

Talking to Teens About Drugs and Alcohol

1st August 2021

As the parent of a teen, drug and alcohol use is probably high on your list of concerns for your child. Although parents would like to think that their own children will never drink, smoke, or take drugs, it is prudent to get to know as much as you can and to maintain ongoing communication with your teen about the risks of drug or alcohol misuse.

What causes a teen to use drugs or alcohol?

- Curiosity—teens are testing out different values and personalities and want to know what drugs or alcohol are like.
- Teens are generally inclined to take risks but have little understanding of risk consequences.
- Peer pressure is one of the greatest motivators of all for teens. They may want to be seen and accepted as a member of the group.
- It appears to offer an escape valve or a way to dull the stress and pain caused by problems or pressures at home, at school, or with peers.

This final point is often the reason behind chronic use or addiction.

Know the facts for better risk reduction

Learning the facts about commonly available drugs can help you be better able to tell if your teen is using drugs, and if so, which ones. Knowing the facts can also help you to communicate with your child about potential risks. The following is a brief overview of substances that your teen may have access to:

Alcohol. The most commonly misused substance, alcohol impairs judgment and is a major factor in both car accidents and sexual abuse.

Cannabis (marijuana, hashish, ganja, pot, and weed). Slows reaction time and impairs driving. Long-term use can lead to cognitive impairment, lung damage (when inhaled), and other health conditions.

Cocaine. This is a stimulant, often causing hyperactivity. May be used to stay awake. Large amounts can lead to strange behaviour or violence.

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Depressants (barbiturates, benzodiazepines). Mostly prescribed medications, such as Valium for anxiety, or sleep aids; meant to provide a calming effect. They can be extremely dangerous when mixed with alcohol.

Hallucinogens (LSD, mushrooms, etc.). These drugs have highly unpredictable effects and can cause horrifying hallucinations.

Ketamine (a.k.a "Special K"). This drug is not considered an opioid or barbiturate but can cause hallucinations, be used as a date rape drug, and has become popular in social situations. It is frequently used in combination with cocaine or amphetamines but when used with other drugs can be fatal. It is used legally as a surgical anesthesia.

MDMA ("ecstasy," "Molly") brings an increase in energy and a sense of wellbeing. Risks include physical and psychological dependence on the drug; high doses can cause organ failure.

Opioids, natural or synthetic (including heroin and prescription medications, such as oxycodone). These numb pain and produce a sense of wellbeing or euphoria. Long-term use changes the way the brain functions. Highly addictive, these agents contribute greatly to overdose and death.

Rohypnol (a.k.a. "roofies" or the date rape drug). This is an extremely powerful sleeping medication. When combined with alcohol, it removes inhibitions and causes amnesia. It is difficult to detect if slipped into alcohol. Teens who suspect they may have unknowingly taken the drug can take a urine test to detect the drug for up to three days after ingestion.

Stimulants/amphetamines (such as "speed," "uppers," or "meth" as in methamphetamines). Often these are medically-prescribed drugs, such as Adderall for ADHD. May be used to stay awake. As these drugs activate the nervous system, abuse of these may cause many conditions including hypertension, seizures, or mania.

Signs of alcohol or drug use

Possible signs may include:

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- bloodshot eyes
- listless, unhealthy appearance
- weight loss
- changed sleeping or eating habits
- increased anger or aggression
- greater susceptibility to sickness
- skipping school, poor grades
- emotionally withdrawn and secretive
- increased requests for money
- theft from the home of money or articles that could be sold

Signs of alcohol or drug overdose requiring emergency hospital treatment may include an inability to speak or walk properly, severe vomiting, loss of consciousness, or the threat to harm themselves or others.

Communicating before problems arise

Communication is perhaps the most important aspect of your relationship with your teen. When talking with them about important matters, do your best to understand their point of view. Listen, listen, and listen some more. Wherever possible:

Think prevention. Establish and maintain communication about drugs and alcohol before you believe you have any reason to worry, i.e., well before your child enters their teen years.

Try to find a neutral way to bring up the subject. Did you hear the news about that celebrity who overdosed? Did you see the local news about the nearby alcohol-related automobile crash? Remember that your child may use this same strategy to raise issues with you. Be open and ready to communicate.

Don't lecture or preach. Discuss the facts and risks openly and honestly in an objective, factual manner. Let them know the risks and consequences of alcohol or drug use to their health and life.

Talk about why teens turn to alcohol or drugs. Brainstorm how a teen could reject peer

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pressure.

Help put things into perspective. Remind your teen that if personal problems arise, it is far better to face them than to try to run away from them.

Be truthful. If you used drugs in your youth, there is no reason to bring up the matter yourself. However, if your teen asks you if you did, reply honestly.

Don't try to lay down dictatorial rules. Forbidding a child to drink will not prevent alcohol use. However, it may hinder communication and could prevent a teen from calling home for help or a lift home if impaired.

Be supportive of your child. Reinforce the message of unconditional love. Parents can point out that they may not always like their children's behaviour, but they will always love them.

When you think your teen is using alcohol or drugs

- If your teen comes home clearly impaired, leave discussion for the next morning. However, if you see signs of a medical emergency, do not hesitate to seek medical attention.
- Choose your timing carefully; don't try to talk when your teen is rushing to get ready or to leave for school or work.
- Do not be judgmental and don't preach.
- Explain that you were worried by the impaired state and ask how it happened.
- Let your teen talk and listen, listen, listen!
- Discuss the cause and talk about how your teen can prevent it from happening again.
- Remind your teen that it is always better to face problems than to try to run away from them.
- Be supportive; reinforce the message of unconditional love.
- Ask your teen to let you know if you can help in any way. Make it clear that this offer does not carry a time limit. You will always be ready and willing to talk.

If you believe your teen is seriously abusing drugs or alcohol, talk to your child's doctor or a professional about a referral to counselling or a rehab program.

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In working on understanding your kids, parents may also want to take a look at themselves and the example they are setting with respect to drugs and alcohol. After all, kids learn a lot more by watching adults than by listening to them.

You can't be with your children 24/7. And while there are no guarantees that your kids won't use or become addicted to drugs, you can work on maintaining a good relationship with them. You will achieve this by spending time with them, making them feel that they can talk to you about anything, and above all, reinforcing at every step that you will be there for them with your love and an open mind, helping them make the best possible choices for themselves.