

teenagers & drugs

Many parents of teenagers worry from time to time about their teenagers taking illegal drugs, how they can tell, and what to do about it.

We live in a drug-taking society. In fact the most harm and the greatest risk to young people comes from using legal drugs such as alcohol, cigarettes and medicines. Young people want to experiment with new things and test limits, so it is not surprising that many of them try illegal drugs. Not all will go on using drugs regularly.

How will I know if my teenager is taking drugs?

There is no easy way to tell. The effect of the drug might have worn off before you see your teenager or the effect of the drug may not be something that is easy to see. Even when there is a major change in behaviour, it could be caused by something else, such as illness.

Parents know their own children well and so you will notice any sudden changes in behaviour such as:

- silence and sulking
- anger towards others
- changes in mood
- more than usual lack of cooperation and rudeness
- drop in school work or truancy
- change of friends — sudden change to a new group of friends
- change in physical appearance.



Don't jump to conclusions! There are many reasons other than drugs that might be the cause of these changes. It is a good idea to react to the situation in the same way you would to anything that made you feel worried about your teenager's wellbeing.

Bringing up the subject

- **Try to find out by communication, not detection!**
Detection won't give you the answers. Drugs in your teenager's room could belong to someone else. Don't go on searches for drugs; the cost of loss of trust will be greater than the benefit of anything you might find out.
- **Make it easy for your teenager to talk to you.**
Try talking about someone else you know so that your teenager sees that you are open to listen. You might say, "I was talking to a friend about her daughter smoking pot. She was very worried. What do you think about it?" (Sometimes teenagers test out their parents by talking about a friend when they really mean themselves; be careful how you respond!)
- **Find out about drugs for yourself.**
The Queensland Health Alcohol and Drug Information Service (24 hours) has fact sheets on all of the common drugs. Telephone (07) 3236 2414 or 1800 177 833
- **Say something that opens up the subject in an easy way** such as, "I have noticed that you haven't been yourself lately. Can you tell me how you have been feeling?" Most young people will let you know what is happening if you ask at the right time, if they are not afraid of punishment, and if they see you as a caring friend.

If you suspect or find out your teenager is taking drugs

Give yourself time to calm down! Think through what is happening. Strong reactions due to fear are common but they don't help. A big argument might back you both into a corner and harm your relationship with your teenager.

- Wait until your teenager sleeps it off and talk the next day.



- Give your teenager a chance to tell you what happened.
- Try to separate the behaviour from the person. You may not approve but you still need to show your love and care.
- You have the right to tell your teenager your values and what you will allow in your house. If they won't give up the drug you still have the right to say that they are not to use it at home. Some parents tell their teenagers to give it up or they will have to leave home. If you say this, it is important that teenagers are not pushed into more risky living situations.
- Find out what kinds of drugs are being used and how they are being used. The best way to find out is to ask your teenager. Using drugs is not the same as being addicted to drugs. Using drugs for a short time will not always lead to addiction.
- Punishment hardly ever prevents drug use.
- Discuss the fact that your trust has been broken. Ask them what they think should happen and how you can trust them again.
- If teenagers have to go to court, let them see that it is their responsibility. Give moral support but let them deal with the consequences of their choice, including paying fines and keeping appointments.
- It is important that your teenager is aware of what is likely to happen if they use drugs, such as the effect on:
 - family relationships
 - their education
 - future chances of getting work.

Some tips on good parenting

- Start before your children are teenagers and plan interesting activities that include your children.
- As your children enter the teen years think about what you can do to make their lives interesting.

Services for parents and children

- Parentline (8am to 10pm 7 days/week) **1300 301 300**
- Kids Help Line (24 hr) **1800 551 800**
- Community Child Health Service (24 hr) **3862 2333**
Outside Brisbane **1800 177 279**
- Child Care Information Service **3224 4225**
Outside Brisbane **1800 637 711**
- Women's Infolink **1800 177 577**
- *dvconnect* womensline (24 hours) **1800 811 811**
Domestic violence counselling and refuge placements
- *dvconnect* mensline (10am to 6pm) **1800 600 636**
Counselling, support and information

Your local library has a range of excellent books on parenting.

- If your weekends offer some activities, your teenagers are more likely to think of weekends as interesting.
- Support their interests. If young people are not going to school, if they are bored, unemployed and without hobbies and interests they are more vulnerable to drug use.
- If teenagers are involved in more than one group of young people, they have more resources to fall back on if one of the groups is using drugs. Support their friendships with different groups.
- Support your children's healthy self-esteem. Tell them and show them you care and value them.
- Keep the communication open and listen to their ideas and opinions.
- Provide them with opportunities to make choices and give approval for responsible choices.
- Reward responsible behaviour.
- Talk with your teenager about how responsibilities come with rights.
- Discuss a 'what if' plan with your teenager and together develop strategies for dealing with a range of difficult situations including getting home safely.

Peer group issues

- Peer group pressure is often overstated and most young people make a decision to take drugs without being forced or tricked. In fact they may choose their peer group because of the group's activities including drugs.
- Young people need to hear good reasons to change their peer group. The best you can do may be to encourage them not to lose touch with old friends. If you feel your teenager is heavily involved in drugs and you are powerless to change the situation, it is important to talk to someone skilled in the area. Please refer to the contact numbers shown below.

Look in your local White Pages for your Queensland Health Community Child Health Service and for information about their parent education courses (Positive Parenting Program - Triple P)

Adapted from information contained in the Parent Easy Guide Series © Parenting SA, Government of South Australia 2000.

Published by the Department of Communities. For reorders phone 3224 4225 if in the Brisbane metropolitan area or 1800 637 711 if outside the metropolitan area.

Tip sheets are also available from the Department of Communities website at www.communities.qld.gov.au



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