



## When You Have Concerns... about your teen's alcohol & other drug use

A PAD parent resource

This resource is for parents and other caregivers of youth in the 14-19 age range who are concerned that their teen's use of alcohol and other drugs may be starting to cause problems.

### Introduction

The adolescent years are often accompanied by parent-teen relationship challenges. Parents may be concerned that their young person is making poor choices, showing lack of good judgement, and putting themselves at risk or even getting into harmful situations. Youth may feel that their parents are restricting their choices, limiting their independence or holding them back from having fun with their friends. Part of the issue for some youth is their desire to experiment with and/or regularly use alcohol and other drugs. Add into that mix the fact that many youth experience stress, anxiety or depression and it's easy to see why a parent who is concerned about their youth's behaviour might worry about what is going on with their teen. It's difficult for a parent to judge how alcohol and drug use fits into the problems they are seeing with their teen.

We know that many teens use alcohol and other drugs – in fact by the senior high school years about 4 out of 5 students report drinking alcohol (with almost half drinking to get drunk) and more than a third report using marijuana. But are these teens running into problems with their use?

**A simple checklist of how to spot a drug use problem cannot apply to each situation. There is no easy answer or single solution if you find that your child has used a drug – whether on a one time or continuous basis. It may be helpful to consider three different “stages of drug use” and some possible responses.**

### Stage One: “I just tried it.”

The experimental stage of any drug use – tobacco, alcohol or another drug - lasts only for a few tries. After that the person has learned the effects of the drug and has made a decision to use it again or not. Many young adolescents who try a drug out of curiosity or immediate peer pressure find they do not like the effects and will not keep using it. In the case of alcohol, many will delay using it until they are older or have very limited opportunity for drinking with their friends. However, there are concerns about the safety of a young person using alcohol or another drug even once, if they are not used to the effects, use a lot of it at once, react badly to it or are at risk because of the behaviour of the people around them.

### How do I respond?

- Let your teen know early on that there are risks with drinking or using another drug – even once – and how they can protect themselves.

- If you find your teen has tried using alcohol or another drug, let them know you are glad they made the choice to not continue to use it. Talk about ways of refusing the drug when the situation comes up again – as it most likely will.
- State your concerns about your teen’s health and safety and that there are risks for them associated with any drug use..
- Once more state your family standards and expectations, letting your children know that there will be consequences for further use of the drug if they go in that direction.
- The “buddy system” can help your children refuse offers of a drug. Having a dependable friend can help them stand up to peer pressure in situations where their peers are smoking, drinking or using other drugs.
- When children have more than one set of friends for example, from a sports team or cultural group in addition to school friends, they will have an alternative group to turn to for support if one set of peers starts to get involved with drugs.

### Stage Two: “I just use a little – it’s no big deal.”

At this stage, adolescents are no longer struggling with whether or not to use alcohol or another drug. They are choosing to use it in certain situations - most likely with friends – but limiting it to occasional use. This is a tough stage in which to make a change, because they do not easily recognize the potential for harm or risks associated with using. Their use is not costing a lot of money, it has social rewards among their friends and may actually be enjoyable for them. Because we know that the younger a teen begins to use a drug, the more likely they are to run into problems, it is important to consider the age and stage of development of your individual teen. It is easy for a young person to increase their use, play around with new and risky drugs, or use in more dangerous situations, without noticing that their drug use is escalating and starting to cause problems. At this stage it continues to be important to help your youth stay safe, even if they do keep using alcohol or another drug against your wishes. And it is important to be aware of the signs of increasing drug dependence, and consider other possible problems associated with their behaviour.

### How do I respond?

- Be calm but forceful, letting your children know that you do not find their behaviour acceptable. Because you love them and are concerned about their safety and well being you will do what you can to influence their decision about drug use.
- Let your children know that although they may not see the harm or risks associated with their drug use, you are well informed about the risks for physical, social and emotional harm associated with the use of alcohol, tobacco or another drug, at this stage of their life.
- Let them know that the bottom line is that you will help them out if their safety is a concern and talk openly about what they need to do to keep themselves safer in situations where they and others may be using drugs
- Don’t support their drug use in any way - particularly in providing money that will go buy cigarettes, alcohol or another drug.
- Keep an eye on your teen's school attendance and each report card. Declining school performance is often a sign of increasing drug use. Don't be afraid to call the school principal or guidance department and talk about your concerns.
- Maintain your house rules regarding curfews, checking in and doing chores, with clear consequences for breaking these. If you see actual evidence of drug use, give consequences that are meaningful, such as grounding them for a number of days or not letting them drive the family car.

- Focus on changing obvious negative behaviour, such as swearing or rudeness, rather than the drug use which your children may deny.

### Stage Three: “It’s my life and I’ll use when I want. You’re the one with the problem.”

At this point, the drug use is playing a very important role in your teen’s life and causing conflict in the family. Your teen has become caught up in both their problems and drug use and the drugs may be helping them cope with their feelings. Helping them to recognize the extent of their involvement with drugs will likely require professional help. You may see evidence of other activities often associated with drug use, such as stealing or coming and going without explanation at all hours of the day or night. There may be evidence of selling drugs, such as late night phone calls and sudden departures from home. There may be signs of other emotional problems such as depression or extreme anger and aggression that also require professional intervention.

Some young people are very insistent in denying their drug use and very clever in covering it up. Others tend to leave little tell-tale signs (such as cigarettes, coming home drunk, cigarette wrapping papers for marijuana) as if they want their parents to detect their drug use and do something about it. Many youth are so overwhelmed by their overall problems they just don’t know how to stop the cycle of emotional and drug-use problems.

#### How do I respond?

- Remember, you are not alone. There are other parents in similar situations, people who may be from the same background as you, people who share your values, people who have tried to be good parents - just as you have. Feelings of anger and guilt are normal in this situation.
- It is natural to want to make a change quickly in this situation, to “cure” your child of drug abuse. However, change is something that takes a long time and involves hard honest work on the part of every family member. Prepare yourself for small steps of progress, some backsliding and continuing to work through this problem for long-term positive change.
- Start with yourself. When you cannot directly influence your child's choices, make a positive change in your own behaviour. Work on things like keeping your temper, doing something nice for yourself, doing an activity with another child in your home (who sometimes gets lost in all the attention being paid to the child causing problems).
- Re-examine your relationship with your teen, apart from their drug use. Are you giving enough responsibility? Too much? Is there enough independence or too much? Are you giving positive feedback about their good points or have you become so anxious that you are just focusing on - negative behaviours? Make a point of communicating with your children every day about easy topics (the ones that don’t lead to arguments)!
- Make a point of reviewing the positive aspects of your children, your parenting abilities and your relationships
- Don’t let a consequence or your feelings of anger or frustration with your teen’s behaviour interfere with their participation in a family outing or event. It is important to keep your children involved in positive family activities
- Look for help. There are support groups, mental health and addictions professionals who have experience with young people and their families. Keep looking until you find one that you are comfortable with and that will help your family.

## What are the signs of increasing drug use?

Most young people who use alcohol and other drugs do so only on an occasional basis. However, if you feel your child is showing critical changes in emotions or behaviour, these may be signs of regular or problem drug use. Be careful not to jump to conclusions since many of these changes can also be signs of normal adolescence or signs of other kinds of problems.

Your child may:

- be less caring and less involved at home
- be cranky, more difficult to get along with, or even aggressive
- be moody: secretive, uncooperative, withdrawn, depressed
- have difficulty sleeping or sleep long hours into the morning
- skip classes at school; get increasingly poorer grades
- need more money (you may notice money is missing) or become aggressive about asking for money
- lose one or more jobs
- change friends, and not be willing to bring them home or talk about them
- have trouble concentrating and paying attention
- spend more time in his or her room or away from home
- change interests and hobbies
- receive late night calls or other phone calls from people you don't know

## What to do if your son/daughter comes home drunk or stoned?

### **What to do that night**

DO Try to remain cool and calm.

DO Talk to them and try to find out what they have taken.

DO Call a doctor or take them to the nearest hospital emergency department if they are seriously ill.

DO Tell them, "We will talk about this tomorrow".

DO Check them often during the night if they are in a condition to be sent to bed.

DO NOT Shout at, accuse or hurt them in any way - quite useless when they are in this condition.

### **What to do the next day**

DO Talk to them immediately.

DO Have them assume responsibility for their actions including clean-up.

DO Let them know you will not accept their behaviour and you will be watching them closely in the future.

DO Set up guidelines for behaviour with your child as well as curfews for going out with friends. Let them know you expect them to follow these guidelines.

DO Talk with them about other activities and choices, so they can avoid taking drugs.

DO NOT Have your discussion with them if you are too angry to talk about it without losing your temper.

**The job of parenting is a tough one, and it is one that never stops. But even when confronting the very difficult challenge of substance use problems, focusing on the positives of the family, and appreciating each person's unique contribution, can help ensure that the family will be strengthened in the process.**