

Intervening when your teen is using drugs

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YOUR SON OR DAUGHTER IS USING alcohol or other drugs, and you're worried. Perhaps you've tried to change their behaviour and feel frustrated and hopeless when you are unsuccessful. You may be afraid that they might be dependent on using alcohol or other drugs, and you're wondering if they will ever shake off this dependence.

The good news is that your teen has a big advantage in learning to live without abusing substances. They have a concerned parent, and the second part of the good news is that you as a parent can do a lot to help your teen move toward the decision to stop.

You've probably been focused on your teen for a long time, and it's easy to lose perspective when you're feeling so anxious about someone else. Start by giving yourself a reality check.

First, recognize that you did not cause your teenager to start using drugs. Whatever stress people are under, we all choose different ways of coping. Using drugs is a way of coping with the pressures of being a teenager, pressures everyone has no matter how their parents behave.

Second, realize that your teen's drug use does not mean that they are weak. We all make mistakes; some are unlucky enough to make mistakes that have long-term consequences. At the same time, we have a responsibility to ourselves and those who care about us to do our best to reverse our errors. You can help your teen decide to take on that responsibility, but you cannot take it on for them.

Third, you may want to evaluate how serious your teen's use is. Alberta Health Services (AHS) can help you find a counsellor in your community who can help you. You can also consult two of our parent brochures, "Helping teens evaluate their drug use" and "How bad is my teen's drinking or drug use?" This will help you decide how serious the need for intervention is.

Finally, recognize that you can't force your teen to stop. That would be a superhuman job. Yet, though you do not have control of your teen, you do have influence. You can have influence by focusing on what you can control.

Allow yourself to do what you can

What you can control is your behaviour, the amount of knowledge and understanding you have about the problem and, to some extent, the environment—that is, the external circumstances that you, your teen and everyone who cares about your teen find themselves in. You change a teen's environment, for example, when you set rules and consequences, or change the way you respond to your son or daughter.

Take care of yourself

Surprisingly, you can do the most good by taking care of yourself, and by making sure you are putting energy into your relationships with friends and other family members. For more ideas, see the parent brochure "Does your teen's drug use leave you feeling like you're losing your sanity?"

Learn

The more you know about addiction, the more you can help yourself and your teen. Speak to an AHS addiction counsellor to get insight into addiction and find out more about how to help someone else who is addicted.

Change your focus

Those who love addicted people don't cause the problem, but they often help it to continue. This is called "enabling," and it is a way of helping the user to deny reality either by reacting or by protecting.

Reacting involves getting angry or feeling like a victim when your teen misbehaves again. If you yell, nag or complain, the teen can just decide that you are the problem, not their drug use.

They can also deny that use is a problem if you protect them from the consequences of their use, for example by making excuses for their behaviour, writing excuse notes when they are late for school or absent, paying fines, and bailing them out when they are arrested.

People who enable usually do it from love, not because they want the behaviour to continue. Help yourself to stop enabling by asking this question whenever you are doing anything that concerns your addicted teen: "Is what I'm doing enabling the problem to continue?"

Working with your teen

1. Learn to respond to your teen's behaviour without reacting emotionally. The activity sheet included in this brochure will help you to practise doing this.
2. Tell your teen that you are concerned, using "I" statements ("When you come home drunk, I feel..." or "When I know you have been using drugs, I worry that you..."). Avoid repeating the dangers of drugs or alcohol: this is nagging and falls into the "reacting" category of enabling. Above all, do what you can to keep communication open between you and your teen.
3. Record experiences you have that are related to your teen's drug use. These must be first-hand experiences, not what you hear from others or what you guess might have happened. Record how you feel after each experience. Be as detailed as possible: date, place, time, etc. You may even use a tape recorder or a camera. This record will help you get a good sense of how much your teen's use is affecting you. It also acts as backup material that allows you to give your teen a sense of what their use causes them to do, and allows you to have a ready, neutral answer when your teen claims that you are exaggerating or making up an incident.
4. Maintain your own integrity. This means that you will not spy on your teen: no listening in on phone calls, reading private notes, urine tests, bedroom searches, smelling breath, etc. Only when there is risk of suicide is

such behaviour justifiable. You want to take note of how the teen's use affects you; "catching them at it" is not your primary goal. If it is, they may hate you for it. And again, you will be the problem, not their drug use.

5. Establish clear rules and consequences, and stick to them (truly an extension of maintaining integrity).
6. Wait until you are calm and your teen is straight for any discussions. If you are angry, tell your son or daughter how you feel and set a time to talk: "I'm angry at you right now, and I need to take some time to calm down. We will talk about this in the morning."
7. Remember to ask yourself, before making any response, "Is what I'm doing enabling the problem to continue?"
8. Your teen is likely to resist your efforts to change your behaviour and to change the consequences of their behaviour. To avoid falling back into enabling behaviour, you may need the help of others: a counsellor, a member of the clergy, a support group, or others in the group of friends, family, and teachers and other professionals who care about your teen. Don't be shy to draw on the wisdom of others when you feel like you're backed into a corner.

A formal intervention

You may wish to talk to a counsellor about an intervention, a specific technique that will help you to get a teen to face the dangerous consequences of their behaviour. In a caring, loving atmosphere, those who are affected by the teen's behaviour meet with the teen and tell the teen the consequences of their drug use.

Counsellors trained in this technique will ask you to gather a group of people who care about the teen. The counsellor helps the group to improve communication skills, to understand the goals of the intervention, and to make a commitment to enforce consequences of further drug use. The group rehearses the meeting with the teen, and makes arrangements for treatment in advance, so that if the teen agrees to get help, it is available immediately.

For most teens, at least two sessions are necessary before they will agree to get help.

For more information

We understand that everyone's needs are different. Whether you want to prevent your child from using alcohol, tobacco or other drugs, or you want to help your child deal with a drug problem, we can help. Information and prevention programs, group and family counselling, outpatient and residential treatment, and the Protection of Children Abusing Drugs program are offered by Alberta Health Services and its funded services to help your child and your family.

For more information and to find an addiction services office near you, please call the 24-hour Helpline at 1-866-332-2322.

Activity Page

Writer, counsellor and lecturer Tom Alibrandi suggests five neutral responses that can help you to stop enabling: "Yes," "No," "Oh, really?" "Wow," and "Whatever." This activity sheet is designed to give you a chance to practise using neutral responses.

Part 1 gives an example of a conversation you might have with your teen, giving the teen's side only. After each sentence your teen might say, there's an example of an "enabling" way of responding, and an explanation of why this might be enabling. For part 1, you are asked to fill in one of the five neutral responses that you could have given. For part 2, fill in the neutral response. The enabling response and the explanation are left blank for you to fill in if you choose.

Part 1

What your teen says:

"Can you give me a note for some classes I missed yesterday?"

Normally I would be tempted to:

Demand an explanation.

"Why did you miss classes? Were you drinking again? How can I ever trust you?"

Why this might be an enabling move: I make myself look like a victim. My kid isn't interested in what's happening to me. He cares about what's happening to him. So he makes me into the problem.

Neutral answer: _____
_____.

What your teen says:

"But it's my last chance. I'm going to get suspended."

Normally I would be tempted to:

Give in. I don't want him to be suspended.

Why this might be an enabling move: I'm protecting him from consequences.

Neutral answer: _____
_____.

What your teen says:

"If I get suspended, I'm not going back to school. I'll just be a bum and live off you."

Normally I would be tempted to:

Get angry. Tell him how I had to support myself through school. Tell him how lucky he is that we've worked so hard to give him everything, and now he's just throwing it away.

Why this might be an enabling move:

Again, I'm the problem. I'm nagging him. I got angry.

Neutral answer: _____

Part 2

What your teen says:

"Can I go to Joanne's party?"

Normally I would be tempted to:

_____ (optional)

Why this might be an enabling move:

_____ (optional)

Neutral answer: _____

What your teen says:

"Everyone's going except me. If I can't ever go to parties, I won't have any friends."

Normally I would be tempted to:

_____ (optional)

Why this might be an enabling move:

_____ (optional)

Neutral answer: _____

What your teen says:

"You're ruining my life. I'm going to run away from home, and then you'll be sorry."

Normally I would be tempted to:

_____ (optional)

Why this might be an enabling move:

_____ (optional)

Neutral answer: _____

Part 3

This time, write out a typical conversation with your teen, or an actual one where you did react by protecting, getting angry, or complaining. Practise using the five neutral responses. If you memorize these responses, you will find it easier to avoid enabling responses. Don't expect perfection, don't be too hard on yourself, and don't make your teen the enemy. Remember, it took both of you to develop the enabling habit, and you've both been practising it for a long time. It will take time to "unlearn" it.