

DRUG ABUSE AND YOUR TEEN

Adolescence is a time of many changes, the most important being a shift away from direct parental control. Ideally, the result is a competent confident successful young adult, but the journey can be frightening for parent and child.

Peers become central to the world of the adolescent. However, parents' influences are still critical, even though they may appear to be rejected by the teen. Issues like drugs, alcohol, tobacco, and sex become extremely important. There are many ways you can help your child.

Most parents are generally aware of the problems related to drug and alcohol use. This article will outline matters related to young people and drugs, including alcohol. The more you know, the better equipped you will be to handle what you may encounter.

Teens may use drugs for a variety of reasons. They may want to feel that they fit in with their peers and often perceive drug use as the norm, not realizing there are many kids who refuse drugs. They may want to rebel, or are curious. Media images of drug use are unrealistic and do not accurately portray the consequences. Teens may use drugs to avoid dealing with problems or because they feel that drugs are an easy way to have fun. Parents must constantly be aware of these pressures and talk to their children about drugs.

There are stages of drug use. Initially, kids experiment with drugs but still limit their use. Peer pressure is exceptionally important here, and parents are usually unaware. Tolerance to the drug can develop with repeated use; that is, more and more of the drug is needed to get the same effect. This leads to a worsening of the problem with heavier use and actively seeking drugs. Recognizable signs usually occur in this stage, and school performance may slip. Preoccupation and dependency may follow; when the teen no longer can control his use and feels he cannot function without drugs. Use is daily and because drugs are expensive, stealing often occurs.

Which child will progress to more serious drug use depends in part on the child and is also influenced by the drug itself. Cocaine, for example, is more addictive than marijuana.

Of course, all drugs have serious medical complications. They also impair reasoning, memory and reaction time and can lead to risk-taking. Use of one drug can lead to use of another.

A few signs your child may be using drugs include:

- Change in peer group

- Withdrawal from the family
- Drop in school grades
- Skipping school
- Giving up usual interests/hobbies
- Memory problems
- Dramatic motivation decreases
- Pro-drug messages on clothing, etc
- Dramatic changes in sleep, appetite or hygiene
- Delinquent behavior

You can help your teen by:

- Setting a good example yourself. You are your child's best role model.
- Clearly let your child know what you feel is right and wrong.
- Talk to your child about drugs on a regular basis. Do not lecture but rather discuss.
- Be armed with the facts.
- Give your child tools to handle peer pressure and practice scenarios with him
 - Say no
 - Change the subject
 - Walk away
 - Cold shoulder
 - Repeated refusal
 - Avoid places or situations where drugs are
 - Make up an excuse (tried but don't like drugs, etc)
 - Offer peer alternative things to do
 - Strength in numbers (go places with peers who also refuse drugs)
(See Dare materials)
- Help your child deal with emotions. Teens have intense ups and downs, and generally change moods often. If your teen is mostly down, talk to your doctor about depression.
- Encourage and support positive activities; minimize boredom; recognize effort as well as success; avoid over-criticizing

If you suspect your child has been experimenting with drugs, have a calm honest discussion with him. If you are uncomfortable with this, or if you suspect more serious drug use, get help now. The sooner drug use is treated, the better the outcome. We are here to help you.

Resources in Hunterdon County include:

Hunterdon Behavioral Health 788-6401

Alcoholics Anonymous 782-3909

Hunterdon Prevention Services 782-3909 www.hunterdonprevention.com