

Substance Abuse and Teens

What Parents Need to Know

By
Kimberly F.



Toll Free 866-306-1542

info@episcopalrecovery.org

www.episcopalrecovery.org

Written in honor of my parents, Kay and John, who stuck with me and loved me through my teen years of active addiction.

We live in a society that is filled with messages promoting instant gratification and relief through chemicals (including alcohol and prescription drugs) so it is no surprise that adolescents are beginning to abuse drugs and alcohol at very young ages. Usually the first substances teens abuse include tobacco, inhalants, alcohol and marijuana. Because use of these substances can open the way for introduction to the drug culture and other drug use they are often referred to as the “Gateway Drugs”.

Although not intensely mood changing, the nicotine in tobacco is highly addictive and can mark the beginning of destructive behavior in adolescents. Inhalant abuse (inhaling poisonous vapors from household products to get high) is more prevalent in younger teens (grades 6-8) than in older teens and can be deadly even the first time it is used. Using alcohol, a depressant drug, is often dismissed as a rite of passage, but studies show that its use can damage the still developing adolescent. Today marijuana is considered by many teens not to be a drug because of the prevalence of its use and the myths surrounding it. Even adults sometimes think of it as harmless because of their experience with it in their youth. However, marijuana is now 20 to 30 times stronger than it was in the 1960’s and ‘70’s making it a drug that has a more potent impact on the brain.

Drug trends are always changing. As parents it is important to stay informed because teens are often misinformed and need to know the facts about drugs as they begin making decisions that can affect them for a life time.

How to talk to your teen about drugs

- Nurture your relationship with your adolescent by encouraging open communication.
- Discuss family boundaries and rules regarding alcohol and drugs that include a clear “no use” message.
- Talk about what the consequences will be if the rules are not followed so that expectations are clear.
- Try to listen as much as you talk.

- Be a positive role model where chemical use is concerned. Non-verbal messages go a long way.

Warning signs of substance abuse

- Decline in grades
- Strained family relationships
- Change in peer group
- Legal trouble
- Financial problems
- Poor hygiene
- Alcohol/Drug related behavior

Getting Help

If you think your adolescent is using drugs it is a good idea to get them evaluated by a trained substance abuse counselor to assess what level of intervention is needed. A counselor can also help coordinate access to available services.

About drug testing: Keep in mind that a Urine Drug Screen (or UDS) is a tool not a solution. If you are going to drug test have a plan in place for what you will do once you have the results. Drug testing will give you information, but it will not make someone stop using drugs.

From use to addiction

It is difficult to know if a teen is “just experimenting” with drugs or if they are addicted. Chemical use (including alcohol) is not a necessary rite of passage for young people. It is dangerous to their continued development. Several factors contribute to the chances of an adolescent developing chemical dependency:

- Family History – The disease of addiction or “chemical dependency” has been found to have an inheritable component. IF there is a history

of addiction in a teenager's family the chances are greater that they will become addicted if drugs are used. This is true no matter what the drug (including alcohol). Addiction can skip generations in families.

- Early onset of use – The younger a person begins using alcohol and other drugs the more likely their chances of becoming addicted.

Like adults with chemical dependency, teens are often in denial that they have a problem. When a teen is addicted, getting high becomes the most important thing. They usually think they don't have a problem and that anyone who is concerned is over reacting. Often teens will say, "I can quit any time I want to – I just don't want to." They become increasingly dishonest and manipulative to cover their use.

Normal reactions to an abnormal situation:

It is normal for parents to initially deny or minimize that their teen has a problem with drugs. Parents may find themselves wondering if they are crazy. They begin to doubt their own perception. They feel helpless and out of control. Parents desperately want to keep their teen from self-destructing. They often try many ways to control the drug user's behavior.

The balance of power in the family gets turned upside down. The parents' marital relationship can become strained. Sometimes parents don't agree on how to handle the growing number of crises that come with addiction. Often parents describe that they start to feel like prisoners in their own home. The stress of chemical dependency affects everyone in the family.

How Parents Feel

Embarrassed
Worried
Afraid
Sense of urgency
Ashamed
Guilty

Angry
Frustrated
Helpless
Sad
Sense of failure as a parent

What to do when a teenager is using drugs

- As a parent it is important to act rather than react when dealing with a teen that is using drugs.
- Learn all you can about chemical dependency.
- Learn about enabling (Unknowingly enabling the teen to continue the drug use without having to face the consequences of their behavior)
- Get support – Parenting is a difficult job without chemicals involved. With drugs thrown into the mix it can be a nightmare. A natural result of having a child who is using drugs is that parents begin to develop codependent issues. These include a need to control the user and an obsession with fixing the problem. Some of the support groups available for parents include Al-Anon (www.al-anon/alateen.org), Nar-Anon (www.nar-anon.org) and Codependents Anonymous (www.codependents.org). Often these groups will also have local help lines that are listed in the phone book. Support groups are a way for parents to begin their own recovery from the damage that addiction does to the family.
- Work as a parental team. In families where there is divorce or a single parent household it is important to have all parents/caretakers on the same page when dealing with a drug user whenever possible.
- Set clear boundaries with your teen.
- Let go of the need to control – it is a normal reaction to try to control something that is out of control. However, it is impossible to control another person's drug/alcohol use.

Resources

National Institute on Drug Abuse

<http://www.nida.nih.gov/>

NIDA is a reliable source of information on current drug trends.

Parents. The Anti Drug

<http://www.theantidrug.com>

Choices & Consequences; What to Do When a Teenager Uses Alcohol/Drugs, By Dick Schaefer; Johnson Institute 1987.

Teens Under the Influence; The Truth About Kids, Alcohol, and Other Drugs – How to Recognize the Problem and What to Do About It, By Katherine Ketcham and Nicholas A. Pace, M.D.; The Random House Publishing Group 2003.

Marijuana; What's a Parent to Believe?, By Timmen L. Cermack, M.D.; Hazelden 2003.

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