

Teenagers and Drugs

Many parents of teenagers worry from time to time about whether their young people are taking any illegal drugs, how they can tell, and what to do about it.

We live in a drug-taking society. While there is a lot of concern about illegal drugs, the most harm and the greatest risk to young people comes from using legal drugs such as alcohol, cigarettes and medicines. However, young people want to experiment with new things and test the limits, so it is not surprising that many of them try illegal drugs. Fortunately out of those who try, not all will go on using drugs regularly and only a few will develop serious problems.

With all the horror stories about drugs in the press and on TV, many parents wonder why young people would even think of trying drugs. The fact is that many young people don't try them. When they do, it is usually for very ordinary reasons such as having fun or doing something different. Often people think that teenagers try drugs because they are depressed or stressed. Of the young people who are having problems in their lives only a small proportion turn to drugs.

It seems that the longer young people wait before they first use and/or regularly use drugs, the less likely it is that problems will develop. While this can offer comfort to some parents, it is important that parents know what to do and what not to do if a drug problem arises.

How will I know if my teenager is taking drugs?

This is the most common question that parents ask. The answer is that there is no easy, sure way to tell. This is because the effect of the drug might have worn off before you see your teenager or because the effect of the drug is not something that is easy to see. Even when there is a major change in behaviour it could be caused by something else, such as illness.

Parents know their children well and so you will notice any sudden change in behaviour that might be a sign that something is wrong. These changes include:

Silence and sulking

Changes in mood

More than usual lack of cooperation and rudeness

Drop in school work, or truancy

Change of friends – sudden change to a new group of friends

Change in physical appearance

Don't jump to conclusions! Remember that there are many reasons other than drugs that might be the cause of these changes. Think about all the possible reasons for a change in behaviour. Is it due to a sudden growth spurt, or changes due to puberty? Are there problems at school or with friends? Are there things going on within your family that could be affecting your teenager?

For these reasons, it is a good idea to react to the situation in the same way you would to anything that made you feel worried about your teenager's wellbeing. In this way you won't make a tragic mistake by jumping to the wrong conclusion.

Bringing up the subject

Try to find out by communication not detection! Detection won't give you the answers. Even if you find drugs in your teenager's room, they could belong to someone else. Don't go on searches for drugs – the cost of loss of trust will be greater than the benefit of anything you might find out.

Make it easy for your teenager to talk to you. Try talking about someone else you know, so that your teenager sees that you are open to listen. You might say, for example: "I was talking to a friend about her daughter smoking pot. She was very worried. What do you think about it?" (Sometimes teenagers test out their parents by talking about a friend when they really mean themselves – be careful how you respond!)

Find out about drugs for yourself first, so you know what you are talking about. The Drug and Alcohol Information Service has facts sheets on all of the common drugs.

Try to discuss it at a time when you are both feeling relaxed. Make some private time. A good time is when you are driving them somewhere they want to go, or perhaps take them to a movie or out for a coffee.

Say something that opens up the subject in an easy way; such as, "I have noticed that you haven't been yourself lately. Can you tell me how you have been feeling?" Most young people will let you know what is happening if you ask at the right time, if they are not afraid of punishment, and if they see you as a caring friend.

If you suspect or find out your teenager is taking drugs

Don't react immediately! Give yourself time to calm down if you are upset, and to think through what is happening. Strong reactions due to fear are common but they don't help. There is a danger that a big argument about it might "back you both into a corner" and harm your relationship with your teenager.

If you are suddenly faced with drug use, let things simmer down. Wait until your teenager sleeps it off and talk the next day.

Give your teenager a chance to tell you what happened eg: "We'd like you to give us an idea what was going on and how you got there."

Try to separate the behaviour from the person. You may not approve of what your teenager is doing but you will need to show you love and care.

You have the right to tell your teenager what your values are and what you will allow in your house. This can be a tricky issue and will depend on how old the teenager is. With older teenagers you may have to come to terms with the fact that they are making their own life choices. However if they won't give up the drug you still have the right to say they are not to use it at home. Some parents tell their teenagers to give it up or they will have to leave home. If you say this, you need to be sure that it is what you mean and want. It is important to be sure that teenagers are not pushed into more risky living situations.

Find out what kinds of drugs are being used and how they are being used. The best way to find out is to ask your teenager. Remember much drug use is for trying something new. Using drugs is not the same as being addicted to drugs. In most cases addiction to drugs happens over time after they have been used regularly. Even though some people may get addicted faster than others, it is not true to say that using drugs for a short time will always lead to addiction.

If teenagers have to go to court, let them see that it is their responsibility. Give moral support but let them deal with the consequences of their choice, including picking up the bill, making arrangements, keeping appointments etc.

Punishment hardly ever prevents drug use.

Discuss with your teenagers the fact that your trust has been broken. Ask them what they think should happen and what they will do to prove that you can trust them again.

It is important that your teenagers are clearly aware of what is likely to happen if they use drugs, such as the effect on:

- family relationships
- their education
- future chances of getting work

Remember drugs are not the only thing which can lead to difficult decisions for parents. There are lots of times when you will have to think about what your rights and needs are and what are your teenager's rights and needs.

Taken from *Govt. of South Australian Parent Guide #15*