

Substance Abuse and Teenagers

The term “substance abuse” is used to describe the unauthorized or inappropriate use of both legal and illegal drugs, or other chemical substances, that can alter behavior in various ways. While substance abuse by anyone is a matter of concern, it is especially alarming when children and adolescents become abusers because the consequences of abuse can severely affect normal adolescent growth and development.

Substance abuse by teenagers has been well documented for many years. National surveys have shown that the frequency of substance abuse by teenagers is significant. According to one survey, nearly a third of high school seniors reported using some illicit drug during the past year. Illegal drugs — marijuana, cocaine, crack, heroin or LSD, for example, or prescription drugs taken without medical supervision — diet pills, tranquilizers or sleeping pills, are typical drugs of abuse for teenagers.

While some might downplay the problem of substance abuse among teenagers as “just part of growing up,” there is much evidence to the contrary. Aside from the legal problems involved in consuming illicit drugs, there are many physical and psychological side effects of substance abuse that are impossible to ignore.

Physical problems include damage to the circulatory and respiratory systems from smoking or injecting drugs. Additionally, injecting drugs adds the risk of contracting HIV and AIDS from sharing needles with HIV-positive drug abusers. After ingesting mind-altering drugs, there is always the risk of accidents, including auto crashes, resulting from the impaired judgment of the abuser.

Psychologically, long term drug abuse carries the risk of memory loss, and a decline in intellectual ability. There is also the possibility that psychotic episodes can be triggered by long term drug abuse. These episodes carry the risk of suicide or doing permanent harm to others. Further problems in this category include poor school and work performance, alienation from family and friends and a decline in moral values, as getting high becomes the focus of the abuser’s life.

How can you tell if a teenager is abusing drugs or other substances? By carefully observing and talking with the teenager, the physical effects and psychological behavior of drug abuse can often be detected. Looking for changes in what had been typical behavior is one of the keys. Are there physical problems that have come to light recently, weight loss or persistent nasal problems, for example? Does the teenager often seem uninterested in activities that he or she previously enjoyed? Have old friends disappeared and been replaced by new ones with different values? Pay careful attention to what you see and question the teenager thoroughly if your suspicions are aroused. Also check with teachers, counselors or other parents to verify your observations.

What can you do if you suspect that a teenager is abusing drugs? Fortunately, teenage substance abuse is a treatable condition. With the right kind of help, most young abusers can recover and resume the normal tasks of growing up. The first step is to have the young person thoroughly evaluated by a mental health professional. Based on this evaluation, the most appropriate form of treatment can be recommended.

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