



How to Talk to Your Child about Drugs and Alcohol

Here are tips for parents from Hazelden's Center for Youth and Families:

1. You don't have to be an addict to have problems

- Many teenagers have problems with drug use without having an addiction
- Car accidents, trauma, sexual assault, and overdoses occur routinely simply with experimentation
- Only looking for signs of addiction may be setting the threshold too high

2. Don't blame yourself

- No parent is perfect but many do the best they can
- When things go wrong with our children, some parents are overly critical of themselves and their spouse
- While families are an integral part of addiction treatment, misplaced feelings of guilt about missed opportunities or past parenting mistakes can be divisive
- Parents need to work as a team when dealing with teen drug use
- Deal with the past when appropriate, but keep your eyes on the present
- If your child is involved in therapy, there will be ample time to make things right

3. Set your expectations clearly

- Teenagers who believe their parents clearly disapprove of drug use are less likely to use and vice versa – sound simple enough, but few families make such messaging explicit
- You don't have to wait until your children are teenagers to set expectations

4. Don't be too heavy handed

- Being firm with expectations is one thing, but parents don't want to close off communication lines by passing judgment or jumping to conclusions
- You want your child to come to be comfortable coming to you for help if he or she needs it

5. A family culture of open communication

- Complement firm expectations about drug use with a responsiveness and understanding
- If a parent doesn't have a well-established line of communication with their child, it may be difficult to suddenly broach topics as loaded as drug use

6. Don't ignore mental health needs

- Over 2/3rds of young people with substance abuse problems have other mental health issues such as depression, ADHD, anxiety or behavior disorders
- It is the rule and not the exception that teenagers with drug use have other mental health problems

7. Understand risk factors

- Much like risk factors for diabetes or heart disease, certain characteristics place teenagers at increased risk to develop a problem with substance abuse – for example: ADHD, anxiety, depression, early disruptive or aggressive behaviors and early cigarette smoking may all be risk factors for developing substance abuse problems later in life
- If your child is struggling with any of the above, be sure you pay attention and get help early

8. Be honest, with propriety

- Parents often feel uncomfortable talking about their own drug or alcohol experiences – a teenager won't be triggered to use because of a productive discussion about the parent's own history
- While waxing nostalgic about the "glory days" isn't advised, parents don't have to hide their experiences for fear of being hypocritical
- Every adult knows someone who had problems with substance abuse
- A simple balanced message is easier to deliver than you think
- Most parents would be surprised by how much their teen already knows about drug use

9. Intelligence does not equal maturity

- Many parents have intellectually gifted children, but don't mistake intellectual gifts as emotional maturity
- While it may be tempting to treat our tech savvy and articulate children like little adults, remember that intelligence and judgment are two very different things
- The prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain that allows for consistent proper judgment in people; Unfortunately, this part of the brain does not mature fully until your child's mid-20s
- It is poor decision making in the moment that often does teenagers in, not the inability to reason when calm

10. Lock up your medicine cabinet

- Prescription drug abuse is a widespread problem in the country
- The CDC indicates that one in five teenagers experiment with prescription drugs at one point or another
- While parents may be wary of drug dealers and the internet as sources for drugs, most young people obtain prescription drugs of abuse from friends and family
- Be sure to keep track of all medications in the home and properly dispose of medications that are unused
- Spread the message to your relatives and the parents of your child's friends
- Hoarding unused medicines for a rainy day isn't a good idea on multiple levels

11. Look at your genes

- Like some other diseases, addiction can run in families
- Parents often ask for blanket rules about alcohol consumption for their teens: "Is it okay to let them sip wine over the holidays?" might be such an example
- Given the variability of family vulnerabilities, there are no hard and fast rules when it comes to substance use – what works for one family may not work for you
- Study your family history but understand that the lack of a prominent family history doesn't mean your teenager is impervious to addiction

12. Pay attention to your child and their environment

- Changes in mood, sleep, peer group, activity level, academic performance, weight and hygiene can all be signals for substance abuse
- Monitor your child's welfare carefully in times of transition (change in schools, family moves, onset of puberty, break ups with significant others or the start of new relationships, etc.)

13. Seek help early

- According to SAMHSA's National Survey on Drug Use and Health, approximately 2 million young people ages 12 to 17 need treatment for substance abuse problems yearly
- Only about 150,000 receive the help they need
- If you have concerns about your child's drug use, it's fairly easy to contact trained professionals to do an outpatient assessment
- Assessments will give you peace of mind and the use of a third party will preserve objectivity
- Prevention and early intervention are best kinds of treatment
- Don't dismiss experimentation as a simple rite of passage
- Little harm is done by screening (with a pediatrician for example) and can prevent major heartache down the road

14. Safety first

- The top three reasons for teen deaths, accidents, homicides and suicides are all related to substance abuse – all are preventable
- Educate your young person about driving under the influence and pay attention to their whereabouts

15. Leadership

- Parents assume that children ignore them during their teenage years but research suggests otherwise
- If you want a particular behavior, model it
- The fewer flaws your teens can point out in your own behaviors, the more leverage you have to act in the best interest of your child

16. It takes a village

- If your child has a substance use problem, all systems that engage with that young person may need to be involved in treatment
- Include schools, counselors, physicians and family members
- Addressing the child without addressing their environment rarely works for the best

17. Teens are abusing what?

- Over the counter medications such as cough syrup and household products such as spray canisters are commonly abused by some teenagers
- Synthetic drugs that mimic the effects of illicit drugs have also been increasing in popularity in certain populations
- Some of these compounds cannot be detected by standard urine drug screens
- Talk to your teen and get help if you have any suspicion