

The *Real* Reasons Teens Use Drugs



There is no single reason why teens use alcohol or other drugs, and it doesn't always look like what you might expect. Teens can be getting good grades, have plenty of friends, and still be using substances. As parents, it's important to understand potential reasons for teenage drug use. The more we know about what's going on with our teens, the more likely it is that we'll be able to help keep them on track.

Teens may try drugs because:

1 Drugs are everywhere — Teenagers see lots of people using drugs all the time - both in real life and in the media. They likely see you and other adults drinking coffee and alcohol, perhaps smoking cigarettes and marijuana, and sometimes using other substances as well. Many of us take over-the-counter drugs like Advil or medications prescribed by a doctor. Sometimes young people urge one another to use drugs, but it's more common that a teen will start using a substance because it's readily available and they see people around them, including their friends, enjoying it.

What to do: Get to know your teen's environment. Who are their friends? Where do they hang out? How do their favorite forms of media portray drug use? Use their real life circumstances to have timely and relevant conversations about drugs. And don't forget that your own relationship with substances impacts your teen. If you need help managing your own drug use, please don't hesitate to get it.

2 Social anxiety — Many teens feel anxious in social situations. Using alcohol and other drugs can be a way to bond with a group of other kids, and be a shortcut to developing an identity for teens who aren't sure where they fit in. Substances can also release inhibitions and help teens get over shyness.

What to do: Talk to your teen to see if they're struggling with social anxiety, shyness and/or low self-esteem. Counselors, youth groups and after-school activities can help your teen develop social skills and confidence so they'll be less likely to rely on alcohol or other drugs. If they have severe anxiety, consider consulting with a counselor and/or physician.

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3 Curiosity — Exploring different physical and mental sensations is a natural part of human development, and adolescence is a time of enhanced experimentation. Teenagers are trying out all kinds of different experiences and identities— for some, this includes trying substances.

What to do: “Be concrete and proactive about managing your teen’s experimentation,” says developmental psychologist Diana Divecha, Ph.D. Experimenting with different activities is normal for teens, but try to guide them towards healthy ones. Help them find less risky ways to experience stimulating mental and physical sensations (e.g., nature, sports, arts, music, activism), and keep checking in to make sure that sporadic experimentation with substances is not developing into frequent or serious use.

4 Fun — Drugs and alcohol work quickly and can make you feel good in the short-term. People sometimes use drugs to enhance other types of fun, like music festivals and dance parties.

What to do: Explain the importance of delay. Yes, drugs can be fun, but using them at a young age can have very serious long-term consequences. “Teens’ brains are still developing,” says Dr. Divecha, “and early drug use puts them at risk for later struggles with addiction.” It’s better to wait as long as possible to explore substances, so help your teen brainstorm less risky, legal alternatives for fun. Since some teens will experiment, though, make sure they understand the concept of using substances in moderation. For example, alternating alcoholic drinks with water or another non-alcoholic beverages is a good way to reduce the risk of alcohol poisoning.

5 Sensory issues — Some teens are extra sensitive to their environment: common sounds, touches, or smells may be overwhelming or even painful. Teens who experience this sensitivity may use drugs to cope with the emotional intensity of their daily lives. Other teens may be relatively unresponsive to their surroundings. They may have trouble tolerating being alone, experience frequent feelings of boredom, and crave excitement. These teens may use drugs because they need strong stimulation to feel calm.

What to do: Consider having your teen evaluated for sensory issues by a professional. Help them come up with other strategies and coping skills to manage feelings and soothe themselves.

6 Self-medication — Teens can be under a lot of stress, whether from family situations, struggles with schoolwork, or problems with peers. It can be hard for teens to regulate emotions such as sadness, anger, fear, guilt or shame. When they have the opportunity to take something that will momentarily ease their emotional pain, they may choose to do so. Our society’s stigma against mental illness, or even regular sadness, may make it seem easier to take drugs rather than confide in someone about their feelings.

What to do: Talk to your teen about how they’re feeling, and consider bringing your teen to talk to a counselor to get some professional support.

7 Rebellion — Using alcohol, cigarettes and other drugs can be ways for teens to assert their independence.

What to do: According to Dr. Divecha, the best approach when it comes to talking about drugs is an “authoritative-parenting style that sets expectations while offering guidance and warmth.” Emphasize that you care about your teen’s wellbeing and want to help them stay safe. Work with your teen (perhaps with the help of a counselor) to come up with other ways for them to develop their burgeoning identity.

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8 Lack of honest education about drugs — Teens are regularly given incomplete and false information about drugs. For example, they may be told by adults that using any illegal drug will inevitably lead to addiction. Yet they may know successful people who occasionally use illegal drugs without problems. The gap between what they're told and what they experience may cause teens to disregard any information about risk. On the other hand, teens may get the message from their friends and/or the media that certain drugs— like marijuana—are totally “safe.” That may also lead them to disregard risks.

What to do: Give teens accurate and balanced information about drugs, and let them know they can come to you with any questions or concerns.

For more tips about how to talk to teens, read

- 8 Tips for Talking to Your Teen about Alcohol and Other Drugs - [LINK]
- Safety First: A Reality-Based Approach to Teens and Drugs - <http://www.drugpolicy.org/resource/safety-first-reality-based-approach-teens-and-drugs>

This tip sheet was reviewed by developmental psychologist Diana Divecha, Ph.D.. Read her thoughts on authoritative parenting at <http://www.developmentalscience.com/blog/2015/6/28/the-only-parenting-model-you-need>.