



CENTRE COUNTY PREVENTION COALITION
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February 2009 – Adolescent Alcohol and Drug Use: Experimental or Problematic

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Most parents in my practice show loving concern for their teenagers and the choices that they make. Parents know that adolescence is wrought with pressures, concerns, relationship and identity issues, but often they are confused about the level of their children's substance abuse. After all, children do not come with any type of instruction manual.

Initially, parents often express opinions about their children's "experimental use" and that this exploratory behavior has resulted in the voluntary referral, Student Assistance Program, or court mandated referral. We try to assist parents in these situations to better understand what is going on. Sometimes an assessment shows that what parents perceive as "experimental" use is actually a problematic pattern that needs formal intervention.

In true experimental use, parents, school officials, or authority figures usually have no idea that substance abuse is happening. Experimentation in adolescence is normal and appropriate for many things but use of a substance to the extent that negative consequences become noticeable speaks to problem use and problematic patterns. Teenage substance abuse is not a simple issue. No "one size fits all" method exists. Intervention clearly must occur however because substance effects on the developing brain, body, and cognitive functioning of teenagers place them at risk for negative outcomes in many important areas of their lives. Below are some guidelines to follow in order to make sure an intervention has at least a good chance of effectiveness.

1. If you suspect drug abuse in your child take time to deeply breathe, write out the signs you observe (e.g. smell of alcohol, excessive use of eye drops, behavioral non-compliance dropping grades, shifting peer affiliations, mood fluctuations etc.) as well as your concerns. Also identify how you want your child's problematic behaviors, attitudes etc. to change. Be prepared to present this information to your child when you decide to confront the issue.
2. You are your child's greatest advocate so research the programs that exist in your community starting with outpatient ones. Every individual deserves a chance to get back to health first without being removed from their community. Look for programs with counselors competently trained in substance abuse, mental health and dual disorders (mental health issue and substance abuse problem) specifically for teenagers as well as healthy adolescent development, and family therapy. If you suspect your child has been traumatized, look also for professionals trained in trauma informed approaches.

3. Try your best to recognize that there may be a true substance abuse problem. There may also be other difficulties (depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, ADHD, anxiety, etc) but remember that no one issue is more important than the other. In addition, treatment of the other issues listed above, typically is impaired until the active substance abuse is shut down.

Certainly the issues of adolescent substance abuse for dedicated parents are many layered but also know that hopefulness is equally warranted and that there are competent professionals in this community that are there to provide guidance and support.

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