Talking to teens about drugs and alcohol

As the parent of a teen, drug and alcohol use is probably high on your list of concerns for your son or daughter.



Although many parents would all like to think that their own children will be the ones that don't drink, smoke or take drugs, it is certainly prudent to get to know as much as you can and to maintain ongoing communication with your teen about the risks of drug or alcohol misuse.

What causes a teen to use drugs or alcohol?

Curiosity—teens are trying on different values and personalities and want to know what drugs or alcohol are like.

- Teens are risk-takers but have little understanding of risk consequences.
- Peer pressure is one of the greatest motivators of all for teens. They may want to be seen and accepted as a member of the group.
- It appears to offer an escape valve or a way to dull the stress and pain caused by problems or pressures at home, at school or with peers.

This final point is often the reason behind chronic use or addiction.

Tips on risks/knowing the facts:

Learning the facts about commonly available drugs can help you be better able to tell if your teen is using drugs, and if so, which ones. Knowing the facts can also help you to communicate with your son or daughter about potential risks. The following is a brief overview of drugs/substances that your teen may have access to:

Alcohol. The most commonly misused substance, alcohol impairs judgment and is a major factor in both car accidents and sexual abuse.

Amphetamines and/or ecstasy. Bring a sense of well being. May be used to stay awake. Can cause hyperactivity and violence. Long term use can depress the immune system.

Barbiturates. These are depressants that are sometimes prescribed to ease anxiety. They can be extremely dangerous when mixed with alcohol.

Cannabis (a.k.a. marijuana, hashish, ganja, pot and weed). Slows reaction time and impairs driving. As with tobacco, long term use can lead to lung damage.

Cocaine. This is a stimulant, often causing hyperactivity. May be used to stay awake. Large amounts can lead to strange behaviour or violence.

Hallucinogens (LSD, mushrooms, etc.). These drugs have highly unpredictable effects and can cause horrifying hallucinations.

Heroin and heroin derivatives. These numb pain and produce a sense of well-being or euphoria. Long term use can lead to lung damage.

Rohypnol (a.k.a. "roofies" or the date rape drug). This is an extremely powerful sleeping medication. When combined with alcohol, it removes inhibitions and causes amnesia. It is difficult to detect if slipped into alcohol. Teens who suspect they may have unknowingly taken the drug can take a urine test to detect the drug for up to three days after ingestion.

Signs of alcohol or drug use

Possible signs may include:

- Bloodshot eyes
- Listless, unhealthy appearance
- Weight loss
- Changed sleeping or eating habits
- Greater susceptibility to sickness
- Skipping school, poor grades
- Emotionally withdrawn and secretive
- Increased requests for money
- Theft from the home of money or articles that could be sold

Signs of alcohol or drug overdose requiring emergency hospital treatment may include an inability to speak or walk properly, severe vomiting or loss of consciousness.

Communicating before problems arise

Communication is perhaps the most important aspect of your relationship with your teen. When talking with them about important matters, do your best to understand their point of view. Listen, listen, and listen some more. Wherever possible:

- Establish and maintain communication about drugs and alcohol before you believe you have any reason to worry, i.e., well before your child enters the teens.
- Try to find a neutral way to bring up the subject, e.g., did you see the newspaper article about that celebrity who overdosed? Did you see the anti-alcohol ad? What did you think of it?
- Remember that your child may use this same strategy to raise issues with you. Be open and ready to communicate.
- Don’t lecture or preach. Discuss the facts and risks openly and honestly in an objective, factual manner.
- Talk about why teens turn to alcohol or drugs. Brainstorm how a teen could reject peer pressure.
- Remind your teen that if problems arise, it is far better to face them than to try to run away from them.
- If you used drugs in your youth, there is no reason to bring up the matter yourself. However, if your teen asks you if you did, reply honestly.
- Don’t try to lay down dictatorial rules. Telling a child or teen that he or she is forbidden to drink will not prevent alcohol use. However, it will almost certainly stop communication and will prevent a teen from calling home for help or a lift home if/when they become impaired.
- Be supportive of your child. Reinforce the message of unconditional love and point out that you may not always like his or her behaviour but you will always love him or her.

When you think your teen is using alcohol or drugs

- If your teen comes home clearly impaired, leave discussion for the next morning.
- Choose your timing carefully; don’t try to talk when your teen is rushing to get ready or to leave.
- Do not be judgmental and don’t preach.
- Explain that you were worried by the impaired state and ask how it happened.

- Let your teen talk and listen, listen, listen!
- Discuss the cause and talk about how your teen can try to prevent it from happening again.
- Remind your teen that it is always better to face problems than to try to run away from them.
- Be supportive; reinforce the message of unconditional love.
- Ask your teen to let you know if you can help in any way. Make it clear that this offer does not carry a time limit. You will always be ready and willing to talk.

If you believe your teen is seriously abusing drugs or alcohol, talk to your doctor or a professional about referral to counselling or rehab programs.

In working on understanding your kids, parents may also want to take a look at themselves and the example they are setting with respect to drugs and alcohol. After all, kids learn a lot more by watching adults than by listening to them!

While you cannot make sure that your kids will not use or become addicted to drugs, you can work on maintaining a good relationship with them. You will achieve this by spending time with them, making them feel that they can talk to you about anything, and above all, reinforcing at every step that you will be there for them with your love and an open mind, helping them make the best possible choices for themselves.