

Youth Substance Use: Prevention and Intervention

The pandemic has brought with it a plethora of concerns outside of the virus itself including a rise in both mental health and substance use concerns as a result of increased stress, change and uncertainty. During challenging times, individuals may turn to drugs and alcohol as a way to self-medicate and cope with their emotions. In fact, data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that substance use has increased among all age groups during the pandemic. For parents, it is important to pay attention to your own response to the stress of the pandemic. For example, if a teen sees their parent using alcohol or drugs to ease their anxiety, they might think it's okay for them to do the same. Despite individual resiliency, we must not assume that everyone will bounce back once life begins to regain some normalcy. As our communities continue to move forward, it is important to check in with loved ones and friends to ask how they are doing. A meaningful message for kids and adults alike to hear is, "it is okay to not be okay" and just as importantly, "it is okay to ask for help". It is especially important for parents/caregivers to talk with their teens about how they are feeling during this time, given the increased risk for substance use and be attentive to possible signs of substance use.

One of the more challenging parts of being a parent of a teenager is deciphering what is normal adolescent behavior and what behavior may raise a red flag as to a concern. Experts agree that a substance use problem is more likely if you notice several of these signs at the same time, if they occur suddenly or if some of them are extreme in nature. Potential warning signs of a possible substance use issue in adolescents may include:

- Mood Changes- flare-ups of temper, irritability, or defensiveness
- School Problems- poor attendance, low grades, recent disciplinary action
- Rebellion against family rules
- Isolation or withdrawing from family
- Friend changes- switching friends and a reluctance to let you get to know the new friends
- A "nothing matters" attitude: sloppy appearance, a lack of involvement in former interests and general low energy
- A presence of alcohol, drugs or paraphernalia- finding it in your child's room or backpack, smelling of alcohol or other substances such as marijuana
- Physical or mental problems: memory lapses, poor concentration, bloodshot eyes, lack of coordination, or slurred speech

It should be noted that many of these signs may also be symptoms of mental health issues such as depression. If there is reason to suspect use, err on the side of caution and have a conversation or seek guidance from a physician, a behavioral health care professional or your school's SCIP (School Community Intervention & Prevention) Coordinator.

The good news is parents have a significant influence in their children's decisions to experiment with alcohol and other drugs. Engaging in opportunities to have meaningful conversations with youth about the risks of drug and alcohol use is a powerful prevention strategy. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), "developing good communication skills helps parents catch problems early, support positive behaviors, and stay aware of what is happening in their children's lives". Experts offer the following tips for developing open and trusting parent-child communication:

- Ask open-ended questions- the kind of information you receive depends a lot on how you ask the question. Encourage your child to tell you how he or she thinks and feels about the issue you are discussing. Avoid questions that have "yes" or "no" responses.

- Actively listen- before engaging in conversations, make sure you have the time and focus to listen and respond to your child. Be both physically and mentally present.
- Show interest and concern- avoid blaming/accusing.
- Validate feelings- keep in mind that validating another person’s feelings does not mean that you have to approve or agree with their perspective.
- Offer empathy and support for your child’s experiences.
- Give encouragement.

Now, more than ever, kids need to be able to open up about their feelings and emotions and find ways to cope with stress and change in healthy ways to avoid at risk behaviors such as substance use.

The following resources offer additional information on youth substance use and parent-child communication.

Center for Parent and Teen Communication- “Five Coping Skills Teens Need to Know”

<https://parentandteen.com/coping-skills/>

Talk Heart 2 Heart- Local resource developed to provide easy to use resources that encourage adults to talk with young people about alcohol and drugs, mental health and risky behaviors.

<https://talkheart2heart.org/>

Partnership to End Addiction-

“How to Spot the Signs of Teen Substance Use”

<https://drugfree.org/article/spotting-drug-use/>

“Help and Hope Crisis Resource for Parents”

<https://drugfree.org/get-help-hope-by-text/>

References: American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); Journal of Adolescent Health; National Institute on Alcohol and Alcoholism; National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA); Partnership to End Addiction, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)