



CHILD MENTAL HEALTH FOR PRIMARY CARE

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The Adolescent and Substance Use

Issue

The odds of a teenager trying and/or abusing a substance by the time they are a senior in high school are high (62%). Additionally, the earlier a teenager tries a substance, the more likely an addiction will develop. ([National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics](#)).

Strategies for Helping Adolescents with Substance Use Concerns

- ◆ Encourage parents to have conversations early and ongoing before there is a concern, for example, pose open-ended discussion questions about handling friends or peers who might be engaging in substance use or utilize television show plots and character conflicts as points of discussion.
- ◆ Help parents recognize that teens who misuse prescription meds are more likely to obtain them from a friend or relative (CBHSQ, 2016) and to be careful about medication storage.
- ◆ Talk with parents about risk factors like family history of substance use and association with peers who also use substances, but also about protective factors like strong family relationships, mentors, and involvement in community activities. They are the most important and influential people in their child's life and they should be encouraged not to underestimate that role.
- ◆ When parents are concerned about possible use, discuss with them the signs to watch for including abrupt shifts in friends, a decline in school performance, unusual change in sleep habits, constantly tired, poor personal hygiene, poor eye contact, and less openness in their behavior. While some of these are typical of adolescence, encourage parents to listen to their instinct and to talk with their child.
- ◆ When considering talking to their child about their concerns, first encourage parents to examine their approach before engaging in conversations. It is helpful for parents to remain calm when talking to their child or teenager. Staying clear of judgment, condemnation, and lecturing will help the conversation stay open. Encourage parents to consider the way they would want to have been talked to when they were a youth and aim to be attentive, curious, and understanding.
- ◆ Most helpful discussions include open-ended questions, empathizing, and validating their child's thoughts and feelings.

Strategies Continued

- Talk with parents about setting a less threatening environment when they decide to talk with their child/teenager. Taking a walk, playing a sport, coloring, any type of activity the child/teenager enjoys will serve as a positive focus and will help the child feel less on the spot and encourage openness.
- Parents will want to talk about the pressures that come with being around friends who use substances. Parents should help the child/teenager consider creative ways to get out of situations where they are uncomfortable, and shy away from the idea of expecting them to just say no. For example, parents can talk with their kids about the use of an escape word text if they would like to leave a situation.



Image from Pexels, Photo by Eli Burdette

Resources and Reference

[Additional tips on parental conversations with teens about substance use](#)
[Partnership to End Addiction](#)

[SAMSHA Conversation Goals for Parents Talking with Teens about Substance Use](#)

Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality (CBHSQ). Results from the 2016 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Detailed Tables. Rockville (MD): SAMHSA; 2017.

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