

What Can Parents Do to Prevent Teenage Alcohol and Drug Use?

The prospect of drug use frightens many parents and with good reason. But many parents mistakenly believe there is nothing they can do to protect their children. While parents cannot completely prevent their children's eventual exposure to alcohol and other drugs, there are steps parents can take to reduce the potential risks. First, parents themselves must become informed about the risks and dangers of adolescent drug use as discussed in the [previous section](#) and become familiar with the alcohol and drug situation within their own communities. Today's youth are most likely to use and abuse alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, prescription and over-the-counter drugs, and inhalants. However, youth are still at risk for using other substances such as cocaine, ecstasy, heroin, methamphetamine, hallucinogens, or steroids. The type of drugs youth choose to use depends upon the availability and popularity of particular drugs within their community, neighborhood, and culture. Parents can familiarize themselves with the local drug situation by contacting their local police or child's school resource officer.

According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (CDC, 2009), 72.5% of high school youth reported they had drunk alcohol at some point in their life, and 41.8% of the responders reported they had drunk in the previous month (Eaton, Kann, Kinchen, et al., 2010). Using alcohol can cause a person to feel more relaxed and more euphoric in the early stages of intoxication. More worrisome, 24.2% the youth reported they had participated in binge drinking, which was defined as consuming 4-5 drinks or more within a few hours (Eaton, Kann, Kinchen, et al., 2010). Binge drinking seriously increases the risk of youth becoming intoxicated and becoming involved in dangerous situations as their inhibitions are lessened. It also increases the risk of a youth overdosing or experiencing alcohol poisoning.

The survey also reported that 46.3% of youth had smoked a cigarette at least once in their life, and 19.5% reported using cigarettes currently. Furthermore, 26% of youth reported they are currently using some form of tobacco (Eaton, Kann, Kinchen, et al., 2010). The primary ingredient in tobacco is nicotine, which is a highly-addictive stimulant. Moreover, 36.8% of the respondents reported using marijuana at some point in life, and 20.8% of them reported having used in the previous month (Eaton, Kann, Kinchen, et al., 2010).

The survey also found that 20.2% of youth reported taking prescription drugs that hadn't been prescribed to them (Eaton, Kann, Kinchen, et al., 2010). Strong pain medications like Oxycontin, Percocet®, and Vicodin® and anxiety medications like Xanax® can create pleasurable feelings when abused outside their prescribed use. Medications meant to treat Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) like Ritalin® or Adderall® can cause people without ADD to have unlimited energy and reduces the need to sleep. Some youth abuse these drugs to experience the high, but others abuse them to increase their ability to do schoolwork, work, and other activities and reduce the need for sleep. The survey did not ask youth about over-the-counter drug use for reasons other than directed uses, but professionals worry that youth are getting high off of substances like those found in cough and cold medicines as well.

Of the youth who completed the survey, 11.7% of youth reported having used inhalants in the past to get high (Eaton, Kann, Kinchen, et al., 2010). Youth choose to "huff" chemicals, such as the fumes from gasoline, spray paint, or glue or inhaling the contents of aerosol household products, such as computer keyboard cleaner or room deodorizers. The chemicals in these products can cut off the oxygen supply to the brain. While this creates a sensation that youth can find thrilling or pleasurable,

it can also cause short-term and long-term brain damage and even immediate death. Once parents have become informed about the risks of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs and understand the local drug situation in their community, they are better prepared to take the necessary steps to educate and protect their youth. Furthermore, informed parents are better able to identify the early signs of alcohol and other drug use. As such, they are in a better position to intervene quickly and effectively, and to seek professional guidance and medical intervention when necessary.