

# Ties That Bind or Break: The Dual Role of Family in Youth Drug Addiction

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The majority of Pakistan's population consists of youth who are the fundamental resource. The rise of drug addiction among youth is a pressing concern globally and in Pakistan.<sup>1</sup> Addiction among youth is often depicted as a personal weakening, a result of peer impact, or a consequence of societal experience and availability. The most consistent and unrecognized influence in a young person's life is their family.

The family's role in the development of drug abuse is unique, as family can be either a defensive shield or a risk amplifier, offering connection, direction, and resilience, or adding to emotional turmoil, anarchy, and escape into substance use. Furthermore, the family also suffer from the direct consequences of the abuse.

The negative influence of dysfunctional family dynamics cannot be overlooked. Family stressors such as divorce, violence at home, mental illness of parents, or financial instability create a rich ground for emotional dysregulation in children. This often leads to poor coping strategies such as drug use, particularly when mental health support is deficient or stigmatized.

Parental modeling plays a vital role. Adolescents whose parents use drugs are not only more likely to use drugs but may also inherit permissive attitudes toward drugs.

Even where parents are abstinent, punitive criticism, overcontrol, or emotional unavailability can drive the child toward peer validation and escapism through substances. Furthermore feeling of being ignored by family also lead to use of substances.<sup>3</sup>

Children who grow up in environments where there is chronic conflict at home, stress is unmanaged, affection is conditional, abuse is normalized, and rules are inconsistent are more likely to abuse drugs. A 2021 study in Pakistan found that youth from high-conflict or emotionally distant families were three times more likely to report current drug use than those from supportive households<sup>4</sup>

Out of the many conflicts within a family, the lack of problem-solving abilities, interactions, and communication is related to further addiction.<sup>2</sup>

In Pakistan, where open discussions around mental

health or emotional struggles are not encouraged, many adolescents internalize distress until it manifests in destructive behaviors, including addiction. In a study it was found out that 46% of drug addicts have depression.

On the positive side, healthy family environments are reliably associated with lower rates of youth drug abuse. Families that demonstrate open communication, emotional warmth, constant boundaries, and effective parental monitoring create a protective cocoon around youth.

Studies confirm that adolescents who experience strong parental attachment are significantly less likely to engage in risky behaviors, including substance use. These families nurture emotional intelligence, build resilience, and offer safe spaces for distress to be expressed and managed constructively.

According to a study, the parent–adolescent bond has indirect effects through religiosity. Bond to mother is a strong protective factor. Because of this, adolescents feel closer to them and share their daily life routine, thus communicating frequently with their mothers.<sup>2</sup> Bond to father also acts as a protective factor, though less likely than bond to mother.

Active monitoring by parents and parental disapproval are linked to a decreased use of polysubstance.<sup>5</sup>

Strong family connections, open communication, and consistent parenting are protective factors against early use of drugs.<sup>2</sup>

Family can become central to recovery. Family-based interventions are the most effective methods. Functional family therapy, multidimensional family therapy, and parental training programs have improved outcomes by enhancing communication, repairing trust, and re-establishing healthy boundaries<sup>6</sup>.

In Pakistan, however, family involvement in addiction treatment is still limited. Cultural stigma, lack of awareness, and denial often keep families from acknowledging their role—positive or negative.

Many see addiction as a result of external factor rather than a symptom of internal dysfunction. A 2022 qualitative study from Lahore showed that more than half of families denied any home-related stressors contributing

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to their child's addiction, attributing it solely to "bad company".

The addiction crisis among youth cannot be undertook in silos. A youth's mental health path is often shaped long before the first drug is used—within the walls of their own home. Health professionals, educators, and policymakers to view the family not just as a background variable, but as a primary intervention point. Prevention efforts must focus on enhancing parenting skills, fostering emotional literacy, and improving communication within households. Family therapy, when included in addiction treatment, has shown significantly better long-term recovery outcomes among adolescents. Schools and community programs should promote parental engagement and educate caregivers about early warning signs, emotional literacy, and healthy

If we are to make meaningful progress in curbing addiction among our youth, we must look inward—toward the family—and recognize its power—they shape the lens through which children learn to process stress, form identity, and make choices. Whether that lens sharpens or

blurs a young person's path depends on the ties that either bind or break them.

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