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Risky Level Drug and Alcohol Use on Rise

In statistics released for Drug Action Week (21-27 June), Kids Helpline has revealed an increase in young people reporting drug and alcohol use at high risk levels.

Kids Helpline General Manager Wendy Protheroe said the good news is that the proportion of calls about drug use has declined in the last few years but that contacts from young people who are using frequently or at high risk levels has noticeably increased.

“Among young people contacting Kids Helpline about their use of alcohol and drugs, 21 percent were experimenting or were occasional users in 2004 and this has decreased to 16 percent in 2008,” Ms Protheroe said.

“While counsellors are dealing more with young people in their late teens, they are also speaking with more young people who frequently use drugs including alcohol, cannabis, amphetamines (including methamphetamine), tobacco and ecstasy.

“With more young people tending to use drugs and alcohol excessively they are placing themselves at serious risk of harm.”

Aside from physical consequences such as kidney, liver and heart damage young drug users face a heightened risk of committing, or falling victim to, a violent crime, suicide and self injury and infectious diseases.

According to Ms Protheroe, almost half of the young people contacting Kids Helpline with alcohol or drug concerns in 2008 were repeat users of the service or were receiving ongoing counselling, a large increase since 2004 when under 10 percent received ongoing counselling.

“Many young people know they need help and they can get it by calling us. Unfortunately, although we operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week, we can only take so many calls,” she said.

“In 2008 nearly 500,000 young people tried to contact our counsellors, but we could only talk to about 60 percent of those who called.”

Ms Protheroe said that the social cost to the Australian community of substance abuse if unaddressed was enormous.

“Adolescence is a time of experimentation and for many young people this can include trying drugs and alcohol; we have to make sure that these young people do not grow into adults with drug and alcohol problems.”

“We also need to make sure that young people who do not use drugs and alcohol recognise the impact their healthy lifestyle has on a happy and safe future.”

Parents can assist by knowing about and understanding the harmful impacts of drug use, helping young people make informed choices about responsible alcohol and legal drug use, and being good role models.

Kids Helpline is Australia’s only free 24 hour, seven day a week counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25 years of age.

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