

When it's not your kid - what do you do?

It usually goes something like this -- You over hear a conversation not meant for your ears that your daughter's boyfriend is smoking pot. You're the coach of your son's little league team and you are told by one of the team members that a teammate is drinking before games.

While the stories and circumstances may vary, the facts are the same: you are concerned about a teen's substance abuse and that teen is not your child. You have little or no authority over this teen. You are not his parent. You aren't a member of her family, but you know you shouldn't ignore the problem and hope it goes away. It never does.

Most adults agree that any drug use by teens is risky and can lead to serious trouble. Every day, approximately 4,700 American youth try marijuana for the first time -- ages when their brains and bodies are still developing. Drugs and alcohol use can interfere with teen's independence and their efforts to establish their own identity.

Substance abuse is illegal and can change the direction of a young person's life -- physically, emotionally and behaviorally. What was once excused as a "rite of passage" for some teens is now shown to have harmful and, sometimes, lasting effects. Treatment for marijuana is the number one reason kids get admitted to treatment programs -- more than for all other illicit drugs combined.

The Science Is Clear

While we know that not all youthful drug or alcohol use leads to addiction, no one knows how long it takes to develop an abuse problem or even who will develop a problem. What is known is that addiction is a process that begins with use and continues with abuse before becoming a full-blown addiction. Drug and alcohol use can lead to many negative consequences, including bad grades, broken friendships, family problems, physical violence and trouble with the law (see [Signs of Drug Use](#)). Because of new scientific research, we know that addiction is not a matter of will; it is a disease of the brain. While there is no cure, there is prevention. And the sooner you take action to stop occasional use, the more likely your chances of stopping the progression to abuse and addiction.

Research shows that kids start using drugs and alcohol because they feel the need to take risks or they believe it will help them fit in or feel better. Sometimes they use drugs because they are seeking relief from stress or feelings of depression. And it's important to remember that there is, sometimes, a genetic risk for addiction -- just like heart disease, diabetes, cancer and other diseases.

What can you do?

The first thing you should do is learn as much as you can. This web site is a wonderful first step. After you've gathered information about substance use for yourself and feel comfortable, talk with the teen. You need to listen non-judgmentally to what the teen is telling you. Just because a kid is using drugs doesn't mean he or she is addicted. The goal is to get involved early -- before the use becomes abuse and, perhaps, leads to addiction. If you are a coach or a Scout leader, you might take the opportunity to talk to the group as a whole. Again, it doesn't have to be a fancy lecture. Tell them what your expectations are for them, along with what happens when they violate the rules. Tell them that, while you're no expert, you have access to experts in the community and that if they need help, you'll be there.

look to your community for resources for help. There are many prevention and treatment specialists who can guide and inform you.

Family concerns

While only one person may be using drugs, all family members are affected by it. Families don't want to believe that one of their members could be involved in something illegal. Denial plays a big role in substance abuse and addiction. No parents want to face the fact that his or her child is using illicit drugs.

Do you tell the Parents?

It is important that you express your concern for the teen. Sit with the parents or caregivers and explain the facts, as you know them. Offer them information on teen drug use -- the same information that you used to educate yourself. Suggest resources in the community where they can turn for help. Explain the consequences for using drugs or alcohol to the parents, caregivers and the teen. Be there to answer questions or provide resources. Remember that some kids get introduced to drugs by family members. It's important that you recognize that relatives -- even parents -- may be enabling or even dealing or providing drugs and alcohol. This won't be an easy conversation -- for you or the teen or the family. But, you may just help the teen to rethink his or her choices and stop drug use before the consequences become severe.

Remember to follow up. your responsibility doesn't end with one conversation -- staying involved could be the most important thing you do for the teen.

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