



Mental Health & Addictions Prevention Services

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RESPONDING TO TEENAGE ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUG USE: SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS - June 2005

Before There Is A Problem

1. Examine *your own* use of drugs and alcohol. *Are you modeling responsible behavior?*
2. **Learn about drugs.** Know what they look like and their effects. Understand and discuss the drugs your teens hear about, know that others at school/community have used, that they may have used, that are popular in our culture.
3. Talk to your children about your thoughts and feelings about teen alcohol/other drug use. Clearly outline the positive outcome most people want from an alcohol/drug use experience, but **balance this with clear, accurate information about the real risks associated with use.**
4. **Be involved in your children's/teen's lives.** Encourage their involvement in worthwhile activities. Give them your time - **demonstrate that they are important to you by doing activities with them,** talking with them, having fun together. (It's like saying "I love you" with actions, not with words.)
5. **Encourage democratic discussion** but maintain your leadership in the home.
6. **Facilitate two-way communication** by avoiding lectures, advice-giving, and blaming, and, by encouraging the expression of feeling by listening and compromising.
7. Provide a predictable structure for your children. Set up consistent rules and regulations for the household. Know where your children are going and with whom **Consistency and reliability in, both, your expectations of them and in your own behaviour provides the structure, dependability, predictability and safety teens tell us they find stabilizing.**
8. **Get to know your teenagers' friends and their parents.** Make this an important part of your parenting - to always know these people.
9. **Find legitimate reasons to praise your children at least four times as many times as you criticize them.**

Be Aware of Signs and Symptoms of Potential Problems...

1. Changes in your child's appearance -- notice bloodshot eyes, careless dress, etc.
2. Changes in health -- weight, sleeping and eating habits, restlessness, and apathy.
3. Changes in school performance.
4. How your children are spending money.
5. Changes in friends, suspicious phone calls, older friends.
6. Changes in how your child relates to you -- mood swings, avoidance.

If you Suspect/Discover Your Teen Intoxicated /in Possession of Alcohol or Other Drugs...

1. **STAY CALM.** It may not be necessary to talk about your concerns right away (especially if safety is not an immediate issue). You will likely have more impact if you are calm, informed, and clear with what you want to achieve through your conversation with your child. **DEAL WITH SAFETY OR POTENTIAL SAFETY ISSUES IMMEDIATELY.**

2. **Keep track of your observations and concerns.** Reflect on things that have happened in the past that may have been connected with their use of alcohol/other drugs. Write all of these things down or, at least, commit them to memory.
3. **Set a date with them to talk** about something "that is important to them and to you". Do not talk to them about what it is exactly you want to talk about -- simply let them know that you want a date with them and want them to commit at least **X** minutes/hours to your "date".
4. **Decide if you want them to see an alcohol/other drug counsellor for an assessment** -- to determine if their use of alcohol/other drugs is a problem.
5. **Script your message** make a list of the points you want to cover. Note which points are crucial to discuss and which, if any, can wait until another conversation.
 - ? Begin by expressing your love and concern for them.
 - ? **Restate family rules/expectations** about alcohol/other drug use.
 - ? **State your observations** of their behavior that indicates that they are using alcohol/other drugs and why you are worried about this behavior.
 - ? Ask them to explain to you **how they see alcohol/other drugs fitting into their lives** (when they enjoy using, where they like to use, who they like to be with when they use, how long they plan to use, what effects the drink/drugs they are using are having on them, any concerns they or others have or have mentioned about their use).
 - ? **Give them time to respond** (If they continually interrupt you, let them know that you will stop every so often to let them respond, otherwise, they are to remain quiet and let you finish, first.).
 - ? **Return to your script.** Restate your rules and expectations about the use of alcohol/other drugs.
 - ? **Apply consequences** that they knew to expect (in a previous conversation(s) you established the consequences for using drugs, alcohol, and acting in inconsiderate, threatening or otherwise antisocial and negative behaviour.)
 - ? Let them **know what consequences you plan on implementing** if their use of alcohol/other drugs continues.
 - ? If you want them to **see a counsellor for an assessment**, tell them that you would like them to do this so that they, and you, know if their use of alcohol or other drugs is causing problems in their life. (This step helps them take responsibility for how their use is impacting others and provides a way for them to show you, their siblings, etc. that they are willing to look at their behavior.)
 - ? Let them know that **their behavior has affected your ability to trust them** and that this is a serious blow to your relationship with them. Let them know that you would like to rebuild this trust and suggest a few ways that they might begin doing this. Make sure you let them know that trust takes a while to be rebuilt and that you are willing to work at this with them.
6. **Follow through with consequences** and repeat this entire process (or parts of it) again, if/when necessary.
7. **Any/every time you are interrupted** when you are speaking, remind your child that you will let them respond when you are finished. Try using the magic phrase, "**NEVER-THE-LESS**". It can be quite effective.
8. **Get support for yourself** and remain as healthy (physically, emotionally, spiritually, socially) as you can.