



### **The Teen Years: Substance Abuse**

There is a strong relationship between teen alcohol use and aggressive or delinquent behavior. Teens who use alcohol are more likely to try or to become users of illicit drugs than other teens. Alcohol abuse and substance abuse are implicated in the leading causes of death among teens and young adults. The risk of death increases if the teenager has access to guns or other weapons. Alcohol use and drug use are also strong predictors of aggressive or violent behavior in dating relationships.

Given the alarming information about the relationship between alcohol or substance abuse and future problems, one would think that youth would get a clear message about its use and its dangers. However, many parents may minimize alcohol or substance abuse issues in their children because they drink alcohol or use drugs themselves, or did so during their teen years. New information suggests several problems with this way of thinking about teen drug use. *First*, today's drugs are more potent and addictive than drugs of 20 years ago. *Second*, the adolescent and young adult brain is more vulnerable to addiction than researchers previously thought. *Third*, researchers have found strong evidence of links between substance abuse and memory loss, mental illness, psychiatric conditions, or learning disabilities.

Many teens credit their parents as a major influence in choosing not to smoke or use alcohol or drugs. Here are some simple ways to minimize the risk of substance abuse in your teens:

- *Help with homework.*
- *Eat dinner together three or more times a week.*
- *Be clear and consistent about your family's values and rules.*
- *Set an example by being honest.*
- *Engage in healthy family activities.*

Strong parenting can play an important role in discouraging teens' risky behavior, but parents alone cannot prevent teens from trying or becoming addicted to alcohol or illicit drugs. Addiction can occur in any household, happy or unhappy, and at any socioeconomic level. If you suspect that your child is abusing alcohol or drugs, it is important that you seek immediate help from a counselor specializing in substance abuse issues. Current medical practice and research supports the view that addiction is a disease and that, as with other chronic diseases such as diabetes, it requires prompt and appropriate medical attention.

*The information contained in this summary is taken from the Teen Years chapter of the Violence Prevention Resource Guide for Parents by Peggy Patten and Anne S. Robertson (Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, 2001).*

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