



## **How to help teens with alcohol or drug problems? Among talk therapies, ecological family therapies, CBT, and combined treatments work best**

Released October 1, 2014 by the [Society of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology \(SCCAP\)](#)

Published this month in the *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology (JCCAP)*, a careful review of talk therapies for substance use/abuse problems among youth by Aaron Hogue, Ph.D. at the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, Craig Henderson, Ph.D. at Sam Houston State University, and Timothy Ozechowski, Ph.D. and Michael Robbins, Ph.D. from the Oregon Research Institute concluded that, among talk therapies, ecological family therapies, cognitive-behavioral therapies, and approaches that combined multiple treatments have the strongest scientific evidence supporting their use. Studies suggest that substance use problems affect between 10-20% of youths and cause significant and distressing impairment, particularly in academic and social contexts. The [Society of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology \(SCCAP\)](#) has an informative [video](#) for parents available on [www.effectivechildtherapy.com](http://www.effectivechildtherapy.com).

The authors examined 230 peer-reviewed studies published since 2007 in their update of a similar review from 2008 by Waldron and Turner [Holly Waldron, Ph.D., and Charles Turner, Ph.D. at the Oregon Research Institute]. Using a five level ranking system, with the first level representing treatments with the *best support* and the fifth level representing treatments with *no support*, the authors categorized 10 different treatment approaches, with four ranked at Level 1 or best support: ecological family therapy, group cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), individual CBT, and combined treatments. Ecological family therapy directly targets both intra-familial relationships and multiple interacting systems (e.g., school, peer, juvenile justice) within which adolescents develop. CBT group and individual models identify precursors to substance use, enhance coping skills, and establish behavioral incentives and alternatives to reduce or eliminate use. Combined treatments feature an integrated package of CBT, motivational, and family interventions. Motivational enhancement, behavioral family therapy, and combined treatments that include contingency management were ranked at level 2 support, the second highest. Drug counseling interventions grounded in the 12-step approach were rated at Level 3 (i.e., “might work”). No other psychological treatment met scientific standards to suggest that it could reliably or meaningfully reduce impairment and symptoms of youth with substance abuse problems.

For more information, interested readers can go to [www.effectivechildtherapy.com](http://www.effectivechildtherapy.com). In addition, the website offers free videos on a variety of child/adolescent therapy topics, including an extended video describing [evidence-based approaches for substance abuse in children and adolescents](#) presented by Dr. Ken Winters.

This paper is part of a series of evidence-based updates published by JCCAP. Other articles in the series include:

- Update for [treatment of obsessive-compulsive disorder](#) in children/adolescents by Dr. Jennifer Freeman and colleagues
- Update for [treatment of bipolar disorder](#) in children/adolescents by Dr. Mary Fristad and colleagues
- Update for [treatment of ADHD](#) in children/adolescents by Dr. Steve Evans and colleagues

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