

## Maryland School Mental Health Alliance\*

### *Substance Abuse in Children and Adolescents Information for Parents and Caregivers*

In 2005, the National Institute on Drug Abuse found that approximately 21% of all 8<sup>th</sup> graders, 38% of all 10<sup>th</sup> graders, and 50% of all twelfth graders have tried an illegal drug (drug use may be higher among kids who have dropped out of school). Fortunately, there are excellent resources for parents who want to prevent their kids from using drugs, and for those who believe their children are abusing drugs and alcohol and need help.

#### **Why do we care?**

Drugs and alcohol contribute to a host of problems for our children, including:

- Poor academic performance;
- Memory and learning problems;
- Truancy and absenteeism;
- Problems with family and peer relationships, and a lack of empathy for others;
- A tendency to engage in other risky activities, and to feel invulnerable;
- An increased risk for moving on to more dangerous drugs, and developing dependency or addiction

While all children are at risk of using drugs and alcohol, the following risk factors significantly increase the chance that a child will develop a serious alcohol or drug problem:

- Having a family history of substance abuse, dependency, or addiction;
- Depression or low self-esteem;
- Social isolation; inability to fit in to the mainstream;

#### **What can we do about it?**

Research has documented that family involvement and classroom-based prevention programs are the most effective means of addressing substance abuse among youth.

- **Watch for signs of abuse:**
  - Moodiness; irritability;
  - Argumentative, disruptive, rule-breaking behavior
  - Sudden mood or personality changes;
  - Low self esteem or depression;
  - Poor judgment; irresponsible behavior
  - Social withdrawal; pulling away from family
  - Change in former activities or friends; general lack of interest
- **Make your home a positive place to be:** If your child perceives home as a safe, positive, welcoming place, she or he will be less likely to try to escape - physically and emotionally -- to do drugs with friends.
- **Spend time with your children.** Show them how much you love them and are concerned about their safety and well being;
- **Educate your children about drugs and alcohol.** Try to give them information that is appropriate for their age and level of development. Younger children can be told that drugs and alcohol can hurt their bodies, while older children can benefit from information about specific drugs and their effects.
- **Think about the structure and discipline you provide:** Make sure that it is appropriate to your child's age and development, and that you consistently reinforce the behavior you expect.

- **Let your child know—directly and firmly—that you disapprove of drug and alcohol use;** remember that you are your child’s most important role model. Do not smoke, drink to excess, or use drugs yourself;
- **Try to listen** carefully to your children, and stress the importance of open, honest communication. Kids whose parents talk to them regularly about the dangers of drugs are much less likely to use drugs than kids whose parents don’t have these conversations;
- **Help your child recognize his or her own feelings,** by sharing your feelings (“I feel lonely”), and by commenting on how your child *appears* to be feeling; remember that children who can express their feelings are more likely to receive support from others, and are less likely to turn to drugs or alcohol to try to get rid of bad feelings
- **Take care of yourself.** It is difficult to help your child if you are becoming overwhelmed. Keeping yourself healthy will also allow you to present as a healthy role model for your child.
- **Be aware of your child’s friends,** as kids are most likely to use drugs and alcohol with friends (at parties, in cars, etc.).
- **Encourage your child’s positive interests;** such activities as sports, exercise, art, community service, and part-time employment provide positive alternatives to using drugs, and help your child feel good about him or herself;
- **Remember that parental monitoring and supervision are critical** for drug abuse prevention. Try to be an active, consistent presence in your children’s lives, and let them know that you will do whatever it takes to insure their safety and well being. Checking in with their teachers, coaches, and other adults in their life is a good idea.
- **If you suspect that your child is using drugs,** you should voice your suspicions openly-avoiding direct accusations - when he or she is sober or straight, and you're calm. This will show that your child's well-being is crucial to you and that you still love him or her, but you are most concerned with what he/she is doing to him/herself. **Seeking counseling from a certified mental health professional with experience in youth and substance abuse and treatment is critical.** Meeting with school counselors and/or your family doctor can lead to the right intervention and support for your child and family.

### Key Resources/Links

1. **American Council for Drug Education** is an excellent website for parents who want suggestions for talking with their kids about drugs and alcohol, and information about signs and symptoms of specific drugs: <http://www.acde.org/parent/Default.htm>
2. **The AntiDrug.com,** a website of the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign, provides parents and caregivers with information on proven prevention strategies and information about what to do if you suspect that your adolescent is using drugs or alcohol: <http://www.theantidrug.com/ei/>
3. **Building Blocks for a Healthy Future** is a website developed by the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and is geared toward younger children (ages 3 to 6). Here you will find basic information about helping your children make good choices and develop a healthy lifestyle: <http://www.bblocks.samhsa.gov/family/default.aspx>
4. **Children Now and the Kaiser Family Foundation’s** website is devoted to helping parents talk with their children about difficult subjects. For a particularly helpful list of strategies, see “How to talk with your kids about drugs and alcohol”: <http://www.talkingwithkids.org/drugs.html>

5. **National Council on Alcohol and Drug Dependence** is particularly focused on alcohol use and abuse. For a list of specific signs that your child may be in trouble with alcohol: <http://www.ncadd.org/facts/parent2.html>
6. **Partnership for a Drug Free America:** The testimonials, graphics, and information on current trends (such as the use of methamphetamines and performance-enhancing drugs) make this an excellent website for teens and parents: <http://www.drugfree.org/Teen/>
7. **Safe and Drug Free Schools.** This website offers tips for parents on how to talk to their child about drug use and abuse, and how to prevent drug use. It also provides information about specific drugs and their effects. <http://www.yic.gov/drugfree/index.html>
8. **American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry:** This website provides a list of questions to ask a clinician when considering a treatment program for your child. <http://aacap.org/page.wv?name=Substance+Abuse+Treatment+for+Children+and+Adolescents:+Questions+to+Ask&section=Facts+for+Families>

*\*Developed by the Center for School Mental Health (<http://csmh.umaryland.edu>) in collaboration with the Maryland School Mental Health Alliance.*