

A Brief Practical Guide for Parents – The DOs and DON'Ts of dealing with a teenager (or anyone) addicted to drugs or alcohol

First a plea to those who read this:-

DON'T avoid learning about how to help or find help for young people in need by thinking it is unlikely to happen to me / my children / somebody I know. Society has reached the stage of normalising drug taking behaviour in young adults and therefore certainly ALL teenagers, however sheltered, will be exposed at some time to excessive alcohol and drug taking in its various forms. Some will succumb to more than just an occasional binge drink or experimentation with a drug and unfortunately will become addicted. Don't panic if this appears to be the case.

The following is a 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 an overwhelming problem at first..... but neither should helping individuals with drug and alcohol problems be left completely to the realm of specialists. We all can 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.

So firstly DO look out for the signs of continued drug or alcohol 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 and sometimes time.

DON'T bully, lecture, or scare your children about drugs. This is highly unlikely to be effective.

DO let them know your feelings about drugs. Your child is more likely to respect them if these are 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 when tempted.

DO work with them and not against them.

Try to instil a sense of personal responsibility when help or support is required. In other words drugs and alcohol services even those specifically designed for young people can not be forced onto anyone.

DON'T do everything in trying to help someone but rather try to help them to help themselves. However well intentioned a carer might be they might find that smothering a young person with help can be counterproductive and then frustration can easily creep in.

DON'T panic if a "big problem" or "serious issue" crops up, try to stay calm.

DO find out the facts about the drug taking and the type of drug(s) in question. Get information from several sources. But try to seek out reliable ones as there can be a fair amount of rubbish/myths/blind alleys on the internet in particular. See the end of this article for some starting places for information.

DON'T be devious or break confidence (unless there are serious health or safety concerns) as your relationship with the young person may be an important factor in preventing deterioration and aiding recovery.

DON'T assume the complete abstinence from drugs or alcohol has to be the first or only goal. Dealing with addiction will take time.....some times a long time. Small steps in the right direction are more often accepted and achievable for those addicted to drugs or alcohol than the huge gains that are often assumed to be the only way forward by family members.

DO encourage these small steps however small and then....

DO praise achievements however slight these might be initially.

DO show real tolerance to continuing difficult and challenging behaviour. Be aware that recovery is a journey that can be long and arduous and sometimes there are setbacks and lack of progress. Addiction is a long term condition for many. There will be remissions and relapses on the road to eventual recovery. We as carers whether professional or family and friends have to remember this at all times.

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 forget to be thankful for the love that is shown to us by God through his Son. The story of the prodigal son of course is always worth bringing to mind which ever side of that divide we are on.

DON'T forsake a drug or alcohol abuser by saying that there is no hope of a change. However though we do have to occasionally 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.

DO take advice on your next steps. Don't try to deal with complex issues on your own or in isolation. Unfortunately those who misuse drugs have to go all the way down into the gutter before they can pick themselves up again. This may be a time for us to withdraw and wait for change at a safe distance

DON'T EVER take on drug dealers / pushers. Leave this to the police and drug squad.

DO try to work with and take advice from the professionals i.e. Drug Agencies, Addiction Units, Counselling Services (and yes, this should include The Care Group). There are many sources of help, some statutory, some voluntary; some private. All will have the addict's recovery as their goal. Also these agencies are not obliged to share confidential information with you. This is ok but you can keep asking especially if you are unsure why a service has recommended a course of action. With the client's permission a lot can be shared with you and then if you want you can be part of that recovery journey.

DO seek help from agencies that are specifically setup to help families who have an addict in their midst. Much comfort and support can be gained and often families see this support as the most beneficial because of the mutual understanding and shared experiences. (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 have brief experiences of drug taking or alcohol excess become the stereotypical TV "drug-addict" or "alcoholic" 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 and alcohol abusers. 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.

Jonathan Adams

Jonathan is a GP specialising in drug and alcohol addiction.

Where to get help (the following is a brief list only):-

Drugline Tel. 0808 1 606 606 + website

Drugline is an independent drugs crisis, information and support charity that provides free and confidential information and support for people with drugs and alcohol related issues, their families and friends.

Addaction Tel. 020 7251 5860 + website

Provides information, advice and support services to help individuals and communities to manage the effects of drug and alcohol misuse.

Adfam National Tel. 020 7928 8898 + website

The national helpline and support for families affected by drugs and alcohol.

Turning Point Tel: 020 7702 2300 + website

Provides services for people with complex needs, including those affected by drug and alcohol misuse, and mental health problems.

Talk to Frank Tel. 0800 776 600 + website

Email, telephone support and web based information for young people, parents and carers concerned about drugs.

NHS Choices website

Simple advice and signposting into treatment options for those with addiction problems. Advice and help for carers as well

Local services

Depending on the area in which you live there will be local specialised addiction clinic and / or alcohol services (run either by the NHS or other voluntary sector agencies). These may include detoxification and rehabilitation units, substitute prescribing services and full counselling services. Some will be young person friendly. All will encourage a move to recovery.

Self help groups such as alcoholics anonymous or narcotics anonymous will have meetings close by. Your local GP will see many patients with alcohol problems and may have some experience in dealing with drug misuse and its associated problems. Ask and look out for local addresses and telephone numbers of all the agencies. The internet can be a great starting point.

Remember to give the Care Group consideration.....and seek advice if you are considering using the private sector.

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.