Teen drug abuse: 14 mistakes parents make

Substance abuse among young people is a much bigger problem than many parents realize. How big? One in 10 kids 12 to 17 years of age are current users of illicit drugs, according to a 2009 government survey.

The good news? Parents can also do a lot more than some realize to help protect teens from drugs or alcohol. One key is avoiding simple mistakes, like these 14 cited by addiction specialist Dr. Joseph Lee, a spokesman for the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and medical director the Hazelden Center for Youth and Family, an addiction treatment facility in Minneapolis.

1. Failing to set expectations
Teens who know their parents disapprove of drug use are less likely to use - and vice versa. Dr. Lee says it's best to let your kids know how you feel about drugs before they hit their teenage years.

2. Ignoring mental health issues
More than two-thirds of young substance abusers suffer from mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, ADHD, and eating disorders. As a rule, substance abuse and mental health issues come together in young people. If your child undergoes an evaluation for drug abuse, make sure it includes a thorough mental health screening.

3. Assuming experimentation is no big deal
Experimentation doesn’t necessarily lead to addiction, and some parents figure that there's nothing especially worrisome about a child trying drugs or alcohol. In fact, even dabbling in substance abuse can cause big problems, such as car accidents, sexual assault, and serious overdoses. It's not a normal rite of passage.

4. Being dishonest about your drug use
Parents often feel uncomfortable discussing with their children their own experiences with drugs or alcohol. There's certainly no reason to wax nostalgic about the "glory days," but Dr. Lee recommends being honest if kids ask. "I am not aware of research indicating that an informed discussion with kids about your drug use leads to them to use drugs," he says.

5. Blaming yourself (or your spouse)
There's no such thing as a perfect parent, and there's no use in shouldering all the blame (or blaming your spouse) if a child has a drug or alcohol problem. Feeling guilty isn't just unpleasant, it can complicate substance abuse treatment - by dividing the family just when it's important to pull together as a team.

Don't ignore the past, Dr. Lee says, but keep your eyes on the present. If your child is involved in therapy, there will be ample time to make things right.

6. Setting a bad example
Think teens simply don't pay much attention to their parents? Research suggests otherwise. Model the kind of behavior you want from your teen.

7. Being judgmental
Being firm is one thing, but “laying down the law” in a moralistic way can close off lines of communication. Try not to be judgmental or to jump to conclusions. Do all you can to make your child feel comfortable about coming to you for help, if it's needed.
Failing to consider risk factors
Just as obesity is a risk factor for diabetes, smoking is a risk factor for teen substance abuse. Other substance abuse risk factors include early aggressive or disruptive behaviors, depression, ADHD, and anxiety. If your child has any risk factors, get help.

9. Confusing intelligence with maturity
Just because a child is smart doesn't mean he/she is mature enough to have good judgment about drugs and alcohol. The brain region responsible for judgment - the prefrontal cortex - doesn't fully mature until a person is in his/her mid-20s.

10. Not locking the medicine cabinet
Prescription drug abuse is a huge problem in the U.S. The CDC says one in five teens experiments with prescription drugs at some point, and most teens obtain the drugs not from drug dealers or the Internet but from friends and family.

Be sure to keep track of all drugs in your home. If you no longer need pills, get rid of them. And pay attention to other substances around the house that have the potential for abuse, including solvents, aerosols, etc.

11. Failing to consider family history
Like many diseases, addiction can run in families. If it runs heavily in yours, it might be a good idea to adopt a strict no-drinking policy in your home. For some families, it might be okay to let a teen have a sip of wine on a holiday occasion when others are drinking - but not all.

There are no hard and fast rules for what is acceptable for all families, Dr. Lee says. And a teen can develop a substance abuse problem even in the absence of any family history of addiction.

12. Not noticing changes in your teen
Changes in sleep, mood, friends, activity level, academic performance, weight, personal hygiene, etc. can all signal a substance abuse problem. So pay attention. Monitor your child's welfare with particular care at times of transition - moving to a new school, onset of puberty, breakups with boyfriends or girlfriends, etc.

13. Putting off getting help
Two million children between the ages of 12 and 17 need treatment for a substance abuse problem, according to a recent survey. But only about 150,000 get the help they need. If you think your teen may have a problem, have him/her assessed by a child psychiatrist, pediatrician, or another expert. Remember, prevention and early intervention are key.

14. Not talking about driving
The top three causes of teen death in the U.S. are accidents, homicides, and suicides. Each of these problems is linked to substance abuse. Make sure your teen knows about the dangers of driving under the influence - and pay attention to his/her whereabouts.