



Life Balance

Healthy matters to keep in mind.

September 2016

Teen Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Options for Today's Kids

Raising children is one of the most challenging and rewarding roles we can experience in life and brings with it much joy. However, as our children get older and become more exposed to life, we can face unique challenges that require special attention. Preventing teen substance abuse—or dealing with it if it happens—is one of those challenges.

Preventing Substance Abuse

As parents, we can play a significant role in preventing teen substance abuse. Helping teens develop healthy and responsible attitudes, encouraging the development of positive interests, and talking openly and honestly with them are some ways to start.

Research has shown that teens that have conversations with

their parents and learn about the dangers of substance abuse are 50 percent less likely to use substances than those who don't have these conversations with their parents.¹

Research has also shown that kids who start drinking alcohol before age 15 are five times more likely to develop substance abuse or dependence issues than those who first used alcohol at age 21 or older (16 percent versus 3 percent).²

The Effects of Substance Abuse

Experimentation with alcohol and drugs during adolescence is common. However, if teens understand the risks of using substances and see it as socially unacceptable, they are less likely to try them. Unfortunately, teens often don't see the link between their actions today and the consequences tomorrow.

Teens also have a tendency to feel indestructible and immune to the problems that others experience. Add alcohol and drugs to the mix and you have a young person with a distorted perception of reality and impaired ability to make decisions. This can be particularly hazardous for teens because they have less problem-solving and decision-

making experience in general.³

Some of the major effects of substance abuse can include:⁴

- Impaired judgment (leading to accidents and other risky behaviors like unsafe sex)
- Distorted vision, hearing and coordination
- Cirrhosis and cancer of the liver
- Loss of appetite
- Serious vitamin deficiencies
- Stomach ailments
- Heart and central nervous system damage
- Memory loss
- High risk for overdosing

Top Risk Factors for Teen Substance Use

Teenagers at risk for developing serious alcohol and drug problems include those who:⁵

- Have a family history of substance use disorders
- Are depressed
- Have low self-esteem
- Have a history of conduct problems or lack of self-control
- Feel like they don't fit in or are out of the mainstream
- Don't feel a sense of connectedness with their families
- Feel different in some way (e.g., appearance, economic circumstances, etc.)

Warning Signs & Symptoms

These signs and symptoms could indicate a substance abuse problem.⁶ They could also reflect normal teenage growing pains. It is more likely to be a substance abuse problem if you see several signs at once, they occur suddenly or they seem extreme.

Behavioral Signs

- Increased moodiness or sudden changes in mood or personality
- Increased irritability and getting into more fights or arguments
- Dropping out of activities or a general lack of interest
- Secretiveness

Physical Signs

- Change in personal grooming or physical appearance
- Depression or changes in sleep patterns (fatigue)
- Repeated health complaints
- Red or glazed eyes

Changes in School or At Home

- Sudden change in friendships or being with friends who get into trouble
- Doing worse in school, cutting classes or drop in grades
- Withdrawing from the family or breaking family rules
- Problems with the law

SEAP

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- Are in significant social transitions (e.g., graduating to middle or high school)
- Have friends who use substances
- Have experienced childhood abuse or other major traumas

Treatment Options

The decision to get treatment for a teen dealing with a substance abuse problem can be a difficult one. Once the decision is made, you may want to consult with a network provider because other psychiatric disorders can often co-exist with substance abuse problems.

Other options are to talk to a trusted professional such as a school counselor, pediatrician, family doctor or substance use counselor. Your health insurance company can give you a list of providers or your teen's school (or school district) may be able to suggest a good substance use treatment program. Your SEAP is another good source for information. You can also talk to other family members and friends.

Treatment can occur in a variety of settings, depending on the severity of the problem and the availability of treatment options. For example, milder cases may be treated through weekly outpatient counseling sessions. Intensive outpatient treatment involves more time in treatment, ranging from a few hours to a full day, all or most days of the week. Residential treatment involves admission to a 24/7 program and may last for a week or longer.⁶

When evaluating treatment options and talking to treatment professionals, here are some questions to ask:⁷

- Why do you think this treatment program is right for my teen?

- What are the credentials and experience of the members of the treatment team?
- Does my teen have other psychiatric problems in addition to substance use?
- How will our family be involved in our teen's substance use treatment?
- What will treatment cost? Are costs covered by my insurance or health plan?
- How long will treatment take? What types of ongoing treatment might be necessary?

What Parents Can Do⁹

Be A Good Role Model

Consider how your use of alcohol or drugs can influence your kids. If you drink, drink responsibly (e.g., not too much, too often or in high-risk situations like when you're driving). Offer only nonalcoholic beverages at parties and social events to show kids you don't need to drink to have fun.

Talk to Kids Early and Often

Openly discuss your family history of addiction. When there is a family history of addiction, pointing out to teens that they need to be extra cautious in the decisions they make about using alcohol or drugs should be emphasized. Since addiction is hereditary there is a much higher chance that "experimentation" may lead to use that is out of control much more rapidly than their peers without a family history.¹⁰

Open, honest and age-appropriate communication today can set the stage for kids to come to you later with other difficult topics or problems. By the teen years, your kids should know the facts about alcohol and your attitudes and beliefs about substance use.

Help Build Your Child's

Self-Esteem

Kids are more likely to feel good about themselves (and not look for relief in drugs or alcohol) if you emphasize their strengths and reinforce healthy behaviors. Teach kids to manage stress in healthy ways (e.g., by seeking help from a trusted adult or engaging in a favorite activity).

Teach Kids to Say "No"

Teach your kids how to deal with offers of alcohol (e.g., saying "no thanks"). Teach kids never to accept a ride from someone who has been drinking. Remind them to leave any uncomfortable situation. Offering to pick them up from an uncomfortable situation—no questions asked—helps encourage kids to be honest and call when they need help.

Promote Healthy Activities

Help your kids and their friends learn how to have fun. Physical games, activities and exercise are extremely important and offer physical and mental benefits. Encourage kids to become involved in school and community activities such as music, sports, arts or a part-time job. The more active they are, the less time they have to use substances.

Establish Clear Family Rules About Alcohol and Drugs

Set specific, clear rules about substance use. For example, don't do drugs; don't drink if you are under 21; don't ride in a car with someone who has been drinking or using drugs; don't encourage younger siblings to use; and so on. Consistent enforcement of the rules—with consequences—is essential.



Resources

www.liveandworkwell.com

For more information, click on BeWell to access the centers on Coping & Resiliency, Addictions and Living Healthy. For additional support, use the Search for Clinician tool to find a substance use professional in your area.

1 "Taking An Active Role," National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD), <https://ncadd.org/family-friends/there-is-help/talking-with-children>. Accessed November 2015.

2 Ibid, NCADD.

3 "Kids and Alcohol," KidsHealth, <http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/behavior/alcohol.html#>. Accessed November 2015.

4 Ibid, KidsHealth.

5 Ibid, KidsHealth.

6 American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, FAQs, http://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Resource_Centers/Substance_Use_Resource_Center/FAQ.aspx#question1. Accessed November 2015.

7 American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, http://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Substance-Abuse-Treatment-For-Children-And-Adolescents-Questions-To-Ask-041.aspx. Accessed November 2015.

8 Ibid, KidsHealth and NCADD.

9 Ibid, NCADD, and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2012), Report to Congress on the prevention and reduction of Underage drinking.

10 Nancy Schneider, Psy. D.