

11 POINTS FOR PARENTS TO PROTECT THEIR KIDS

Drug abuse can be prevented and addiction is a treatable illness.

1. **Substance abuse is a preventable problem.** We, as parents, are much more powerful than we think. Upsetting us is the number one reason why kids do *not* use drugs, and kids who learn about drug risks from parents are only half as likely to start using.
2. **Get and stay closely involved** with your kids' lives as they head through middle school and into high school. You won't connect well with your kids about serious health issues if you haven't been interested in the day-to-day events of interest to them – which test caused half the class to flunk, which of their friends got a part in the play, who lied to their parents and went down to the city with older kids...
3. **Begin the dialogue when your kids are young.** Talk early and often. It doesn't have to be a formal "birds and bees" type discussion, but should springboard off "teachable moments" -- like an incident in their town or school, a problem in your extended family, a popular music video or movie, or something on the news. Set a "no-use" expectation, including for alcohol, and make it explicit.
4. **Monitor your kids.** Kids whose parents supervise them closely are only half as likely to develop a drug problem. Know the "who, what, why, where, when" of their activities, compare notes with other parents, and continue this practice as kids hit middle school, even when you no longer know all their friends, and friends' families.
5. **Be the parent, not just the pal.** Your kids already have friends, but they need parenting. Consistently enforce boundaries for your family that apply even when kids are in other settings, or with families that have different rules. Teens like to be trusted, and will feel supported by clear and consistent boundaries that are explained in advance and are based on our love and concern for their well-being.
6. **Addiction is a health problem.** It does not happen because someone is "a bad person," but is an illness that is in fact the number one preventable adolescent health problem. (The American Academy of Pediatrics). It is not your fault. Stigma and shame due to past ignorance and stereotypes about the problem are unwarranted. A drug disorder can take over your life, and cause you to lie, steal and act badly toward even those you love. However, addiction has a physiological basis; chronic alcohol and other drug use change the brain and body chemistry, making it hard to stop. Thirty years ago, families were told: your son needs to develop will-power to stop using cocaine... Now we know better.
7. **There is hope, help and healing** available for your family if someone develops a substance abuse problem. There are objective ways to assess the problem, and many new treatments. Millions of people recover their health and turn their whole lives around, even though they tend not to be as visible as the public struggles of celebrities addicted to substances.
8. **Don't wait -- know the warning signs and act early.** If you suspect your child has a drug or alcohol problem, you are probably right, and need to learn more about the problem and steps for helping: Intervene early, find the right type of help, and be persistent. Warning signs include sudden changes (which are otherwise unexplained) in personality, irritability and mood swings, habits and friends, excessive secrecy, and finding drug paraphernalia. There are objective "screener" short questionnaires that you can answer to determine the sort of problem you're facing. It's a myth that someone has to hit "rock bottom" before seeking and getting help. Without help, addiction tends to progress and can even, eventually, be fatal. Although earlier intervention is best, it is possible to get help at any stage of addiction, and success rates with quality treatment are comparable to those for other illnesses like diabetes, asthma, or hypertension.
9. **Help is not just "rehab."** Most people recover from addiction without formal, in-patient treatment, or "rehab." There are many paths to wellness, including out-patient medical help, and sometimes a combination of treatment and a 12-Step, self-help program, which holds free meetings any time during the week, near enough to get to.
10. **Addiction runs in families,** similar to illnesses like cancer or heart disease. Kids who have a family pattern are at much higher risk of addiction if they use drugs or alcohol at all; no recreational use can stay safely under control, particularly during the formative years of adolescence. Families with a history of alcoholism or drug addiction should talk about this, so their kids

are aware. If there is a problem developing, family involvement and support makes treatment work better. Everyone – the addicted child and the parents and siblings – need strong help and mutual support to solve the problem.

11. **You are not alone.** Substance abuse is common among teens, and drug addiction doesn't discriminate. It cuts across race, gender and economic lines, every region of this country, and every walk of life. Most people now know someone who has struggled with addiction, and one in four teenagers is now living with an addicted parent. Take heart. More than anything, families need confidence that recovery is possible, and encouragement and information and professional support to heal this problem.