

Adolescent Drug and Alcohol Abuse Tips for Parents

Drug use in Adolescence can be viewed as normal, from the standpoint of an Adolescent's attempts of adjustment to large cognitive, social, and developmental changes. It is however only a substitute for developing appropriate coping strategies, and can put the adolescent at great health risk. This is particularly true when drug use involves automobiles, sexual activity, and intravenous drug use. Alcohol is the drug most often associated with death and serious injury.

Experimentation will often not lead to abuse. Experimentation however should be taken seriously, especially if accompanied by large doses, rapid consumption, and use urged on by peers. Warning signs of drug use often mimic and occur with other problems, such as depression, anxiety disorders, personality disorders, conduct disorders, and attention deficit disorder. These issues will also need consideration for prevention and treatment to be successful.

Though Parents may feel helpless to intervene, studies have shown that parental intervention does have a significant effect. Since drug and alcohol use often begin as early as 12 years, you should begin discussion in the preteen years. Schools often begin their drug awareness as early as fourth grade -- it is easier to have a captive audience in this age group. Though High School students do receive much of their information from their peers, studies show they do listen. They also report they wish their parents would discuss these issues (and others) with them, so it is never too late.

Tips for parents for discussing and dealing with drugs and alcohol in children include:

- Discussions about Drugs and Alcohol have to be "open door" and ongoing, and never a single "Drug Talk." Listen as much talk, and encourage your child to be comfortable telling you about problems.
- If your child tells you something that makes you feel uncomfortable, be calm and collected, so not to react in a way that may cut off further discussions. If your child becomes defensive or assures you that he/she

does not use drugs, discuss why they think people use drugs.

- Use captive moments to discuss drug and alcohol use with your child; such as car trips, etc.
 - Eat more meals together, since they are great opportunities to increase bonding.
 - Take advantage of Newspaper and TV news stories to point out the issues with drug and Alcohol use.
 - Become knowledgeable about drugs and alcohol, and the effects of them. Let your child know the truths about drugs and alcohol and the problems that result from their use. (See web sites below)
 - Challenge your child's belief that "everyone is doing it." Adolescents often over estimate the number and the degree in which their peers use drugs and alcohol.
 - Never enable or verbally condone drug use. State clearly that you would be disappointed (are disappointed) if they used drugs. Give specific reasons why use of a specific drug has health consequences. (See web sites below)
 - Do not assume your child knows your position on drugs and alcohol. Set clear rules and consequences for drug and alcohol use, and be consistent. Consequences should not be severe enough to undermine the quality of the child-parent relationship.
 - Praise positive behavior, consistently and immediately.
 - Allow the child to learn by natural consequences only when it does not place the child at physical risk. (i.e., allow an arrest for drug use, but do not allow them to drive under the influence)
 - If your child inquires about your past drug use, you should be honest to avoid loss of credibility. Honesty however should avoid unnecessary private details. Be frank about what attracted you to drugs, why they are dangerous, what is now known that was not known then. Explain how information and discussions about drugs from the Grandparents, might have affected your decisions. You can also give examples of how you learned from other people's mistakes.
- Never supply alcohol to a teen thinking they are safe with supervised drinking at home. It will send the wrong message. Moreover, it is often illegal.
 - Set the example: Abstain for drinking or drink responsibly. Do not use illicit drugs or abuse prescription drugs.
 - Get to know your children's friends and their parents. Even though you cannot pick your children's friends, you can discuss your concerns about them with your child. You also can involve their friend's parents for additional help.
 - Always know where your children are, what their plans are, and when they are expected back. Tell them this is simple courtesy and that you care.
 - Always have a backup transportation plan for your child should they or their driver drink or use drugs. You can pick them up or provide them with a cab if necessary.
 - Find alternative ways to celebrating important events.
 - Develop a Prevention Program at your school, church, and other community institutions.
 - Prevention Programs should target normative beliefs, lifestyle compatibility, and beliefs about consequences. Prevention Programs need to provide mentoring (adult and peer), and involve parents.
 - Prevention programs need to target limiting supply and availability and have links to treatment programs in the community. Prevention Programs should involve after school activities when needed.

A Word about Drug Testing

The role of a Pediatrician is one of prevention, diagnosing, and treatment, or appropriate referral for care. Suspicion of drug use warrants a comprehensive evaluation, and not a single drug test.

Because of the legal and personal consequences that may result from a positive test, Physicians have legal and ethical obligations to the patient to obtain their informed consent. Most adolescent patients have enough intellect to make an

informed consent, meaning they are capable of conceptualizing a relationship between drug use and its consequences. This understanding forms a large basis of drug treatment.

It is important for parents to understand that many physicians do not order drug screens because of their diagnostic limitations. There are many over the counter products that can cause a positive illicit drug result. A negative drug test often does not rule out problem drug use. Many drugs leave the body before they can be detected. There are also more illicit and designer drugs than there are tests. Some drugs may require blood in addition to urine to detect.

It is also important for parents to understand that drug screens play little role in treatment decisions. A drug test (even a positive result) does little to indicate problem drug use. Rather than drug testing most patients in the appropriate therapeutic environment will provide the physician with the necessary information to make treatment decisions. This often requires the physician to evaluate the teen in private. The physician is obligated to maintain strict confidence with the patient, and will only divulge information with the patient's permission. This confidence however may be forfeited if the patient is at serious physical risk.

Web site for details and tips about drugs:

www.theantidrug.com/drug

www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/substanceabuseproblems.html

www.aap.org/healthtopics/suabuse.cfm

www.medem.com (type in *substance abuse* or the drug in question in the Search)

www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/teendrug.htm

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