, early intervention, and treatment activities. Nurses’ failure to do so may result in youths’ unfulfilled potential, or worse, young lives lost. We anticipate that the articles in this special issue will contribute to ongoing discussions, improvements in clinical care, future research studies and policy changes. Ultimately, pediatric nurses can help recognize and reduce risks for addiction during childhood, when children are rapidly developing and highly vulnerable to their long-lasting impact of addiction.

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