

## Teen Drug & Alcohol Abuse: A Quick Reference Guide for Parents & Guardians

*Unity Chemical Dependency Parent Resources*

These days substance abuse is a worry on almost every parent's mind. That's why we put together this quick reference guide for parents. It will help you understand the facts, how to recognize the early signs of a problem, and what to do if you discover your child is using alcohol or drugs.

### **HERE ARE SOME KEY FACTS TO KEEP IN MIND.**

- There are many substances that can be abused by your child today:
  - Stimulants (cocaine, crystal meth, nicotine)
  - Depressants (alcohol, marijuana, inhalants)
  - Hallucinogens (LSD, mushrooms)
  - Designer club drugs (ecstasy and GHB)
  - Prescriptions (Oxycotin, Ritalin, Vicodin)
  - Common, over-the-counter medications like cough and cold products that contain the narcotic derivative, dextromethorphan (DXM)
- Although drug use has actually decreased slightly over the past few decades, the perceived risk has also decreased. That means young people see substance abuse as less dangerous than in the past. This is not a good thing.
- The average age when a child starts abusing alcohol, nicotine, or marijuana is 14. In other words, experimentation begins *very* young—often in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

The younger the child starts using, the greater danger they face in terms of becoming addicted. According to the National Institutes of Health, people who begin drinking before age 15 are four times more likely to develop alcoholism than those who begin at age 21.

- Athletes and “straight A” students can have addiction problems just like any other child.
- *And now for the good news.* If your child reaches the age of 21 without trying alcohol, drugs or nicotine, the odds are good that he or she will never have a chemical dependency problem.

## **THE HARMFUL IMPACT ON THE ADOLESCENT MIND.**

As we all know, alcohol and drug abuse is a terrible problem for anyone. But it has a particularly damaging impact on teens because their brains are in a critical state of development. They are trying to find out who they really are. And they are learning how to make smart decisions and manage their emotions.

Drug and alcohol abuse interferes with all of these developmental issues. Of course, it also impairs physical coordination, the ability to drive, and a child's overall health and well-being.

So why do they do it?

*People who abuse alcohol and drugs do it to change the way they feel.*

Of course, that brings up another big question: What's wrong with the way they feel when they're not using? If your child is abusing drugs or alcohol, that's something you'll definitely want to explore. Also, remember that people who have a history of addiction in their family are more likely to have addiction problems themselves.

## **HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOUR CHILD IS USING ALCOHOL OR DRUGS?**

Most of the time, you'll see changes in their behavior. They may suddenly start telling lies and hanging out with different friends. Their grades may suffer.

In the vast majority of situations, children will give you "clues" that there's something going on.

- Ⓞ For a more detailed list of "warning signs," visit [www.unityhealth.org/services\\_chemdep\\_signs.asp](http://www.unityhealth.org/services_chemdep_signs.asp)

## **POPULAR PLACES TO HIDE ALCOHOL AND DRUGS.**

Teens with chemical dependency problems often find creative hiding spots for drugs and alcohol:

- CD cases
- Special pockets sewn inside pants
- Lipstick tubes
- Containers hidden in their sandals or soles of their shoes
- Many other "normal" places that don't usually arouse suspicion

If you're concerned that your child may have a problem, make sure you investigate possessions that could be used to store drugs or alcohol.

Here are some other things to watch out for:

- Pipes for smoking made from soda cans and plastic bottles
- Glowsticks
- Pacifiers

The last two items are often used by teens who use club drugs like ecstasy at "rave parties."

## **DENIAL IS OFTEN A BIG PART OF THE PROBLEM.**

Parents who discover that their children are abusing drugs or alcohol often feel tremendous guilt for denying that there was a problem for so long. Of course, many parents think, "My child wouldn't do that!" Others think about their own teenage experiences with drugs and alcohol and say to themselves, "I tried it, and I turned out all right." Some parents have substance abuse problems of their own and don't want to address the issue.

Still others believe that it's OK for their children to drink at home, under supervision, where they can learn to "drink responsibly."

These are just some of the common myths and rationalizations that postpone many parents from recognizing the problem – and getting help.

## **WHAT YOU CAN DO IF YOU SUSPECT THERE'S A PROBLEM?**

- *Don't ignore it.* A lot of teens who are struggling with a chemical dependency problem really want their parents to intervene – even if they seem resistant. In any case, it's important to take action as soon as you can.
- *Don't overreact.* That will only make the problem worse. Try to engage your child in honest, two-way adult conversation.
- *Let your child know how much you care about them.* Sometimes children are actually surprised to find out how much their parents really care. Sometimes reminding them of this can lead to a breakthrough.
- *Enforce the consequences when your children break the rules.* Parents sometimes think they're helpless to do anything. But children depend on their parents for the keys to the car, Internet access, telephones and cell phones, etc. All of these privileges can be taken away if your child breaks your rules. You may be surprised to discover how much influence you can have on their behavior.
- *Get support and assistance right away.* Help is available—for your child and yourself. Unity Chemical Dependency is a great place to start.
- *Communicate, communicate, communicate.* And learn to ask more honest, open questions and spend less time giving lectures. A lot of families struggle with communication. But it's never too late to learn how to communicate better with the people you love.

## WHAT HAPPENS IF YOUR CHILD NEEDS TREATMENT?

There are a lot of treatment approaches available to families dealing with chemical dependency problems. They range from after-school counseling to intensive residential care programs.

At Unity Chemical Dependency, we offer outpatient treatment as well as residential programs for teens. Our teen programs are designed to address the different learning styles and developmental needs of teens. Our team of experts understands teens and reaches them through unique and effective treatment techniques that focus on mind, body, and spirit. We incorporate a wide range of experiences into our individual and group therapy, including recreation therapy, movement therapy, meditation, and therapeutic creative activities such as art, music, and drama.

In general, the process into treatment involves the following:

- Evaluation
- Treatment Planning and Recommendations
- Medical Screening
- Individualized Care
- Family Involvement & Parental Input

Family involvement is extremely important for successful recovery – especially for teens. Our teen programs require the family's involvement, and encourage parents to have an active and important role. We understand the devastating impact addiction can have on the family. Our comprehensive services include family counseling, family education, co-dependency therapy, and intervention services. Call 585-723-7740 for more information.

## WHAT EVERY PARENT CAN DO TO REDUCE THE THREAT OF A CHEMICAL DEPENDENCY PROBLEM.

- *Be clear about your expectations.* Let your children know that you don't approve of drug and alcohol use, and don't allow it.
- *Supervise your child's activities.* Make sure you know what's going on. And keep your eyes open for warning signs.
- *Wait up for your children when they're out late.* If teens know that they'll have to talk to you and undergo a subtle "sniff" test or inspection when they get home, they will be less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol when they're out and about with their friends.
- *Set boundaries and rules and enforce the consequences.* If there are no penalties for crossing the boundaries or breaking the rules, they won't appear to be very important to your children.
- *Get to know the parents of your children's friends.* And the sooner the better. Then it will be easier to talk to them—and work with them—if a problem occurs in your home, at their house, at school, or in the community.

- *Get to know your children's friends.* Even if you think a particular friend may be a bad influence, invite him or her to your house and become acquainted. It will help you understand why that friend is important to your child. Besides, you may turn out to be a very good influence on the friend.
- *Eat together as a family as often as you can.* Research by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University shows that children who regularly eat dinner with their families are much less likely to use drugs, alcohol and nicotine. Family dinners also decrease the chances of your child developing an eating disorder. That's a pretty powerful argument for dining together.

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR PARENTS**

- Ⓞ Want practical advice on how to deal with a child with a chemical dependency problem? Read *Choices and Consequences: What to Do When a Teenager Uses Alcohol/Drugs. A Step-By-Step System That Really Works* by Dick Schaefer.
- Ⓞ Want some parenting and communication tips? Visit the web site for Love and Logic, America's Parenting Experts, at [www.loveandlogic.com/](http://www.loveandlogic.com/)
- Ⓞ For more information on treatment options and family support, contact Unity Chemical Dependency at 585-723-7740