

# Chemical Use in Adolescents; What Others See:

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As parents, helping our adolescents navigate through the chemical world can be very challenging. Synthetic drugs keep emerging, marijuana potency has gone up drastically since the 1970's, and methamphetamine/Heroin rates are rising again. Yet, our focus should be on alcohol, tobacco/E-cigs and prescription drugs which are the most abused at this age. Education and involvement is the key in helping our children make healthy choices.

First, parents need to be aware that these drugs are available to their teenagers. Most of these drugs can be in your child's hands within hours and certainly within a few days. If your child wants to use; they can! Teenagers typically know who is using. A simple chat or text will easily provide them with a dealer.

Secondly, as a place to start we should be acknowledging that our teens are under a lot of stress and are confused about what is acceptable. The majority of our teens identify that they start using chemicals to relieve stress and feel better about themselves. Often times they don't have the healthy coping skills to relieve the stress in their life. They want a fast fix to cope with the stress and that is what drugs do. Much of the teen's confusion begins with the legalization of marijuana and various products marketed toward teens. With the legalization of these products, they see it as a more acceptable option to use. E-cigarette juice even has flavors catered to teens. We have seen an increase of pot smokers among our teens over the last few years, as they do not believe it is as addictive and harmful as previously believed. Marijuana dependency is the number one drug that our teens seek treatment for during their high school years. It quickly becomes a coping mechanism which keeps the teen in a destructive cycle rather than maturing with practiced lifestyle skills.

Adults that are invested in helping our adolescents make healthy choices and keeping our community safe should be more active. They should report underage parties and drug dealers by providers names that are supplying the drugs and the place of use. This can be done in a confidential manner. Parents want to know if their child is using, and authorities need assistance in finding the suppliers.

What are some signs and symptoms of chemical use?

- The best indicator is your teen's friends. If their friends are making unhealthy choices the odds are that your teen is too. Healthy friends quickly pull away leaving the teen surrounded by others that are making the same unhealthy choices.
- At School: absenteeism (certain hrs. partial days, full days) suspension, chronic tardiness
- Emotional signs: depression, withdrawal/avoidance, defensiveness
- Physical signs: smell of drugs on breath or clothes, weight loss/overall deteriorating appearance, sudden mood swings, sneakiness/lying, glassy/blood shot eyes, fighting, drowsiness/hyperactivity

Parents have a vital role in helping their child navigate the teen years. As a parent, don't underestimate your importance. As teenagers, there is a natural independence that is occurring as family becomes less important and their friends become more important. As parents, we may have a tendency to become less involved in our teens life during this period. However, this is a time where parents need to be involved! A teenager's frontal cortex is still developing with impulse control, leading to their inability at times to make the right choice in the moment. Our teens need firm boundaries and need to be told often what is expected and not tolerated when it comes to chemical use. The silent parent is often perceived by their child as giving permission. An actively engaged parent is effective in helping them develop healthy lifelong coping skills instead of turning to drugs.