

How Can I Tell if My Child is Using Drugs or Alcohol?

In the early stages of drug and alcohol use it is difficult to separate typical adolescent behavior from chemically induced behavior. Some children may not show obvious symptoms even in more advanced stages, and the parent may only sense something is wrong.

Most children, however, will exhibit many of the following signs, which can develop over a period of a few months or years. If you observe any of the following, or just know something is not right, we recommend that you take action.

Signs of Early Use

- Seems to be changing.
- Becomes more secretive: declines who, what and where questions; is generally evasive about his activities.
- May frequently ask to stay overnight at friend's houses.
- Spends less time at home and/or increasing amount of time isolated from family.
- Gradually loses interest in church, sports, family activities, etc.
- Becomes less responsible about chores, curfew, homework, etc. OR becomes super conscientious to avoid suspicion.
- Grades may drop.
- May dress differently.
- Changes friends.

Signs of Habitual Use and Dependency

Check the symptoms you see in your child. Look for "clusters" in one or more category.

School

- Skips classes, whole days or drops out.
- Complains that teachers are unfair and are picking on him.
- Hostile toward school authorities: may openly challenge authority.
- Tardiness, suspensions, demerits.
- Drug-related graffiti on notebooks, papers.
- Requests schedule changes, easier classes.

Legal

- Traffic violations, DWIs, accidents.
- Improper use of vehicles.
- Shoplifting.
- Run-ins with police.

Behavior

- Steals money or items easily converted into cash.
- Sells personal belongings.
- Has money but no job.
- Gets fired from jobs.
- Doesn't come home after school.
- Sneaks out of house at night, runs away.
- Spends time in attic, crawl space, garage, storage areas.
- Demands more privacy, wants a lock on his bedroom door.
- Change in sleeping habits; naps or "zonks out" at unusual times.
- Extreme mood swings: euphoria, depression, hostility, oversensitivity.
- Overreacts to mild criticisms or requests.
- Talks about suicide, spirit world, devil.
- May neglect personal hygiene.
- Poor memory, judgment and reasoning.
- Does seemingly senseless things.
- Increased illnesses, menstrual irregularities, cough, bronchitis, chest pains.
- May be promiscuous, intimate in public.
- Involved in prostitution, pregnancy.
- Secretive about phone calls, callers hang up or refuse to identify themselves.
- Attempts to grow marijuana.
- Denies ownership of drugs when confronted.
- Misses meals but snacks on junk food.
- Changes in speech and vocabulary; mumbles.
- Lies a lot.
- Seems to be losing values, morals, sense of decency.
- Challenges family values, standards, morals.
- Verbal/physical abuse or threats to family or others.
- Very difficult or impossible to live with; argumentative; grouchy.
- Selfish and inconsiderate.
- Interest in pornography, drug magazines.

Physical evidence

- Displays obvious drunkenness or red eyes, drooping lids, "thick" voice.
- Secret pockets in clothing, torn linings.
- Wears sunglasses and uses Visine.
- Odor of alcohol or marijuana (like burnt rope) in room or on clothing.
- Uses incense, room deodorizers, exhaust fans.
- Burns candles, opens windows.
- Paraphernalia among belongings, examples: pipes, "bongs", "roach clips", cigarette papers, cigars, "stash cans", glass vials, film containers, beer or liquor bottles, small plastic bottles, plastic baggies, foil, screens, needles, syringes, spoons, glass tubes, high quality lighters, eyedroppers, pills, cold pills, capsules, cough medicines, printed blotter paper, small gelatin squares, eye drops, glue tubes, aerosol cans, solvent containers, seeds, powder or crushed brown leaves, pacifiers, mouth guards, vapor rubs, surgical face masks. (Hiding places: room, car, attic, storage areas, underside of drawers, under mattress, inside stereo speakers, light switches, clocks, etc.)

Family Impact

- Parents argue more and more about child's behavior.
- Siblings fear child and spend more time away from home or in room.
- Relationship between all family members is deteriorating.

Obviously, many of these behaviors could develop apart from drug use, but if you have checked at least five of the above, we recommend that you seek help and support.

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