

What's a Family to Do?

How parents can find help and answers if they suspect teen alcohol or other drug use

According to the 2013 Monitoring the Future survey, by the 12th grade *nearly one-third* of teens have used an illicit drug, and *almost half* have consumed alcohol. Teen alcohol and other drug use is commonplace, and parents who suspect their son or daughter is using need to take a closer look. Even if addiction is not in the picture, teens who experiment with alcohol and other drugs can experience severe and lasting consequences—accidents, unintentional overdoses, violence, sexual trauma, and legal issues.

1. Look for the signs.

Physical and behavioral signs of drinking or other drug use can be subtle or obvious:

- Changes in eating and sleeping habits, extreme hyperactivity, tremors, red or watery eyes
- Sudden changes in emotion or behavior, such as depression, dishonesty, moodiness, isolation, loss of interest in activities, or lack of motivation
- Poor school attendance or deterioration in grades
- Stealing or having suspicious amounts of extra money
- Deterioration of appearance

In some cases, warning signs might be self-evident, such as possession of drug paraphernalia. In other cases, a combination of seemingly unrelated incidents over a short period of time might indicate trouble, such as disobeying curfew, having a car accident, or stealing money.

2. Ignoring warning signs doesn't make a potential drug problem go away. It enables further use.

Early detection of drinking or other drug use gives families the opportunity to take a closer look, find answers, and get help. If parents have concerns, they can take action by talking with a professional who can help them determine whether their child's behavior warrants a drug and alcohol abuse assessment.

If parents haven't talked with their children yet about drinking and other drug use, they can begin today by setting clear limits and communicating their expectations regularly, focusing on concerns about overall health and safety. If parents don't want their children to use alcohol until they reach the legal drinking age of 21, they can say so. Parents also benefit from knowing where their kids are going and who they are hanging out with and by knowing the parents of their children's friends.

While the physical and behavioral signs of drug use discussed above are intended as general guidelines to help parents recognize potential problems, parents have another equally important indicator: parental intuition. If parental instincts indicate something is wrong, it probably is. At that point, it's time to ask their child, "What's going on?"

Talk early. Talk often.

"Parents can set clear rules and consequences around drinking and other drug use and communicate expectations regularly with their kids."

—Heather
Youngstrand,
BS, LADC

Manager of Intake
and Admissions

3. Involve other people.

If parents discover alcohol or other drug use by their child, they don't need to go it alone. Many people can help parents intervene, including a family doctor, a school counselor, or an addiction counselor.

4. Get educated.

If addiction treatment is needed, parents should know their options and ask questions:

- **Is the program accredited or licensed?** National accreditation programs (such as the Joint Commission or the National Committee for Quality Assurance) look for elements of treatment that research has shown to be effective.
- **Are staff members licensed or credentialed?** Credentials held by addiction professionals include LADC (licensed alcohol and drug counselor), LPC (licensed professional counselor), CAC (certified addiction counselor), and CCDP (certified co-occurring disorders professional).
- **Does the program use evidence-based practices?** A treatment center should be measuring how effective its services are as well as using research-based methods.
- **Is gender-specific programming offered?** Research shows males and females recover from addiction differently and have the best opportunity for recovery when separated by gender.
- **Are detoxification services offered?** Comprehensive, medically supervised detoxification ensures that your child is medically stabilized before beginning the treatment process.
- **Is programming individualized?** Each person's needs are unique and require an individualized treatment plan based on specific history, issues, and needs.
- **Are treatment services holistic?** Effective programs address mental, physical, and spiritual health.

5. Family involvement matters too.

Studies show recovery from addiction is stronger and more effective when family members are educated and involved, but the social stigma of addiction often prevents families from acknowledging that a problem may exist—and from getting help when needed. Blame and shame are typically involved. It's important for parents to realize they can't control their child's addiction, but they can take responsibility for their own health and happiness. They can love their son or daughter and, at the same time, dislike his or her behaviors. For help and support, parents can turn to professionals or find a local Al-Anon meeting. They will find practical tools to empower their family's journey on the path of recovery.

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The Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, a national nonprofit organization founded in 1949, is a force of healing and hope for individuals, families and communities affected by addiction to alcohol and other drugs.