

If you suspect that your child is using drugs or engaging in underage drinking

Source: Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (1998). *Growing Up Drug-Free: A Parent's Guide to Prevention*. Available at www.ed.gov/offices/OSDFS/parents_guide/index.html.

If you suspect that your child is using drugs or alcohol illegally, you should voice your suspicions openly — avoiding direct accusations — when he or she is sober or straight and you're calm.

This may mean waiting until the next day if he comes home drunk from a party, or if her room reeks of marijuana. Ask about what's been going on — in school and out — and discuss how to avoid using drugs and alcohol in the future. If you encounter reluctance to talk, enlist the aid of your child's school guidance counselor, family physician, or a local drug treatment referral and assessment center — they may get a better response. Also explore what could be going on in your child's emotional or social life that might prompt substance use.

Taking the time to discuss the problem openly without turning away is an important first step on the road to recovery. It shows that your child's well-being is crucial to you and that you still love him, although you hate what he's doing to himself. But you should also show your love by being firm and enforcing whatever discipline your family has agreed upon for violating house rules. You should suggest ways to regain the family's trust such as calling in, spending evenings at home, and improving grades.

Even in the face of mounting evidence, parents often have a hard time acknowledging that their child has an alcohol, tobacco, or drug problem. Anger, resentment, guilt, and a sense of failure are all common reactions, but it is important to avoid self-blame. Substance abuse occurs in families of all economic and social backgrounds, in happy and unhappy homes alike. Most important is that the faster you act, the sooner your child can start to become well again.