

A Brief Practical Guide for Parents

First a plea to those who read this section.

DO NOT avoid learning about how to help young people in need by saying it is unlikely to happen to me / my children / somebody I know. Society has almost reached the stage of normalising drug taking behaviour in young adults and therefore certainly ALL teenagers, however sheltered, will be exposed to drug taking in its various forms. Some will succumb to more than just experimentation and unfortunately become addicted.

The following is a very brief guide on how to identify and assess problems and what you might do to help. There are no ready made solutions for what can appear overwhelming problems but neither should helping individuals with drug and alcohol problems be left completely to the realm of specialists. We all should be able to learn some simple Do's and Don'ts and then to put them into practice. Some of the principles outlined below are merely common sense and should underpin all our dealings with young people.

DO look out for the signs of continued drug misuse:-

- sudden and persisting changes of mood
- unusual irritability or aggression
- loss of appetite
- loss of interest in hobbies / sports / work or friends
- increased evidence of telling lies or furtive behaviour
- unexplained loss of money or belongings from the home
- unusual bouts of drowsiness / sleeping

DO check the facts.

DON'T jump to conclusions.

DO take your time to assess the situation.

DO stay calm when the truth comes out.

DO TALK however reluctant you may be or difficult the situation.

Parents are the most important influence in a child's' life. They do hear what you say and notice what you do. But they also care a lot about what their friends and peer group think and that is the great dilemma for young people.

Above all, DO LISTEN.

Your child needs you to try and understand how things look from their point of view. You won't necessarily agree and it may be difficult to discuss certain subjects but try to talk about their BIG issues not yours. Drugs and alcohol will certainly be one and may be their real concern as well as yours.

DO take a young person seriously.

DO take time to get to know their views, feelings and friends, but give them space.

DON'T bully, lecture, preach or scare your children about drugs.
This will not work.

DO let them know your feelings about drugs. Your child is more likely to respect them if given in a sensitive and straightforward manner.

DO set an example with regard to alcohol and tobacco especially.

DO get them to think how they can refuse drugs or get help / advice.

DO work with them and not against them.

Try to instil a sense of personal responsibility when help or support is required. For example drugs and alcohol services however well intentioned can not be forced on anyone. In other words DON'T do everything in trying to help someone but rather try to help them to help themselves.

If a "big problem" emerges DON'T panic, stay calm.

DO find out the facts about the drug taking and the type of drug(s) in question. Get information from any / all sources. See end of article for starting places for information. DON'T be devious or break confidence as your relationship with the young person may be the most important factor in preventing deterioration and aiding recovery.

DON'T assume complete abstinence from drug taking has to be the first or only goal. Dealing with addiction may take some time. Small steps in the right direction are more likely and achievable for a drug misuser than the huge gains that are often expected immediately by friends and family.

DO encourage these small steps and

DO praise achievements however slight these might be initially.

DO show real tolerance to continuing difficult and challenging behaviour. Surely we have a wonderful example in the Lord Jesus. Our foundations may be shaken but a testing of our faith can bring rewards in the long run. No one who has personal experience of drug misuse will readily dismiss the rich blessings of an "ordinary" life and ever forget to be thankful for the love that is shown to us by God through his Son.

We should never forsake a drug misuser by saying that there is no hope of a change. But occasionally we have to withdraw to a safe distance if there is real danger to ourselves or it is deemed to be in the best interests of that person. Take advice. Unfortunately those who misuse drugs have to go all the way down into the gutter before they can pick themselves up again. Remember the prodigal son!

DON'T EVER take on drug dealers / pushers. Leave this to the Drug Squad.

DO take advice from the professionals i.e. Drug Agencies, Addiction Units, Counselling Services (and yes, this might / should include The Care Group). There are many sources of help, some statutory, some voluntary; KEEP asking especially if you are unsure what to do next or where to go for help. (See end of article for typical agencies available).

DON'T EVER let pride or denial prevent or delay help being accessed.

DO take heart that not all young people who experience drug taking become the stereotypical "TV drug-addict" on a destructive, downward spiral.

Finally DO pray. Positive outcomes are not in the hands of just those that care for, support and treat drug misusers. The saying may be familiar but it is definitely true.... At times it may be hard to pray but that is when we should pray the hardest.

And as somebody who sees the increasing misery that drug taking brings to so many young lives then I remind readers that it makes me pray for the kingdom to come when there shall be no more suffering and pain.

Jonathan Adams

Jonathan is a GP specialising in drug and alcohol addiction in a City Centre Practice.

Where to get help:-

National:-

The National Drugs Helpline Tel. 0800 77 66 00 (24hrs, every day)

Gives FREE advice about drugs, including advice on how to talk to your children about drugs, confidential counselling or information on any aspect of drug taking. It can tell you about local services in your area and how to be referred onto specialist services such as clinics and rehabilitation programmes.

Adfam National

Tel. 0171 928 8900 (10-5pm ,Mon-Fri)

The national helpline for friends and families of drug users. Provides confidential support and information to anyone who is worried about someone close to them using drugs.

Health Education Authority

Trevelyan House, 30 Great Peter Street, London, SW1P 2HW

Produces a range of excellent publications for use by anyone concerned with their own drug problems or someone else's. Examples:-

A Parent's Guide To Drugs and Alcohol Many parents and carers worry about their children becoming involved with drugs and alcohol but feel they don't know enough about the subject to talk to their children. This booklet provides basic facts about the range of illegal drugs; guidance on talking about drugs with their children; advice and sources of help for those worried that their children might be using drugs.

Advice about Alcohol for Young People / Parents A discussion guide and information booklet.

Drinking and Me (Teacher's Guide) 8 lesson guide for teachers designed to encourage young people to make appropriate choices about their drinking and behaviour. Key stage 2 and 3. Also useful for youth club workers.

Drugs: The Facts Talking to 11-14 year olds about drugs can be difficult, but this leaflet gets the message across in a clear accessible way that young people will understand.

The Score:Facts about drugs Designed for young people aged between 14-16, this leaflet has been carefully targeted to reach this notoriously hard-to-please age range!

D-Mag A magazine which provides information about drugs for 16-25 year olds

The Care Group has a limited supply of these publications.

Local places to seek help

Depending on the area you live in there will be a specialised addiction clinic (run usually by health agencies), a detoxification / rehabilitation unit (which may be run by health, social and voluntary services in partnership), counselling services, voluntary drug agencies, self help groups such as alcoholics anonymous or narcotics anonymous. Some will be specifically geared for young people perhaps. Your local GP may have some experience in dealing with drug misuse and its associated problems. Ask and look for local addresses and telephone numbers. Remember to give the Care Group consideration. Above all don't give up if one agency doesn't seem to suit. Try another and as circumstances change don't be afraid to go back.

Jonathan Adams