

Drug and Alcohol Use Among Teens:
What Can Parents and the Community Do?
Lea Goldstein, Ph.D.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS

1. DON'T confront your child about drinking or drug use while he/she is under the influence. It's like talking to a wall and could lead to an ugly scene.
2. DON'T make excuses to your spouse, family, friends, or school authorities for a teen's drinking/drug use. This includes writing notes to cover up tardiness or unexcused absences from school. Alcohol/drug abuse needs to be faced squarely. Wishing it away or waiting for it to vanish doesn't work. Covering for the abusing person only prolongs his/her problem.
3. DON'T take responsibility for your child's drinking/drug problem. The abuser needs counseling and treatment. Parental guilt has never proved to be a remedy. If anything, it tends to hinder an abuser's recovery. A parent's job is to get the abuser into treatment. Whether or not the child responds to treatment is out of the parent's control.
4. DON'T accept as normal behavior a drunken/drug abusing son or daughter who comes home and destroys the house or creates problems within the family. Try to respond objectively, as if this wild creature were a stranger. (This is obviously a tough assignment). What parents fail to see, because of their emotional involvement, is that if their children were to treat anyone else in the community like they treat their own parents, they would probably be locked up. Do not tolerate any threats of violence. Call the authorities.
5. DON'T nag or scream at the adolescent about drinking or drug use. It certainly won't make them quit or cut down. Your anger can even provide an added excuse to get drunk/high. Besides, then you're taking responsibility rather than them.
6. DON'T clean up your abusing child's messes and predicaments. It is important for the abuser to see just what alcohol/drugs are doing to him/her and to realize it is the number one problem.
7. DON'T let yourself be so ruled by your child's behavior that you let it pull your behavior down too. Avoid screaming arguments. When parents fight and argue with an alcohol/drug abusing teen, they are reflecting the child's behavior and it let's the child off the hook. If the abusing teen is allowed to keep his or her own bad feelings, this lets the young abuser get sick of them and seek an alternative way of living.
8. DON'T view your child as lacking backbone or will power. An abusing teen is in the throes of a major problem. "If you think will power works on a disease, try it sometime on diarrhea."
9. DON'T assume your child doesn't love you because of the way he or she acts.
10. DO reach out and get professional help for your child and for yourself and your family.

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1. Continue discussions with your child about drug and alcohol use throughout their adolescent years. Assuming that they know where you stand may not be enough. Your attitudes about drug/alcohol use DO matter. Your child's attitudes about the use of alcohol and drugs will change as they move through adolescence.
2. Unite with all the responsible adults in your child's life about attitudes and policies about drug and alcohol use. Even in divorced families, consistent rules in both households are imperative in sending the message about use of substances.
3. Establish clear and consistent rules and the consequences of the use of drugs or alcohol.
4. Create family time on a frequent and regular basis. Even family dinnertime gets more difficult to schedule, but family rituals are critical to connectedness. A sense of unity and shared goals reinforces your family's bonds.
5. Remain vigilant, curious, interested, and involved with your teen's life. They will tell you less and less, so get creative about finding ways to talk with them. Utilize other means of gathering information about them.
6. Support a balanced life of school, extra-curricular activities, and leisure. Allow real free time where there is no schedule.
7. Stay connected with the parents of your child's friends and check in regularly about activities, events, and other plans. This becomes harder to do as your teen gets older and is more independent, but do it anyway.
8. Take your head out of the sand about the use of drugs and alcohol among teens at their school and in your community. You can safely assume it's going on. You just don't know to what extent and may not know if your teen is involved.
9. Partner with the school and other parents in establishing a NO ALCOHOL/DRUG POLICY for parties, vacations, and other activities. Only allow attendance at parties where the policy has been signed and will be enforced.
10. Give your teen an "out" to avoid dangerous situations. Be the excuse why they can't use. Offer to pick them up from a party with no questions asked.
11. Involve the school and greater community supports when information about drug and alcohol use is discovered.
12. Model healthy coping mechanisms to relieve stress. Model positive leisure activities and celebrations that do not involve the use of drugs or alcohol.
13. Model responsible use of alcohol, if consumed. Your kids do not need to see you drunk or out of control at any time.
14. HAVE FUN WITH YOUR TEEN. Find activities that you can still enjoy doing together. They will be out of the house before you know it.