

Alcohol and Drug Abuse

Alcohol and Drugs Can Destroy a Family

While much is written and aired on TV about alcohol and drugs, most families are surprisingly unprepared to deal with problems of misuse and abuse in their families because there is a stigma attached to anyone with a drug or alcohol problem. Many parents feel that "normal" families don't have these problems, or that they have failed as parents if their child has a problem. Parents might repress their fears or deny real problems.

Parents Have a Responsibility to Understand the Potential Problems

We must be aware that tobacco and alcohol are drugs and should be taken just as seriously as marijuana, cocaine and LSD. In fact, tobacco, alcohol and marijuana are all considered "gateway" drugs; that is, a person who has experience with them is more likely to try other drugs.

Many children have had their first drink by the time they are six years old. The following statistics about high school seniors should indicate the scope of the problem and the importance of being aware:

- More than 90 percent have tried alcohol.
- 65 percent have had a drink in the past month.
- More than half of all boys and a third of all girls have some experience with alcohol by the time they are 12 years old.
- 20 percent smoke daily; 30 percent smoke sometime during the month.
- Up to 20 percent also use chewing tobacco or snuff.
- More than half have tried marijuana; about 25 percent have used it recently.
- Cocaine and crack use is a major problem; more than 13 percent of adolescents have tried cocaine and 4 percent have used crack. It is very accessible.

Reasons Kids Turn to Alcohol and Drugs

Many parents are surprised to learn that attitudes about drinking start at home and play a large part in children's later attitudes about drugs.

Sometimes a child gets his first taste of alcohol from well-intentioned parents who mistakenly believe that the "awful" and unfamiliar taste will discourage their children from wanting alcohol. Unfortunately, that first taste can make the child feel warm and rather good.

If children see their parents drinking to unwind after a hard day, after an argument, or as an essential part of a social get-together, those early impressions about alcohol may be reinforced.

For teenagers, the reasons are more complex than just a warm feeling. Adolescents want desperately to be accepted by their friends and are likely to imitate the behavior of their peers, including drinking and taking drugs, to gain acceptance.



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Kids with low self-esteem are especially susceptible. They often use alcohol and drugs to feel more comfortable around others. They can alleviate shyness and relieve nervousness. Unfortunately, the loosening of inhibitions can lead to other potentially harmful outcomes:

- Problems at school.
- Drinking and driving.
- Unplanned sexual activity and consequent pregnancy or sexually transmitted disease.
- Emotional trauma over guilty feelings.
- Criminal activity, often to support their habit.
- Physical problems, including alcohol poisoning.
- Death.

Contrary to what most adolescents think, instead of making them more energetic, alcohol can actually lead to:

- Sadness and depression.
- Suicide attempts.

Know How to Tell When Use Becomes Misuse or Abuse

Do yourself and your children a favor by knowing the warning signs of drug and alcohol use and abuse. The best indicator is your own instinct. If things don't seem to add up, they probably don't.

If there is a recent change in any aspect of your child's life, such as school, relationships with friends or relatives, physical performance, overall health, or sleeping or eating patterns, you should probe further.

Teens sometimes need help but just feel like they can't talk to you. They may leave physical evidence, such as empty bottles under the bed or matches or drug paraphernalia in the open, because they subconsciously want a reaction from you.

Other warning signs include:

- Sudden drop in school grades.
- Unusual neglect of personal hygiene.
- Frequent mood swings.
- A sudden change of friends.
- Lots of talk about partying.
- Your over-the-counter medications, alcohol or prescription drugs are missing.
- Truancy from school or frequent late nights out.
- Lack of interest in previously important activities.

Experimentation—sometimes be detected but usually won't cause any observable changes in function.

Misuse—occurs when alcohol and drugs are sought to deal with problems, to get along with others or to have a good time. You will begin to notice changes at home or school.

Abuse—means alcohol and drugs are being used frequently and compulsively, despite harmful consequences.

Addiction—means alcohol and drugs have become the central focus of life. Addicted people may get involved in inappropriate activity, such as crime, promiscuity and truancy. They experience physical and emotional withdrawal symptoms when they are not using alcohol or drugs.

Prevention and Early Intervention Are Best for Your Children

Experts give parents this advice:

- Set a good example at home, starting early.
- Try to build self-esteem in your children by encouraging expression of feelings and open communication, and by unconditional love.
- Set firm but kind limits.
- Be consistent with communication and discipline.
- Encourage independent thinking.
- Support and encourage involvement in outside activities and interests.
- Make it your business to be aware of the dangers of alcohol and drugs.
- Problems will sometimes arise no matter what a parent does. But you can cope:
- Even if you start after the fact, make rules—and the consequences of breaking them—clear.
- Follow through on threats of disciplinary action.
- Be firm but kind; this is terrible for your child, too, but you are working to keep him safe.
- Inquire about and monitor behavior.
- Seek professional help.
- Don't cover for a child who breaks the law.

You Can Count on Bradley

Bradley Hospital's main concern is for the emotional well-being of children and their families.

Professional staff members can evaluate or treat all types of disorders, including alcohol and drug use and abuse and concurrent emotional disorders. The whole family is encouraged to participate in all phases of treatment.

There are many community service options, as well. Bradley will act as a liaison with them on your behalf if they are appropriate for your family's needs.

If you feel overwhelmed by a problem, call us anytime. Bradley experts can do a confidential and thorough evaluation to help you get advice and answers to your questions. We are dedicated to healing the hearts and minds of children and their families.

Call Bradley anytime: 401-434-3400, ext. 364.