



Teens and Drugs, Including Alcohol

Brenda Jacobson
Graduate Student
Department of Child Development
and Family Science

Winnie Grams
Graduate Student
Department of Child Development
and Family Science

Sean Brotherson, Ph.D.
Family Science Specialist
NDSU Extension Service

Certain subjects can be difficult to approach with a teenager.

Alcohol and other drugs can be one of those tough topics. As tough as they might be to discuss, talking with teens about what alcohol and other drugs are, what they can do to you and why to stay away from using them is important. Your teen needs to know about the values in your family regarding drugs, including alcohol and tobacco. For example, you should discuss not only that you discourage using alcohol and other drugs, but more importantly, why *you* discourage such use.

Teens normally are impulsive and want to know about their world. Having honest conversations with your teen can help prevent curiosity and exploration from taking over. Caregivers can give teens the most true and accurate information about alcohol and other drugs. For example, clarify for teens that **alcohol is a drug**, and that it should be identified as such and treated carefully.

Parents and caregivers can make a difference – but only if you communicate! Most teens say the influence of a parent or caregiver is the major reason they decided not to use alcohol or another type of drug. So, what are some guidelines for having this conversation?

Tips for Talking About Alcohol and Other Drugs

You cannot have a conversation just once about this topic with your teen. Be consistent but not overbearing in communicating your feelings and standards about using alcohol and any other drugs. Consider the following tips:

- **Talk with your teen in a nonthreatening manner or environment.** Teens don't usually respond well to threats, so don't always "lay down the law" when talking about alcohol and other

drugs. However, communicate your standards clearly. Also, when you have a conversation about drugs, including alcohol, talking with your teen in a nonthreatening place, such as the car or on the way to the store, at dinner or when you pick him or her up from school, might be easier. The talk you have with your teen shouldn't end after a five-minute car ride. Keep the conversation going.

- **Continue having conversations with your teen as they get older.** As teens grow more mature, they will need more information and encouragement to avoid using alcohol and other drugs. Keeping the conversations going will make avoiding using drugs, including alcohol, easier for teens. Let them know they can talk to you about it.
- **Communicate your expectations and standards clearly and firmly.** Being firm with your teen as needed, using a clear voice and letting him or her know that you do not want alcohol or other drugs used in your home, or any other place, is OK. Communicate your family expectations.
- **Talk to your teen honestly about the consequences of using drugs, including alcohol.** Pointing out family consequences you have determined for using alcohol and other drugs, and letting your teen know they face legal consequences

as well, is important. When your teen knows what will happen, he or she can make more positive decisions. By having a caregiving plan (established consequences) already determined before an issue occurs, caregiving can be easier because your teen knows what to expect if he or she breaks family rules. Also, caregivers won't have to come up with a consequence on the spot.

- **Be a good example for your teen.** Teens learn best through example. Having your teens follow your rules about alcohol and other drugs is easier if you live by them as well. By following your family rules, *you give your words more power.* Your teen likely will have greater respect for the family and feel more connected if you are doing the same things. Remember that teens are learning the most from you and your actions. Positive actions promote positive behaviors.

Guidelines for Parents on Handling Concerns About Alcohol or Other Drugs

The following suggestions can be helpful as guidelines for parents and caregivers in handling family concerns about the use of alcohol or other drugs:

1. **Remain calm and in control of your emotions and reactions.** A person full of emotions can make negative decisions or remarks. Also, by staying calm, you are able to make your communication more productive.
2. **Sit down and talk with your teen about your concerns.** Let him or her know how you feel and discuss some guidelines for behavior.
3. **Listen to your teen for what your teen is or isn't saying** (you know your teen best – caregivers usually know whether he or she is being honest). Teens may avoid topics or deceive if they do not want to get caught using alcohol or other drugs, and you should be aware of this possibility.
4. **Talk with your teen's friends or other siblings and see if they have additional concerns.** Discuss the importance of "reporting" versus tattling, and how you want to help your teen feel loved and connected to his or her family, school and community. Explain to peers or siblings that sharing concerns is not ratting out a friend or sibling, but rather a way to help others who may be in trouble, and also to be more responsible for people they care about. This can make a positive change in your teen's life.
5. **Discuss your concerns with a school counselor.** School counselors typically have excellent resources and additional information to help parents and caregivers deal with such concerns. They usually are a phone call away and keep everything confidential, or you may just drop in at your local school to speak with the counselor and request some information.

Signs and Signals of Alcohol and Other Drug Use

Alcohol and other drug use falls into three categories:

- Drug experimentation
- Drug use
- Drug abuse

This is true for both alcohol and other types of drugs. The more you know about the topic, the more you can educate your teen about the use and abuse of both alcohol and other drugs. Many types of drugs and alcohol are being offered or promoted to your teen. Here are some common signs or signals that your teen *might* be using drugs, including alcohol:

- Sudden change in friends – hanging around other teens or groups
- Missing school, not doing homework, negative attitude about school, grades change (drop)
- Sudden excessive use of perfume or deodorant to cover up smells, such as smoke or alcohol
- Secretive conversations with friends, the use of "coded" language
- Change in clothing choices, wearing clothes that promote one drug or one type of alcohol
- Borrowing more and more money, or suddenly needing money without an explanation
- Having drug paraphernalia, such as pipes, rolling papers, lighters
- Missing items or frequently used up items that could be "huffed" or inhaled, such as hair spray
- Use of eye drops, for blood-shot eyes or dilated pupils, or wearing sunglasses in the house to cover their eyes
- New use of mouthwash or breath mints – may be used to cover the smell of alcohol or smoke
- Missing prescription drugs, especially narcotics or mood stabilizers
- Mood and attitude changes for no apparent reason

These signs *might* mean something harmful is going on in your teen's life, although you should not jump to conclusions. Share what you have observed and your concerns about alcohol or drug use.

Another potential step is to take your teen to your local medical facility for a drug screening. This can be a big and sometimes challenging step for parents or caregivers; however, if your teen is presenting several signs of using alcohol or other drugs, it also can be a life-saving step.

Knowing what is going on in your teenager's life is important. Teens still need your guidance. Caregiving doesn't end when a child turns 12. Teens need to know you love them enough to provide care for them, set limits and be there to give guidance and support, even if they make a bad decision. Teens still are learning about life, choices and consequences. They need family connection and love. When you know what is going on in your teen's life, you can get him or her the help he or she might need.

Caregiver Tips to Prevent Use of Alcohol and Other Drugs

While you may need to deal with concerns about alcohol and other drug use, taking steps to prevent such concerns also is important. Consider the following:

- **Who, What, Where, Why** – Make sure you know who your teen's friends are and the friends' parent or caregiver, as well as the friends' family members, if possible. Having phone numbers available to other friends' homes can be helpful in an emergency. The more you know about your teen, the more you can encourage him or her in making good choices. Teens are more likely to make bad choices about alcohol or other drugs when they are not supervised. Ask and pay attention to who they are with, what they are doing, where they are going and why they are doing certain things. Showing and telling teens you love them enough to care and be aware of what is happening in their lives is important.
- **Keep Your Teen Busy** – Make sure your teen has something to do after school. Trying alcohol and other drugs after school is more tempting for teens when you are at work,

shopping or busy with other tasks. Enroll teens in an after-school sport or club that keeps them busy until you get home. Boredom can lead to bad choices. Studies show many teens are likely to engage in unhealthy behavior during the after-school hours, ranging from 3 to 5:30 p.m.

- **Encourage Activities that Create a Sense of Worth** – Teach your teen a skill, support your teen in events and tell your teen you love him or her. Learning a new skill raises a teen's sense of self-worth, and helps the teen see his or her own potential. Thus, they'll be less likely to make choices that could damage their potential. This also provides them with a connection to the larger world through positive accomplishments.
- **Encourage Good Behavior** – Let your teen know how proud you are of him or her for the positive things he or she is doing in life. Take your teen out on a special date or give your teen his or her favorite treat. This will encourage more positive behavior and make your teen feel good about the choices he or she is making. Your teen will feel proud about becoming more independent if you are encouraging positive independence. *Catch your teen being good and tell him or her how that makes you feel.* When parents or caregivers are focused on positive actions, this tends to encourage additional positive behavior from teens.
- **Keep Talking with Your Teen** – Be interested in what your teen is doing, who his or her friends are, and how or what he or she is doing in school. Spending more time together will promote bonding and connection between caregivers and teens. This will allow you to get to know your teen more and promote a strong bonding relationship. At times, do things your teen enjoys doing. Walk and talk with your teen or find something the two of you can share together by yourselves. Even cooking counts. Get connected with your teen. The more you know your teen, the easier you can see signs of alcohol or drug use and monitor decision making.

- **Encourage Positive After-school or Teen Programs** – You need to talk to school staff about the importance of these programs. Some parents or caregivers can work collaboratively with their local school to set up supervised programs at the school. Often having volunteer caregivers to provide physical support can lower program costs. Some schools might be able to find funding to put together activities or special-interest clubs. Check out the 4-H programs in your area and see if having 4-H become more active after school in your area is possible. Express concerns and needs in your community and help in providing solutions.
- **Plan Ahead for Activities to Do** – Plan ahead and make a book of things to do. Every book will look different because every teen is different. The booklet should contain things or ideas your teen enjoys doing. This booklet can be paper stapled together and filled with drawings or magazine cutouts. Younger teens will enjoy this while older teens might be more reluctant. Teens of all ages need to be able to solve problems and see they have options. Planning ahead for activities to do will help prevent boredom. Ideas might be:
 - Read a book
 - Write in a journal
 - Call a friend
 - Watch a television show
 - Go for a walk
 - Play with a family pet
 - Do a responsibility (chore), cook or bake
 - Paint or draw a picture

Conclusion

If these suggestions are not working for your family, *seek additional help* through other resources. Valuable resources include your support systems, such as family, friends, neighbors and community professionals. Helpful information always is available in books, newsletters and classes, and through family counseling or therapy. Counseling can provide families with additional tools to overcome difficult times.

Helpful Phone Numbers

North Dakota Helpline

211 or (800) 472-2911

Or call your county office of the NDSU Extension Service to find phone numbers for agencies that can assist you.

* Regional Parent Resource Centers with the NDSU Extension Service also can provide phone numbers of other agencies to assist you. A local NDSU Extension agent also can provide information to you.

The mental health associations or departments in each state can provide you with resources, locations of mental health professionals, or answer your questions.

- Mental Health Association of **North Dakota**, (479) 255-3692
Web site: www.mhand.org/
- Mental Health Association of **Minnesota**, (612) 331-6840
Web site: www.mentalhealthmn.org/
- Mental Health Association of **Montana**, (406) 727-6642
Web site: www.mhamontana.org/
- Division of Mental Health **South Dakota**, (605) 773-5991
Web site: www.state.sd.us/dhs/dmh/MentalHealthResources.htm

Helpful Resources

- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1997). *Keeping youth drug-free: A guide for parents, grandparents, elders, mentors and other caregivers*. DHS Publication No. (SMA) 97-3194. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Visit the Web site at www.drugfree.org/ to find additional information on alcohol and other drug use. This is a national leader in organizations working to educate parents, reduce alcohol and other drug use with resources, and provide articles to help parents, educators and teens.

References

- Nesbitt, S. (2002). *Teens and alcohol*. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Extension Service. Retrieved Oct. 17, 2006, from www.extension.umn.edu/info-u/families/BE929.html
- Parents: The Anti-Drug (Public Health Campaign). *Laying down the rules: Tips for parents*. Retrieved Oct. 17, 2006, from www.theantidrug.com/ei/tips_for_parents.asp
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1997). *Keeping youth drug-free: A guide for parents, grandparents, elders, mentors and other caregivers*. DHS Publication No. (SMA) 97-3194. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Van Vranken, M. (2004). *Drugs: What you should know*. Retrieved Oct. 17, 2006, from www.kidshealth.org/teen/drug_alcohol/drugs/know_about_drugs.html

This newsletter may be copied for noncommercial, educational purposes in its entirety with no changes. Requests to use any portion of the document (including text, graphics or photos) should be sent to permission@ndsuet.nodak.edu. Include exactly what is requested for use and how it will be used.

For more information on this and other topics, see: www.ag.ndsu.edu