

**Many parents worry about whether their son or daughter is taking 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. More young people are involved in violence, are hospitalised or die from alcohol-related causes than from the use of illegal drugs.**

**Many parents wonder why young people would even think of trying drugs. Part of growing up is to experiment with new things and test limits, so it is not surprising that some young people try illegal drugs as well as those which are legal. Many young people however don't experiment with drugs at all. Fortunately, out of those who do try drugs, many will not go on using drugs regularly, and only a few will develop serious problems.**

**Sometimes we think that only troubled young people use drugs. However, of the young people who are having problems in their lives, only a small number turn to drugs. Using drugs, especially alcohol, is a way some young people try to manage problems in their lives.**

**It seems that the longer young people wait before they first try or regularly use drugs the less likely it is that a problem will develop. While this can offer some comfort to parents, it is important for parents to be well informed and know what to do for their young person.**

## Why do young people use drugs?

Some parents think that young people only use drugs if they are depressed or have problems at home or school. Understanding some of the reasons young people use drugs may help parents to appreciate the many pressures facing young people.

Some of the reasons young people may use drugs are:

- ordinary reasons, such as 'having fun' or doing something different
- availability—access to drugs is not necessarily difficult. It's usually through other young people, friends or older peers
- curiosity and experimentation—'I wanted to see what it was like'
- acceptance by peer group—'Most of my friends were doing it'
- rebellion—'Because you don't approve' or said 'No'
- depression—'I just wanted to feel better'
- confidence and self-esteem—'I wanted to feel better about myself'
- relaxation or coping with stress, boredom or pain—'All my problems disappeared for a while'
- experiencing a 'high'—'I liked the feeling'

- example you set—what sort of behaviour do you model? If you use drugs don't be surprised if your child follows
- The amount you focus on the 'dangers of drugs' can raise young people's curiosity.

Young people often rely on friends to tell them what to expect from a drug—the information they get is often not accurate.

## What parents can do to prevent drug use

Good parenting is important to all children and young people and should help them to be healthy in all parts of their lives. However, good parenting will not necessarily prevent young people from trying drugs. They are at an age when they make their own choices about using drugs, and many other things as well. If you find your son or daughter has used, or is using illegal drugs, blame is not helpful.

Preparing them in the best way possible to make healthy and safe decisions is the most important thing you can do.



This can include:

- Being aware that the way you live your life and the behaviours you model will influence your children.
- When it comes to parenting and drugs 'Do as I say, not as I do' has little impact. Think about your use of alcohol, tobacco, medications and other drugs.
- Spend time with your children (start before they are into their teens)—be involved in their lives, know their friends, teachers' names, what interests them. Show a genuine interest rather than just 'prying'.
- Teach responsible behaviour. Give them practice at making choices. Acknowledge their responsible decisions and help them to learn from their mistakes. Gradually give them more responsibility for making their own decisions.
- Teach the balance of rights and responsibilities, so that they understand that responsibilities also come with rights. For example, ask your teenager to let you know where she is going when she is out, but allow her to have some say about when she comes in.
- As your children enter their teen years think about what you can do to help make their lives interesting. If you spend the weekend sitting around watching TV, drinking and smoking, you are modelling that this is the way to spend your spare time! If your weekends offer things to look forward to, they are more likely to think of weekends as a time for enjoyable, healthy and interesting activities.
- Young people who have other interests may be less likely to take up drugs (although some sports encourage it, for example, drinking after matches). Encourage their involvement in sport, take an interest in their hobbies and help them get to the different activities that they're interested in.
- Build your young person's self-esteem. Tell them and show them you care about and value them. Let them see that you notice the things they do.
- Keep the communication open and honest—be approachable. Listen to their ideas and opinions, even if you don't agree with them. Try not to interrupt or react in a way that stops discussion. This way they won't be frightened to tell you things you may not want to hear, but need to hear.
- Don't pretend to know everything. If you don't know, say so and that you will try to find out.
- Make sure that you have safe arrangements for young people getting home. Have an emergency plan for a situation if they lose money, drink too much or get into a difficult situation. For example, a pre-paid mobile phone to call you, permission to take a taxi and you will pay. If it happens often, think about what else might be happening for them.
- Give rewards for responsible behaviour, for example, allow them to stay out a bit later or have an extra night out.

- As young people get older they will be making their own choices about friends, groups and activities. Making their friends welcome, being interested in their interests and helping them get to activities will be very important to them.
- If young people are not going to school, if they are bored, unemployed and without hobbies and interests, they are more vulnerable to drug use.
- Sometimes young people who have a mental illness use drugs to help cope with their distress. If you have other concerns about your child it is important to get help.

It can be helpful to understand that using drugs is not the same as being addicted to drugs. In most cases addiction happens over time and after regular use. Some people may get addicted faster than others.

Using any illegal drug is risky and should be avoided. They may contain very dangerous chemicals that can cause damage to the brain or even death. This can happen at first use and before addiction.

## Peer groups

- Peer group pressure is often overstated and most young people make a decision to take drugs without being forced or tricked. However, they may choose their peer group because of what the group is doing in a number of areas, including drugs.
- Young people need to see good reasons to change their peer group. Encourage them not to entirely lose touch with old friends. If young people are involved in more than one group they have a bigger network to connect with if one of the groups is using drugs. Support them to have friendships with different groups. Make their friends welcome.

## How will I know if my son or daughter 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 who know their children well will notice any sudden change in behaviour that might be a sign that something is wrong.

These changes include:

- unusual or out-of-character behaviour
- silence, sulking, or anger towards others
- mood swings
- more than usual lack of cooperation and rudeness
- avoiding being with or talking with the family

- drop in school work, or truancy
- dropping out of regular activities, for example sport
- change of friends—unexplained or sudden change to a new group of friends
- changes in physical appearance, for example reddened eyes
- eating problems
- lack of energy, tired all the time
- valuable items or money missing at home.

**Don't jump to conclusions!** 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 things going on within your family that could be affecting him?

Remember that there are many reasons other than drugs that might be the cause of these changes.

It's a good idea to react to the situation in the same way you would to anything that made you feel worried about your child's wellbeing. Then you won't jump to the wrong conclusion which could damage your relationship.

## Bringing up the subject

To raise the subject you need to be able to talk with some confidence. The way you talk will make a difference to how your teenager responds.

- **Find out about drugs for yourself first** so you know what you are talking about. What's the latest up-to-date information? What are the common drugs and their effects? The Alcohol and Drug Information Service has fact sheets on all of the common drugs.
- **Try to discuss it at a time when you are both in a reasonable mood.** Make some private time. A good time is when you are driving your young person somewhere she wants to go, but not when you are in a hurry.
- **Say something that opens up the subject in an easy way** such as, 'I have noticed that you haven't been yourself lately. Are things okay for you?' 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 and supportive.
- **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 a young person will test out parents by talking about a friend when they really mean themselves—be careful how you respond!

## If you suspect or find out they are 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. Don't nag or lecture. There is a danger that a big argument about it might 'back you both into a corner' and harm your relationship.
- If your child comes home under the influence of drugs, wait until he sleeps it off and talk the next day. Getting angry will close the door on communication.
- Try to get a picture of what is happening in their life. Give him a chance to tell you what happened, for example, 'Can you give us an idea what was going on?'
- Try to separate the behaviour from the person. You may not approve of what he is doing but you still need to show your love and care.
- It is important to tell him that you are concerned about his wellbeing and think he might be using drugs.
- Remind him of your values and what you will allow in your house. This can be a tricky issue and will depend on how old he is.
- With older adolescents 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 that they are not to use it at home.
- Some parents tell their young person to give it up or they will have to leave home. If you say this, be sure it is what you really want and that you mean what you say. Don't push him into a more risky living situation.
- Find out what kinds of drugs are being used and how they are being used. The best way to find out is to ask him, for example by communication rather than detection. Detection won't give you the answers. Even if you find drugs in his room, they could belong to someone else. Don't become the 'drug police' and go on searches for drugs—the loss of trust will be greater than the benefit of anything you might find.
- Discuss with him what he considers to be the benefits and consequences of using drugs. Is he clearly aware of what is likely to happen if he uses drugs, such as the effect on his friendships, family relationships, education, and future chances of getting work?
- In the ACT, if your young person is involved in minor drug offences, efforts are made to keep them out of the criminal justice system. In the first instance, referrals are made to health services so the young person has a chance to look at their drug use.
- The ACT Health Alcohol and Drug Program runs diversionary strategy programs for young people. These programs aim to divert people with drug related offences from the court system into the health system. People who meet the criteria are assessed by the alcohol and drug clinician and after consultation a suitable and appropriate treatment plan is formulated. Referrals are made via ACT Police, the Magistrates Court and the Supreme Court.

## What parents can do to prevent drug use *continued*

- There are three types of programs
  - ACT Police Early Diversion Program
  - Court Alcohol & Drug Assessment Services (CADAS)
  - The Treatment Referral Program
- If this happens, give him moral support but let him see that it is his responsibility. Let him deal with the consequences of his behaviour, including picking up the bill, making arrangements, keeping appointments etc.
- Discuss the issue of trust. You may feel that this has been broken. Ask him what he thinks should happen and how trust can be re-built.
- Punishment hardly ever prevents drug use.
- Remember drugs are not the only things that can lead to difficult decisions for parents. There are many times when you will have to think about what your rights and needs are and what are your teenager's rights and needs.

Ask for help. You don't need to handle this alone and it is often useful to talk to someone who is skilled in this area.

## Dealing with emergencies

- If you find or suspect your child or their friend has passed out from drug or alcohol use, phone 000 immediately for an ambulance. Do not hesitate.
- If you want advice about alcohol and drug use or want to know how to be prepared to handle a drug overdose contact the Alcohol and Drug Program 6207 9977 or healthDirect 1800 022 222.

**Using drugs is not the same as being dependent (addicted) on drugs. In most cases dependence (addiction) happens over time and after regular use. Some people may become dependent (addicted) faster than others.**

**Using any illegal drugs such as cannabis, heroin, ecstasy amphetamines (speed) or hallucinogens (LSD or mushrooms) is risky and should be avoided. There is no way of knowing what they actually contain. They may have very dangerous chemicals that can cause damage to the brain or even death and this can happen at first use and before dependence (addiction).**

## Reminders

- Parents who communicate, listen well, are approachable and who give choices (not orders) can support young people to build skills they need to make good decisions for themselves.
- Choose a good time and make sure that you know what you are talking about when you talk with your young person about drugs.
- Being angry, judging and criticising doesn't work—it only makes things worse.
- Be willing to talk honestly about the drugs you use (alcohol, nicotine, medicines etc).
- Don't over-react to situations—you might jump to the wrong conclusion.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help. You don't need to handle concerns on your own.

## Contacts

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| <b>ACT Health Alcohol and Drug Program</b>  | 24-hour  | 6207 9977    |
| <b>Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)</b>                                      | 24-hour confidential telephone service for advice, information, referral | 1800 422 599 |
| <b>healthdirect Australia</b><br>(free health advice line staffed by registered nurses) | 24-hour  | 1800 022 222 |
| <b>Kids Help Line</b>   | 24-hour  | 1800 55 1800 |
| <b>Parentline ACT</b>   | 9am–9pm Monday–Friday, except public hols                                | 6287 3833    |
| <b>Poisons Information Centre</b>   | 24-hour  | 13 11 26     |

## Websites

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| <b>www.adf.org.au</b>            | Australian Drug Foundation provides alcohol and other drug information, publications, research and fact sheets for parents, young people, health professionals |
| <b>www.cyh.com</b>               | Parenting and child health information   |
| <b>www.drugs.health.gov.au</b>   | National Drugs Campaign  |
| <b>www.kidshelp.com.au</b>       | Kids helpline  |
| <b>www.parentlink.act.gov.au</b> | Other parenting guides, including Discipline, Living with teens, Teenage depression, What about parents' rights?, Young people and parties                     |

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