

Alcohol, Drugs and Your Teen's Health

More than 90% of all U.S. high school seniors report some experience with alcohol.

Alcohol is America's #1 drug problem among young people. Alcohol-related highway deaths are the leading killer of 15-24 year olds. Many students report that their first experience with drinking took place at age 12.

One half of all U.S. high school seniors have tried an illicit drug such as marijuana and cocaine. Research has found that drug use moves through distinct stages; beer and wine to cigarettes and liquor to marijuana to illicit drugs other than marijuana. Alcohol is known as a gateway drug. This means that adolescents who use marijuana, cocaine, heroin, or inhalants started out using alcohol as their drug of choice.

While some experimentation is to be expected, parents must discuss the possible consequences and dangers of using drugs. If parents drink they must take care to walk their talk, that is, parents cannot say not to drink and drive and then drive home from a social event where they had been drinking.

Parents must also monitor their adolescent and his or her friends because friends' behaviors are especially important in predicting alcohol and drug use in adolescents. Parents cannot totally protect young people from stress and the pressures to use drugs; eventually they may experiment with it. Thus, it is better to prepare adolescents, by providing them opportunities to discuss with you their concerns regarding this issue.

Teen drug and alcohol use continues to remain high in America culture. Teens use drugs for many of the same reasons that adults use drugs; to feel good; to feel different; to avoid feeling at all; to fit in; to overcome shyness. In addition, teens use drugs for reasons that are particular to their

needs; to "be cool," a sign of being "grown-up," to experiment, and to take risks.

The best thing that we, as parents, can do to help our teens make smart decisions about drugs and alcohol is to build up their social skills including; planning, decision-making, and conflict resolution skills. We want to be more careful than ever to help our kids learn the kinds of attitudes and skills that will keep them from abuse even if they choose to experiment with drugs and alcohol occasionally. While the teenage years are filled with challenges, most teens and their families do make it through them. As parents, we can do a lot to see that our teen's growing up experience is empowering and loving instead of an ordeal.

Contrary to what we may think, most teens make the transition from childhood to adulthood with few problems. Many go through this period of development without encountering major health risks caused by alcohol and other drug use. Nevertheless, one of the biggest challenges for teenagers is to learn how to make decisions that will not be hazardous to their health and yet allow them to interact positively with their peer group and develop independence from their parents.

Some behaviors are more life-threatening than others. It is helpful to understand what motivates some children to be willing to accept those risks and what helps other teens resist unhealthy behaviors. A child who is confident about himself may experiment with drugs, alcohol, and sex, but he is not as likely to make these behaviors a central part of his life as a child who does not feel like a worthwhile and valued person.

If kids don't feel good about themselves, they tend to look for ways to feel better.

Because low self esteem can be such a strong factor in unhealthy behavior, it's

particularly important for parents to help their children grow up with a strong sense of self-worth. Encouraging children with praise for specific accomplishments, helping them to experience successes in life, and making them feel like a valued family member are some of the ways parents can help make their children feel good about themselves.

Most Teens are . .

- ' Coping with physical, emotional, and intellectual changes
- ' Searching for their own identity and separating from their parents
 - ' Critical of their parents
 - ' Moody and self-centered
- ' Unpredictable and interested in trying out new behaviors
- ' Strongly influenced by peer group values and opinions

Signs of Low Self-Esteem in Children

Socially withdrawn
 Extreme shyness
 Difficulty making eye-contact
 Seems down on themselves much of the time
 Take failures personally
 Thinks successes are due to luck or factors other than themselves
 Frequent anger at themselves and/or others, often over "little things"
 Can be highly critical of others (an attempt to boost their own self-esteem)
 Can be aggressive toward peers and family (arguing and fighting)

Predisposing Factors for High-risk Behaviors:

- 9 A family history of alcoholism or other addictions
- 9 Family stress or crisis such as an alcoholic parent, divorce, death, parent's unemployment, etc.
- 9 Lack of social support and concern at home
 - 9 Low self-esteem

- 9 Depression
- 9 Exposure at home to high-risk or unhealthy behaviors such as smoking, drinking, excessive dieting, etc
- 9 Child does not perceive behavior as unhealthy or high risk to health
- 9 Behavior meets with peer approval and acceptance
- 9 Smoking or prior episodes of high-risk behaviors
 - 9 Social isolation from peers
 - 9 Poor performance in school
- 9 Concerns about sexual orientation and social acceptance
 - 9 Intense pressure for academic achievement, athletic performance, appearance, or other accomplishments
- 9 Need for stimulation and high-risk behaviors

Warning Signs of Substance Abuse

Falling grades
 Erratic behavior
 Mood swings
 Chronic disobedience
 Drastic change in dress or appearance (poor hygiene)
 Change in musical taste and friends
 Withdrawal from family or old friends
 Unusually secretive about social activities, friends, or possessions
 Spends a lot of time away from home
 Missing curfews/lying about where they are
 Unusual sleep patterns (typically stays awake late, wakes late)
 Dramatic change in weight and/or appetite
 Physical and mental deterioration (memory lapse, slurred speech, bloodshot eyes, persistent cough or runny nose)
 Combination of hyperactivity and lethargy
 Stealing or constant need for money
 Diminishing home liquor supply
 Tangible evidence, such as pipes,

cigarette papers, pills, powders,
empty beer cans
Identification with drug culture, in
conversations, jokes, slogans on tee
shirts

**If you suspect that your teen is using
alcohol or other drugs:**

- Establish family rules to govern drinking
and drug use
- Be knowledgeable about effects of drugs
and local laws governing use
- Check for signs and symptoms of alcohol
and other drug use
 - State your concern to your teen;
document his/her behavior
- Check out your child's behavior with
others
- Get referrals for professional assistance,
if necessary
 - Make sure that your teen gets help
- Continue to monitor your teen's behavior

**Strategies for supporting a healthy
lifestyle:**

- Have on-going conversations about
family values and rules
- Model healthy behavior; take a hard look
at your health habits
- Be clear about your expectations for
child's behavior
 - Make your home an inviting place
 - Spend time with your teen
 - Eat meals with your children, when
possible
- Have an emergency action plan or taxi
account so your child will always
have a way out of a difficult situation
- Make sure your child understands that no
matter how deeply in trouble he/she
might be, you will always be there
for him/her
 - Listen and acknowledge your teen's
feelings
 - Speak with other parents to establish
mutual rules, supervision, and
checking in with one another
- Teach strategies for assertiveness and
resisting peer pressure

— Use newspaper, magazines, or TV
accounts of incidences of health risks

- Be familiar with drug classifications
(hallucinogens, inhalants, narcotics,
depressants, etc)
- Be familiar with street names of drugs
- Be knowledgeable about the effects and
health hazards of alcohol and other
drugs

Resources:

*"Teening-Up" With Your Adolescent:
Parenting Children Ages 10-16.* University
of Florida Extension Service, Department of
Family, Youth and Community Sciences,
1997.

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and
Drug Information . P.O. Box 2345
Rockville, MD 20852.
<http://www.health.org> 1-800-729-6686.

National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA),
Natl. Institute on Health,
<http://www.nih.gov>.

Rate your parenting on how well you are promoting a responsible life choice regarding drug use.

A zero "0" indicates you don't know or you are not addressing this issue. A "1" indicates that you are beginning to address this issue. A "2" indicates that you are currently addressing this issue as an on-going part of the family's daily function.) At the end, add up your score and discover how well you are addressing these issues and fostering responsible behavior choices.

PARENT ANTI-DRUG CHECKLIST	0	1	2
You have talked to your child at an early age about drugs.			
You have provided information to your teenager about drugs.			
You are honest and share your own mistakes.			
You have talked with your teen about the short-term "feel good" emphasis of the world.			
You provide safe space for your teen to make and learn from their mistakes.			
You have a signed written agreement with your teenager that he or she will call you for a ride home at any time when he or she is not capable of driving.			
You provide your teen with opportunities to master a skill or talent.			
You get involved in a drug-free program, such as "safe rides."			
You do not remove or minimize the consequences of the wrongful action.			
You know where to get help if you think your teenager's drug use has gone too far.			
You remind your teenager that you love him/her very much. You say this to them when you are pleased with their actions, as well as when you are displeased with their actions.			
Total			

How did you do? Add up your score and compare.

16 - 22 **Super!** You are addressing most of the drug issues facing your teen and providing him or her opportunities to foster responsible behavior. Pat yourself on the back and keep on with it. The benefactors of your hard work and commitment to your son or daughter are your teen, family, and community.

9 - 15 **Good!** You are addressing most of the needs and issues regarding teen drug use; however, there is some need to strengthen and enhance your response. You may wish to work on those areas where you scored a zero.

0 - 8 **Almost!** How do you think you are doing? You may wish to refocus your energy to better address the need and issues of your teen regarding drug use. Similar to the group above, you may wish to work on those areas where you score a zero.