**TAKING DRUGS**

*Some teenagers use drugs to help them feel relaxed and confident, or for a mind-altering experience. Many drugs are illegal, highly addictive and expensive. This can result in teenagers having contact with police and the courts. Drug use can have a serious impact on health, relationships, job opportunities and other adult activity. This tip sheet gives you some suggestions to help you deal with pressures your teenager may experience to use illegal drugs.*

**TEENAGERS AND DRUG USE**

Marijuana is often one of the first illegal drugs that teenagers try, especially if they already smoke tobacco. One in ten teenagers aged 13 to 17 years report using marijuana. Smoking marijuana increases the risk that teenagers will go on to try harder drugs.

Amphetamines and party drugs like ecstasy are used less frequently with approximately one in twenty-five 14 year olds having tried them. However, their use appears to be increasing.

**WHY DO TEENAGERS TAKE DRUGS?**

Drug use can increase the excitement of another activity, such as dancing or listening to music. It may provide a temporary distraction from boredom, or an unhappy lifestyle.

**HOW TO PREVENT YOUR TEENAGER TAKING DRUGS**

* **Education your teenager about the risks**

Obtain educational material from health centres, schools and your family doctor. Provide your teenager with the most accurate information you can.

Here are four good reasons for not taking drugs:

* The health risks associated with drug taking depend on what substances are being used, and in what combination, for example with alcohol. Also, some drugs can be laced with additives that increase the health risks. Drug use can also have a negative impact on school performance. It may increase the risk of sexual activity, violence and suicide. Some drug use is also known to increase the risk of serious mental disorders such as schizophrenia and depression
* Many drugs are expensive. Teenagers can easily be fooled into paying large amounts of money for what is not what they expect. Teenagers who take drugs regularly often need to obtain money to buy their drugs. This can lead to borrowing money or stealing and can seriously damage relationships with family and friends.
* Many drugs are addictive. Once addicted, teenagers may find it very difficult to stop using a drug. Being addicted means giving up some of the freedom that is so important to teenagers
* Taking drugs can bring teenagers into contact with the police and the courts. Teenagers can also get involved in other illegal activities while under the influence of drugs. This can include stealing cars, vandalising property, breaking into shops or houses, assaulting others, or engaging in other violent activity such as rape. A criminal record can have a major negative impact on a teenagers future job prospects
* **Praise and attend to behaviour you like**

Parental approval is important to most teenagers. Take every opportunity to praise and give attention to behaviours you approve of whenever you can. This is especially important as parents often spend less time with teenagers than with young children.

* **Encourage involvement in supervised activities**

Look for possible activities that your teenager can get involved with that provide a challenge and offer excitement.

* **Set rules at home**

Make a time to sit down with your teenager and make it clear that illegal drugs are not to be brought into the home.

* **Help your teenager develop a plan to resist peer pressure**

Your teenager may report they are often pressured by peers to take drugs. They may be worried that they will lose their friends if they do not join in. They will need to have a plan about what to say that allows them to avoid the pressure to take drugs but does not result in them being rejected or bullied by their friends.

* **Help your teenager rehearse their plan to resist peer pressure**

Once your teenager has decided what to say when they are asked to take drugs, get them to practice with you. Pick a time when there is no one else around and you are not likely to be disturbed. Ask your teenager to describe a situation that is likely to occur in the near future, or a situation that has happened recently. Get them to describe the place, the time and the person/s involved so you have a clear picture. Then follow these steps:

* First, you play the role of the friend who is going to try and persuade your teenager to use drugs
* Encourage your teenager to pactise saying to you what they have decided to say when their friends try to get them to use drugs
* Make it as realistic as possible – do not just sit and talk about how to do it. Your teenager needs to practice in a situation that is similar to the real thing

**HOW TO TELL IF YOUR TEENAGER IS USING DRUGS**

* **Look out for warning signs**

It is important to monitor your teenagers behaviour to pick up any early signs that they might be trying drugs. If you begin to see a number of these signs together, this is a warning that your teenager might be taking drugs

* Sudden happiness or irritability
* Odd language, or slurred speech
* Staying in their room for long periods
* Secretive behaviour, including phone calls, meetings and places they go
* Always needing money without saying what for
* Taking money from house, shop lifting or stealing
* Has money but no job
* Lying about where they have been, what they have been doing and who they have been with
* Little interest in anyone else but themselves
* Sudden drop in school grades or marks
* Little interest in homework
* Difficulty concentrating
* Poor short term memory
* Vague about time, where they have been, what they have been doing and who they have been with
* Missing class or truanting from school
* Being rude, defiant or resentful at school and/or at home
* Odd sleeping or eating habits
* Lowered resistance to colds and coughs
* Changing friends with no interest in old friends

**WHAT TO DO IF YOU SUSPECT OR KNOW YOUR TEENAGER IS USING DRUGS**

A plan like the one described above will only help if your teenager is still only taking drugs occasionally. Your teenager may also need some extra motivation to stop their drug use especially if they are already becoming addicted.

Encourage your teenager to tell you if they are using any drugs. Promise your teenager that you will not over react if they say that they are. Try and stay calm. If you have difficulty staying calm, explain this to your teenager and suggest you talk again when you have had time to calm down.

Remember, it is better that you know if your teenager is using drugs. Then maybe you can do something to help them stop.

Ask what they find enjoyable about taking any drugs they might be using. If you can, find out where and with whom they are doing it, and where they are getting the money to pay for the drugs.

If you suspect or know that your teenager is using drugs, discuss with them the four reasons for not taking drugs described in the earlier section on prevention. Point out the likely consequences of taking drugs. Check to see if they agree with them or not. If your teenager agrees some or all of these are good reasons for not using drugs, suggest that you help them to stop. Your teenager may say they want to stop using drugs but they are finding it difficult to follow through with their behaviour.

* **Set up a behaviour contract**

Setting up a behaviour contract can help your teenager stop or reduce their drug use. Follow these steps:

* ***Step 1*** – Work out a way of monitoring their drug use. Do this with your teenager if possible, but without them if you have to. It may be difficult to do this directly. If your teenage will not reliably tell you when they use drugs, look for a related behaviour to monitor instead. Pick behaviours that are likely to occur if they are using drugs. For example, consider the list of warning signs described in the earlier section on prevention. You may decide to monitor irritability, missing meals, poor memory or lying. The idea is to use a behaviour contract to reduce these behaviours by rewarding the opposite behaviours. If the rewards and privileges are important to your teenager, they will probably have to reduce their drug use in order to behave differently. Be careful to pick behaviours that will be very difficult to improve if your teenager keeps up their drug use. This will be different for each teenager
* ***Step 2*** – Decide on a reward or privilege that your teenager will earn if they improve the behaviour you have selected. It is very important to select rewards and privileges that you have control over and which are important to your teenager. The contract will not work if your teenager can get access to what they want without you or if it is not something they really want
* ***Step 3*** – Decide what changes in your teenager’s behaviour will earn what reward or privilege. Aim for improvement at first. If you expect your teenager to improve too fast the contract may fail. Work out what would be an improvement on the current situation and aim for that at first. For example, if one of the behaviours you want to improve is sitting at the table and eating regular meals, how often is this happening now? If it isn’t happening at all, aim for your teenager to join you for meals say, 2 or perhaps 3 times during the week. Provide the reward as soon as your teenager meets this goal. Then increase the goal to perhaps 4 or 5 times during the week. By gradually increasing the goal you should be able to bring about major change over several weeks
* ***Step 4*** – You will probably need to review and revise your contract, as you may not get it right at first. Where possible, involve your teenager in any review of the contract. The contract must be flexible so that it works when changes to the daily routine occur. However, your teenager needs to learn that the only way they get the reward or privilege is if their behaviour improves. Do not allow credit, or give the reward in advance. Your teenager gets the reward only after it has been earned

See *Positive Parenting* booklet for more details on how to select rewards and privileges and work out a behaviour contract.

* **Discuss how to prevent and deal with relapse**

If you teenager is able to stop or reduce their drug use, praise them and tell them how well they have done. The next challenge is to prevent them from starting to use drugs again. Many people who stop taking drugs, think they can have just one joint or pill and it will not make them start again. This is a very dangerous belief. Most people who do this find they are soon using as much as they were before they stopped. Your teenager may want to test themselves to prove they have really given up. However, this is not a good idea as the temptation may be too great for them to resist.

To prevent your teenager starting again, use the following strategy:

* Discuss with your teenager the high risk times or situations when the temptation to use drugs might be stronger than usual. This might be during school holidays when there is not much to do. Or it may be at parties, or at friends’ homes when parents are out. Use the routine for dealing with risky behaviour to work out a plan. Knowing what to do when in a high risk situation will help your teenager follow through with their decision not to take drugs. Some teenagers may have to avoid certain friends and situations to be sure of not using again. Use your behaviour contract to reward them for keeping to their plan. You may even wish to consider a consequence for not following the plan and starting to take drugs again
* If your teenager does give in to temptation again, do not become angry or give up. Treat it as a setback that can be dealt with. Go back to the behaviour contract and look at the rewards or privileges you are using. Perhaps they are not powerful enough. Or perhaps they have lost their appeal and some new ones are needed. Also, go back to your routine for dealing with risky behaviour and see if you can improve the part of the plan that did not work

Giving up drug use can be difficult, especially if your teenager has started to become addicted. Provide as much support and encouragement as you can. But do not feel that you have failed if your plan is not successful. You may need to try again at another time. Or you may decide to seek professional advice.

* **Talk to teachers at school**

If your teenager is using drugs at school, talk to the Director of Learning.

**WHAT TO DO IF YOUR TEENAGER IS REGULARLY USING DRUGS AND DOES NOT WANT TO STOP**

Decide what you will do to try and get your teenager to stop using drugs or cut down to a reduced level of drug use. How successful you are will depend upon several factors. These include:

* Your relationship with your teenager
* How supportive other family members are
* Whether you still have control of rewards and privileges your teenager wants
* Whether you are prepared to follow through with the decisions you make

If your teenager does not accept that there are good reasons for not using drugs you may need to look for a stronger way to get your message across. Here are some suggestions:

* Get your teenager to calculate the cost of buying drugs over a year. Explain how much they will need to earn to support this habit, and what they could buy with the money if they stopped
* Show them newspaper cuttings about drug related incidents where teenagers have suffered, such as having an accident or having to go to court or jail
* Find someone who has tried to give up drug use, such as a relative or friend, and ask them to explain to your teenager how helpless it feels to be controlled by the craving they experience

**POINTS TO REMEMBER**

If you have tried setting up a behaviour contract to help your teenager stop or reduce their drug use but it did not work, you may need to seek professional assistance. If your teenager is already addicted to drugs, seek professional advice.

**KEY STEPS**

* Educate your teenager about the risks
* Praise and attend to behaviour you like
* Encourage involvement in supervised activities
* Set rules at home
* Help your teenager develop a plan to resist peer pressure
* Help your teenager rehearse their plan to resist peer pressure
* Hold a follow-up review session
* Look out for warning signs
* Set up a behaviour contract
* Discuss how to prevent and deal with relapse
* Talk to teachers at school