



UNDERSTANDING DRUGS A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

Drug abuse can occur in any family.

The prospect of a son or daughter becoming involved in drug abuse is frightening. It is important for parents to be informed about drugs and to be vigilant, without being over-anxious.

Young people are exposed to a variety of drugs today. They must be able to handle this exposure. Parents need to be aware of influences on young people and to develop an understanding of adolescence. For some, adolescence is a time of questioning established values, pushing at boundaries and experimenting with the forbidden.

This often means coming in contact with drugs.

Why do young people use drugs?

Numerous reasons are given, including:

- Curiosity
- Influence of friends
- To feel grown-up
- To establish independence
- As an expression of rebellion
- The desire for pleasure
- To escape from reality

Experimenting with drugs

During adolescence, young people are particularly influenced by the behaviour and values of their friends. Belonging to a group is an important part of the young person's social development.

Parents can help young people to cope with the demands of peer involvement, by encouraging the development of their individuality and personal strengths, so that they will be able to resist the pressure to misuse alcohol or other drugs without losing face. This means teaching young people to make "safe" decisions regarding drug use and equipping them with the skills they need to handle situations in which drugs are offered.

Experimentation with drugs does not necessarily mean that the young person will go on to become a regular user. However, the following risks must be considered.

Risks and dangers of drug misuse.

1. Accidents or injury

Accident or injury may occur while under the influence of drug. Some substances depress or stop breathing. Accidental overdose can lead to unconsciousness or death. Even a small quantity of some drugs, including alcohol, may affect co-ordination, and impair the ability to think clearly and make "safe" decisions.

2. Effects on the brain

Even a small quantity of some drugs can cause mental and emotional disturbance. With regular use, psychological development and school performance may be impaired.

3. Relationships

Relationships with family and friends often suffer as a result of involvement with drugs.

4. Dependence/Addiction

Dependence/Addiction refers to the state where a person feels that they must continue to take a drug and are unable to cope without it.

Some drugs cause a physical dependence requiring a "weaning-off period". (Withdrawal symptoms may occur if the drug is unavailable).

When particular drugs are taken regularly, a person may develop tolerance to them, so that a larger dose must be taken to achieve the same effect.

5. Contamination

If drugs are diluted with other substances there may be severe or unpredictable reactions.

6. Infections

Unclean needles can cause blood poisoning, abscesses, and infections like Hepatitis B and HIV (the virus which causes AIDS).

7. Illegality

Illegal drugs carry the risk of involvement with the law, possibly resulting in a criminal record.

8. Financial considerations

Drug misuse can be very costly and this in turn may lead to financial problems, debts and crime.

How do you recognise drug taking?

It is often difficult to tell if someone is taking drugs just by observing them. While the following symptoms may indicate use, they may also occur as a result of someone being off-form.

Possible indications:

- Abnormally sleepy or drowsy
- Sudden mood changes
- Lack of concentration, memory loss, black-outs, hallucinations

- Lack of interest in school, work, old friends and hobbies
- Keeping unusually late hours
- Secrecy about activities and whereabouts
- Telling lies or stealing
- New and strange friends
- Unusual smells, stains or marks on body and/or clothes
- Unusual powders, capsules, tablets, syringes, needles, or scorched tin-foil

Remember, because of the nature of adolescence, many of these signs may well be part of the process of growing-up. Therefore, it would be unwise to jump to the conclusion that this behaviour is due to drug taking without considering alternative causes.

Who becomes dependent?

While many young people who experiment do not go on to develop a serious problem, those who lack love, confidence, security and self-esteem, or those who are depressed or unhappy are more vulnerable. Alcohol and drugs may temporarily make them feel happier or appear to solve their problems. Repeated drug use may lead to dependence. Those with a family history of alcohol or drug-related problems are particularly at risk.

How long does it take for dependence to develop?

This depends on a number of factors such as the individual's personality, the type and strength of drug used, and the frequency of use.

It is important therefore to identify those at risk and to provide them with the help they need at the earliest possible stage.

What can parents do if they feel there is a problem?

The first step is to find out the extent of the problem. i.e. is it a once off experiment or is it regular use. If there is cause for concern, parents should try to discuss the matter with the young person in a calm and reasonable way. It is important not to accuse if you have no definite proof. Offer to listen and discuss – do not cut each other off.

At this stage, it may be helpful to speak to a counsellor who will help you to deal with the situation.

Effects of drug misuse on the family

It is common for the person using drugs or alcohol to deny the existence or the seriousness of the problem. The family too may become involved in a process of denial, hoping that the problem will go away. Sometimes, facing up to a drug problem means having to recognise other family problems, which may be contributing to the situation, for example, unhappy family relationships, or alcohol-related problems.

If there is a problem

Parents may need help to deal with confusing emotions such as love, hurt, disappointment and guilt which they experience on discovering a problem. In many cases the drug misuser tends to become the centre of family attention, thus dictating family feelings and behaviour. This may lead to a very unhealthy and unstable family situation.

The way in which parents respond has a major influence on whether drug-taking will stop or continue.

If possible:

- Remain in charge as parents
- Do not allow yourselves to be manipulated by the drug misuser
- Have reasonable and consistent rules for behaviour in the family home

- Look after your own emotional needs and those of your other children

Intoxication

If the young person is intoxicated, find out what was taken, how much and by what route, e.g. smoking, inhaling, injecting. Leave further discussion until the young person is fully alert. If you are worried, contact your local G.P. or hospital or call the Drug Treatment Centre. (Phone 01 6771122)

In an emergency

If someone overdoses and you find them drowsy or unconscious:

- Never leave them alone, but comfort and reassure them
- Turn them on their side to prevent inhalation of vomit.
- Ring for a doctor or ambulance
- Collect any powder, tablets or anything used in taking the drug so that they can be examined by the doctor.

Preventing drug misuse

- Parents play a powerful role in preventing drug misuse by providing:
 - Love and affection as the young person grows
 - Consistent and fair discipline
 - Open channels for the expression of feelings and thoughts
 - Opportunities for positive experiences at home and in school
 - A stable family atmosphere
 - Tolerance of the young person's mistakes
- Appropriate responsible role models in the use of, and attitude towards alcohol and other drugs
- Accurate information about the problems of growing up today, e.g. sexuality, drugs, crime and other subjects about which children may be ignorant or fearful.

Help young people to explore alternatives to drugs by encouraging the development of talents and hobbies. Spend time with them and show an interest in their world.

Be there to listen, support, advise and encourage.

Other resources

If you need help with a drug problem or are in any way concerned, there are several places to turn to: e.g. your family doctor, pharmacist, community addiction counsellor, health board, garda síochána, clergy, teachers, social workers or probation officers.

Drug Treatment Centre Board
Trinity Court, 30-31 Pearse Street,
Dublin 2. Tel: (01) 6771122

Health Promotion Unit
Department of Health and Children
Hawkins House, Dublin 2
Tel: (01) 6354000

Crosscare
The Catholic Social Service Conference Drug Awareness Programme
The Red House, Clonliffe College,
Dublin 3. Tel: (01) 8360011

The Talbot Centre
29 Upper Buckingham Street, Dublin 1.
Tel: (01) 8363434

Narcotics Anonymous
4/5 Eustace Street, Dublin 2
Tel: (01) 8300944 Ext: 486

Coolmine Therapeutic Community
Coolmeim House
19 Lord Edward Street, Dublin 2.
Tel: (01) 6793765/6794822

Garda Drug Squad
Dublin Castle, Dublin 2
Tel: Dublin (01)6669900
Cork (021) 522602 ext. 3162
Limerick (061) 414222

Mater Dei Counselling Centre
Clonliffe Road, Dublin 3
Tel: (01) 8371892

Community Awareness of Drugs (CAD)
31/31A Central Hotel Chambers,
Dublin 2
Tel: (01) 6792681

STIMULANTS

EFFECTS OF USE:

Produce an increase in physical and mental activity. They include mild stimulants such as caffeine, the highly addictive nicotine and serious stimulants such as cocaine and amphetamines. Weight reducing drugs are also part of this group.

EFFECTS OF ABUSE:

Physical and mental hyperactivity. Feelings of confidence and superiority. Effects depend on user's mood and amount taken.

RISKS:

Anxiety, panic attacks, depression, fatigue, dependence and overdose. Users of strong stimulants may become violent and aggressive. Smoking of stimulants, e.g. crack, often places an additional strain on the heart and blood vessels leading to sudden death.

SEDATIVES

EFFECTS OF USE:

Reduce feelings of anxiety and tension e.g. alcohol, sleeping tablets, tranquillisers, anti-depressants. A person on prescribed medication should consult their doctor before altering their dose.

EFFECTS OF ABUSE:

Drowsiness. Slurred speech, staggering, lack of co-ordination.

RISKS:

Overdose with risk of death, particularly if combined with alcohol. Dependence may occur with regular use.

HALLUCINOGENS

EFFECTS OF USE:

May distort reality and cause hallucinations, e.g. L.S.D., inhalants/solvents, magic mushrooms. N.B. Even one experiment with solvents may be fatal.

EFFECTS OF ABUSE:

Hallucinations, paranoia, confusion of time and distance, disturbance of reality.

RISKS:

Personality change, psychosis, memory loss, accidental injury, death.

OPIATES

EFFECTS OF USE:

Pain relieving drugs derived from the opium poppy. They include heroin, opium, morphine, codine, as well as synthetic opiates such as methadone. Of value in the medical treatment of severe pain.

EFFECTS OF ABUSE:

Drowsiness, slowing down of mental and physical activity, detachment from reality.

RISKS:

Physical and psychological dependence. Physical debilitation due to neglect of health. Infection from using and sharing unclean needles, e.g. Hepatitis B, HIV/AIDS. Risk of overdose and death.

CANNABIS

Derived from the cannabis sativa plant, has both sedative and hallucinogenic properties. Its effects depend on the strength of the drug, as well as the mood and personality of the user and the frequency of use. Cannabis is usually smoked in home-rolled cigarettes or pipes.

It comes in three forms:

1. Marijuana (grass) – the leaves and fruiting tops of the plant
2. Hashish (hash) – resin extracted from the plant
3. Hashish Oil – a further concentrated extract.

The active ingredient in cannabis is THC (tetrahydrocannabinol). "Skunk" is a highly potent form of marijuana containing up to 27% THC. It can take up to one month to eliminate all traces of THC from the body because it remains in fatty tissue for so long.

EFFECTS OF USE:

Intoxication, impaired judgement and concentration, high risk of accidents, fatigue, mood swings, loss of interest in school or work, impairment of memory and learning ability.

RISKS:

- Risk of mental disturbance increased in those with a tendency to mental illness or when "skunk" type drug used.
- Increased risk of bronchial illness and cancers.
- Adverse effect on male and female reproductive systems.
- Maternal cannabis use during pregnancy may affect foetus.
- Physical and psychological dependence with continual use.

ECSTACY

Ecstasy is an illegally produced drug which has properties of both amphetamines and hallucinogens. It is used to obtain a "Hug Drug" effect and for the energy to dance at "Rave" type parties. A tablet ('doves') costs between £8 and £10.

RISKS:

The effects of ecstasy are unpredictable and may result in both psychological and physical problems.

Psychological problems include anxiety, panic attacks, mental confusion, psychosis and particularly depression.

Physical problems include Heatstroke leading to blood clotting, muscle breakdown, coma and death. Excessive water intake (more than 1 pint per hour) can result in coma and death from water poisoning. Ecstasy also affects the heart, liver and kidneys, key brain cells linked to depression and memory can be permanently damaged.

Dependence may occur with regular use.