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# Living With Your Teen: Alcohol and Drug Use

Today's teens hear mixed messages about drinking alcohol and using other drugs. One minute they hear the simple message, "Just say NO!" or they hear "Don't Drink and Drive." Television commercials, magazine ads, and billboards have a different message. These suggest that drinking is "fun," "sexy," "romantic," "adult," or "macho." On top of this, teens know adults who use alcohol or pills to relax, to get rid of stress, or to socialize.



## Warning signs of teen alcohol and drug abuse

When can you tell a teen has gone beyond trying out drinking or drugs? There are signs that show that a teenager may be using or abusing alcohol or other drugs. The following warning signs show a teen may be drinking or using a drug:

- missing work or school
- not saying where he or she is going
- lying about where he or she has been
- stopping activities the teen used to enjoy and not filling the time with other fun activities
- getting angry easily and often
- borrowing money from parents or friends; can't explain loss of money or valuables
- sniffing, running nose, dilated pupils or red eyes
- losing appetite
- associating with a new group of friends, often with those who use drugs
- hiding things that would show alcohol or drug use – liquor bottles, rolling papers, pipes

*Source: National Institute on Drug Abuse*

## The role of parental monitoring

Parental monitoring means parents supervise their children or know where they are and what they're doing. Higher levels of parental monitoring are related to lower levels of alcohol drinking in youth. Young people who are closely supervised rarely drink on a weekly basis.

## Ways parents can help

- **Communicate with your teen.** Many parents express concern over possible problem drinking and drug abuse. But, they don't always discuss their views and concerns with their children. Rather than waiting until a problem arises, talk with your teen about your concerns and the messages they may be getting from the media and their peers.

- **Encourage teenagers' abilities and interests.** Parents need to encourage their teens in activities that develop interests and skills. These activities should help teens feel good about themselves without the use of alcohol or drugs. Hobbies, school events, sports and volunteer work may keep youth from using alcohol and drugs out of boredom.
- **Help your teen or pre-teen deal with peer pressure.** Parents can help their teen say no to alcohol/drugs without losing face. Here are some things teens can say: "I don't like the way it (beer, cigarettes) tastes," "I'll be grounded for life if my dad finds out I've been using drugs," "I need all my brain cells for football practice (math test, homework) tomorrow."
- **Permit white lies.** Tell your teen he or she can "blame" you when under peer pressure. "My mom's going to give me a driving lesson this afternoon." "If I don't drink I'll get to use my dad's car on Friday nights." Tell them that many times a simple "no thanks" or "not today" will do.
- **Know the facts about alcohol and other drugs.** Parents should know the effects of alcohol/drugs on the body and on driving, and the risks of alcohol/drug abuse.
- **Create strong family ties.** Strong family ties can help protect against alcohol/drug problems in young people. Family activities (for example: sports, movies or family meetings) along with open discussions and flexible rules can be particularly helpful. Really listening to your teen, even when you don't agree, will strengthen the ties between you.
- **Keep calm.** Research shows that many teens will use alcohol once in a while and experiment with some other drugs. Try to stay calm if this happens and carry through with consequences. Don't assume your child is an alcoholic or drug addict, however. Parents should be concerned if a teenager is involved in frequent, heavy or very early use of alcohol or other drugs.
- **Guide and limit.** Preventing alcohol and drug abuse can begin at home. Parents need to guide their teens and set clear and reasonable rules. To do this, parents should clearly state rules about alcohol and drugs (for example: tell teens not to drink and drive); calmly talk about alcohol/drug use before problems start (for example: use news reports of alcohol related accidents to discuss the harmful outcomes of drinking).
- **Encourage teens to be healthy.** Talk with your teens about the advantages of eating nutritious foods, exercising and driving safely.
- **Make a contract.** Many families have found it helpful to sit down together and write up a parent-teen "contract" for no drinking and driving. In the contract, teens agree not to ride in a car when the driver has been drinking. They agree to call their parents for a ride if they or the driver of the car has been drinking. Parents agree to pick up their teens and not discuss the event until the following morning.



**Source:**

Whose Kids?...Our Kids! Teen Assessment Project. University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension.

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