

BREAK FREE

with OSCAR
BAMUHIGIRE

Dear Counsellor,
How serious is the problem of alcoholism among children in this country? I am a teacher and am concerned about the high rate of alcoholism among both primary and secondary school students in my district.

Stewart, Mbalei

Dear Stewart,
I would like to thank you for your concern about the mental health of

the children in your school. I encourage you to go a step further and help those children who are dependent on alcohol to access treatment. The rate of alcoholism among children in Uganda is high. According to a study published in 2016 in the International Neuropsychiatric Disease Journal, approximately 39.1% of children in Uganda aged 12 to 24 used substances regularly. A more recent study published in 2024 in the journal BMC Public Health observed that there is a high prevalence of probable

alcohol use disorders (AUD) and substance use disorders (SUD) among children and adolescents in Uganda. In this study, more than half of the children (51.7%) were aged 14 to 17, with a mean age of 12.9 years. The study revealed that the overall prevalence of probable AUDs and other SUDs was 27.8%, whilst that of probable AUD alone was 25.5%. It further noted that more than a third (39.4%) of children had ever consumed alcohol, and more than half (62.5%) of these were male. Among those who

How serious is the issue of alcoholism among children?



A study revealed that more than a third (39.4%) of children had ever consumed alcohol

had used other substances in the past 12 months, 4.9% had used tobacco, 4.8% had used marijuana, and 5.3% had used some other illicit drug.

The study also found that, with regard to use in the past 30 days, 23.6% of children had used alcohol, 2.6% tobacco, 4.0% marijuana, and 3.3% any other illicit drug. The study noted that most children begin drinking at a very early age: "Among young people, alcohol is the number one choice of substance for use and its pattern of use among this group is one of drinking too much and at too early an

age. In our specific context, evidence reveals that children commence experimentation with alcohol use as soon as they are able to hold a glass. Another study conducted within our region similarly highlighted cases of alcohol use dependence among children as young as five to eight years old. This early initiation of substance use is associated with a greater likelihood of developing substance dependence in adulthood."

The study further noted that those who begin using substances before the age of 13 years are far more likely to drink to intoxication frequently or die from an overdose. According to the study, these children and adolescents also often exhibit behaviours that pose a risk to themselves and others, such as sustaining injuries in fights, attempting suicide, and engaging in risk sexual behaviour.