

Substance Use and Abuse



Your Dilemma:

“We want to talk to Toby about drugs and drinking, but we also want him to know that we trust him.”

or

“Faye has been avoiding us lately and won’t go on family outings anymore. She doesn’t seem like herself. We’re worried she’s using drugs.”

You may find it hard to believe that your teen would ever drink alcohol or use other drugs. Or if you grew up in the 60s and 70s, you may feel hypocritical telling your daughter or son not to do things you did yourself at that age. The topic can be upsetting and emotionally charged, but by avoiding a discussion about it, you do your teen a disservice. Your son or daughter needs a great deal of guidance and support to make wise choices.



ENCOURAGE POSITIVE FRIENDSHIPS

Research strongly suggests that peer influence affects rates of substance use. Get to know your teens’ friends. If you notice that they have a positive effect on your teen, say so: “You always seem happy when Sarah’s around.” If certain friends seem to bring out negative attitudes and behaviors, carefully express your concerns and set limits on how much time your teen may spend with them.



KEEP EXPECTATIONS HIGH

Acknowledge that your teen may want to experiment with using alcohol and other drugs out of curiosity, to seem more grown-up, to rebel, to deal with shyness, or for other reasons, **but emphasize that alcohol use is illegal under age 21 and describe the potential serious consequences of any drug use** (e.g., addictive properties, impairment of judgment and the risk of getting arrested). Be specific with your teen about your expectations regarding alcohol and other drugs. Make it clear that you believe in his or her ability to live a successful life and that you trust her or him to make good choices.



SET FAMILY BOUNDARIES

Even if your teen smokes marijuana or drinks alcohol “just once,” removing certain privileges (e.g., driving) as previously agreed may be an appropriate consequence. **A seemingly isolated incident may signify something’s not going right.** Perhaps your teen isn’t feeling valued or is having trouble fitting in at school. If you can inquire about the incident respectfully, you create a valuable opportunity to help get her or his life back on track.



CREATE A SAFE, CARING NEIGHBORHOOD

Talk with your neighbors to get everyone on board about not letting teens have parties unless a responsible adult is home. Ask them to let you know if they see unsafe activity going on when you’re not home.

Underage Drinking

According to the American Medical Association,* underage drinking:

- ◆ Is a factor in nearly half of all teen automobile crashes—the leading cause of death among teens;
- ◆ Contributes to youth suicides, fatal injuries, and homicides—the next three leading causes of death for teens after auto accidents;
- ◆ Is linked to two-thirds of all sexual assaults and date rapes of teens and college students; and
- ◆ Is a major factor in unprotected sex among teens.

Share this information with your kids.

*Statistics reported by the American Medical Association Web site accessed January 28, 2004: www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/print/3557.html.

♥ PROVIDE FAMILY SUPPORT

When teens feel good about themselves, they are less likely to turn to alcohol or other drugs to “feel better.” Look for ways to help your teen feel accepted and loved as he or she is. Spend time regularly with each of your teens. Try to have at least one meal together every day.

If you think your teen has a substance abuse problem, don't try to cope alone or keep it a secret. Changes in school performance or in how he or she usually behaves (e.g., missing curfew, abandoning old friends for a new crowd, lying, being unusually aggressive) may be warning signs.

You can get help from physicians, clergy, school counselors, librarians, caring teachers, relatives, and friends. An inpatient or outpatient drug treatment program may also be helpful.

Spend time with your teen doing things you both enjoy, but don't feel you have to bring up “the problem” whenever you're together.

📍 MODEL RESTRAINT

Consider how *you* use alcohol or other drugs at home, informal get-togethers, parties, and elsewhere. **What messages are you sending to your teen**—is he or she learning that alcohol and other drugs are unappealing, frightening, enjoyable, helpful, or just for grown-ups?

😊 TEACH RESISTANCE SKILLS

To help teens understand ways to resist pressure in social situations, emphasize that **if they're clear about what they want, people will take them seriously.** Talk about your own experiences. Make sure your teen knows he or she can “use you as an excuse” to get out of difficult situation (e.g., “Forget it! My folks would never get off my back if they found out”). If it's comfortable, try role playing techniques to handle certain situations:

- ◆ Say no and give a reason (“No. Cigarette smoke makes my breath stink”);
- ◆ Use humor (“Forget it. I'd rather go play on the freeway. It's safer”);
- ◆ Apply pressure yourself (“No. I thought you were smarter than that”); or
- ◆ Always have an out (“Sorry, I can't stick around—promised my sister I'd take her to a movie”)

🎨 BE CREATIVE

Help your teen find creative outlets for his or her intense feelings rather than avoiding those feelings by using alcohol and other drugs. Expressing himself or herself through writing, painting, drawing, dancing, or other **artistic activities can be ways to turn difficult feelings into something life-affirming.**

FEEL ALIVE

Helping teens steer clear of substance use and abuse involves helping them feel strong enough to follow their own true path, even if the situation is a bit shaky. With the expectation that your daughter or son will succeed—and your continued acceptance when she or he doesn't—your teen is more likely to find her or his way.

More Help for Parents

Parenting at the Speed of Teens is a quick and easy-to-use book that offers positive, commonsense tips for dealing with both the everyday issues of parenting and the serious issues that teens may encounter.

Available at mvparentstore.search-institute.org.

