

SIGNS OF ALCOHOL OR OTHER DRUG USE

Drugfree.org is a great resource for parents. The section on signs to look for is comprehensive and is reprinted below. It is available at: <http://www.drugfree.org/think-child-using>

First Step: Ask

If you think your child may be drinking or using drugs, the first and most important thing you can do is to come right out and ask.

Research says that when parents talk openly about drugs and drinking, children have better self-control and develop more negative perceptions of these risky behaviors.

The work you put into opening the lines of communication with your child now can make all the difference for their future. <http://www.drugfree.org/think-child-using/your-first-step-ask/>

Keep in mind

Many of these signs of drug use or alcohol use – in isolation – may be just normal teen behavior. Mood swings or changes in behavior are a standard part of growing up as teens make the transition from childhood to adulthood. However, as you start to recognize more and more of these signs and symptoms in your teen, a picture of drug or alcohol use may begin to become clear.

Clue In to Behavioral Issues

The signs of substance abuse aren't all physical. Be aware of these behavioral indicators that may be a sign that your teen has been drinking or is using drugs, especially if you've noticed an abrupt change in one of these behaviors.

- Change in relationships with family members or friends. (If your teens treats you or other family with blatant disrespect, or has completely ditched certain friends, drugs could be to blame.)
- Loss of inhibitions
- Mood changes or emotional instability
- Loud, obnoxious behavior
- Laughing at nothing
- Unusually clumsy, stumbling, lack of coordination, poor balance
- Sullen, withdrawn, depressed
- Unusually tired
- Silent, uncommunicative
- Hostile, angry, uncooperative
- Deceitful or secretive

- Makes endless excuses
- Decreased motivation
(An overwhelmed teen may just “drop” a class or club, but a general lack of motivation for school, activities and friends could be a sign of substance abuse.)
- Lethargic
- Unable to speak intelligibly, slurred speech, or rapid-fire speech
(Barring hearing loss or stroke, slurred speech is usually linked to the influence of some type of drug.)
- Inability to focus
- Hyperactive
- Unusually elated
(it’s good to have a happy teen, but if your kid is bizarrely elated for no reason, it is possible he’s high off amphetamines or another drug.)
- Periods of sleeplessness or high energy, followed by long periods of “catch up” sleep

A CLOSER LOOK

Unusually Tired

Studies shows that teenagers can’t truly wind down until at least 11pm — but usually must be up by 6am for high school! In addition, most teens are too busy with homework, sports, and after-school clubs to get the 9 hours of sleep doctors recommend. So it’s no surprise teens are perpetually tired. But if your teenager seems abnormally exhausted, it could be because he has a hangover or is using cocaine, amphetamines or prescription pain relievers, all which disrupt the normal sleep pattern.

Keep an Eye Out for Health Issues

Drug and alcohol use can cause a number of effects on health, minor to major. Look for these symptoms in your teenager. If you spot some, don’t be afraid to suggest a visit to your teen’s doctor. Often a doctor can offer a medical perspective or an outside viewpoint on what’s happening to your teen.

- Frequent nosebleeds (Excessive nosebleeds could be a sign of snorted drugs, such as cocaine or meth.)
- Runny nose, not caused by allergies or a cold
- Frequent sickness
- Sores, spots around mouth
- Queasy, nauseous
- Seizures (If your child has a seizure but does not have epilepsy, you should be aware that it could have been caused by huffing inhalants.)
- Vomiting
- Wetting lips or excessive thirst (known as “cotton mouth”) (Discounting average thirst, dry mouth and excessive thirst are signs that a person is smoking marijuana or taking Ecstasy.)

- Sudden or dramatic weight loss or gain (Heroin, cocaine, meth, amphetamines and prescription stimulants are all associated with severe weight loss, due to suppression of appetite.)
- Skin abrasions/bruises
- Accidents or injuries (If your teen can't or doesn't want to tell you how she got hurt, it may be that she had an accident while drunk, high or stoned.)
- Depression
- Headaches
- Sweatiness

A CLOSER LOOK

Sores or spots around mouth

Many kids suffer from recurring cold sores, which stem from the herpes simplex virus. Although cold sores are very common, spots around your child's mouth could also indicate that she has been smoking marijuana. And if your child has open sores not only around his mouth but on his face or body, there is a chance that he is abusing meth and picking at his skin (a behavioral side effect of using meth).

If spots around the mouth are accompanied by a chemical odor, paint stains on your teen's body or clothing, or a runny nose, your teen might be using inhalants.

Take Note of Home or Car Related Signs of Substance Abuse

If you've noticed items disappearing around the house, or found some unusual objects appearing, it's a good time to have a talk with your teenager about what you've noticed, and to start looking for other signs of teenage alcohol abuse or drug use.

Mood swings and changes in behavior are often a normal part of teenage development. But in some cases, these may be potential indicators of teenage alcohol abuse or possible drug abuse. If you suspect your teen may be using alcohol or drugs, here are some tell-tale signs you can watch for:

- Disappearance of prescription or over-the-counter pills
- Missing alcohol or cigarettes
- Disappearance of money or valuables
- Unusual smell in the car or bottles, pipes, or bongs on floor or in glove box
- Appearance of unusual containers or wrappers, or seeds left on surfaces, like Frisbees, used to clean marijuana
- Appearance of unusual containers or wrappers and drug apparatus, including pipes, rolling papers, small medicine bottles, eye drops, butane lighters or makeshift smoking devices, like bongs made out of toilet paper rolls and aluminum foil
- Hidden stashes of alcohol

Have Personal Habits or Actions Changed?

Look for changes in your teenager’s behavior or personal habits that might indicate drug or alcohol use. If you notice any of the below, look for some of the other signs, or use them as a way to begin a talk with your teenager.

- Smell of smoke on breath or clothes
- Chewing gum or mints to cover up breath
- Heavy use of over-the-counter preparations to reduce eye reddening (eye drops), nasal irritation, or bad breath (breath mints or gum)
- Frequently breaks curfew
- Cash flow problems
- Reckless driving, car accidents, or unexplained dents in the car (Notice if your teen is driving more recklessly when she returns than when they left.)
- Avoiding eye contact
- Clenching teeth (Both Meth and Ecstasy cause involuntary teeth clenching.)
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- Locked bedroom doors
- Going out every night
- Secretive phone calls, texting, instant messages or emails
- “Munchies” or sudden, voracious appetite
- Sudden or increased use of air fresheners, scented candles, or incense

A CLOSER LOOK

Smell of smoke on breath or clothes

If your teen walks in after a night out and smells of smoke, don’t immediately jump to conclusions — your teen may have been hanging out with smokers but not doing it herself. If so, tell her you are worried about her choice in friends, but also commend her for not smoking. But if your teen’s breath also smells of smoke, it is almost certain she was also using.

Pay Attention to School or Work-Related Issues

Notice how your teenager is doing at school, any sudden change in how she or he is doing homework — or what you’re hearing from teachers or school administrators.

- Truancy or loss of interest in schoolwork
- Drop in grades
- Loss of interest in extracurricular activities, hobbies or sports

- Failure to fulfill responsibilities at school or work (There may be many reasons for this, but substance abuse is almost always accompanied by a decrease in motivation. Remember, asking doesn't hurt anyone.)
- Complaints from teachers or co-workers
- Reports of intoxication at school or work

A CLOSER LOOK

Truancy or loss of interest in schoolwork

As kids get older, many deem it “un-cool” to go to class or do their homework. A rebellious or attention-seeking child may cut class as a way of acting out. He also may start missing class or stop doing schoolwork because he has an undiagnosed learning disability, such as dyslexia or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), which makes him feel frustrated or dumb. But a child who is missing class frequently could be doing so in order to drink or do drugs during that time instead, and a loss of interest in school may be attributed to the lack of motivation that comes along with drug addiction.

GETTING HELP

- Drugfree.org has a wealth of online background information for parents who may need help for their child and a Parent Help Line (1-855-DRUGFREE, 10 am to 6 pm eastern time).
- Ask school counselors, other school staff or LYSB (860-434-7208) for referrals.
- Local substance abuse counselors who work with adolescents and young adults include Theresa Theriault (Old Lyme 860-434-9438) and Project Courage (Old Saybrook 860-338-9656).
- SAMHSA (Substance Abuse Mental Health Administration) provides a referral and information service, 1-800-662-HELP, 24 hrs. a day/7 days a week.