

Understanding when it's time to seek help

Source: The Drug-Free Home. *A Parent's Guide to Drug Counseling*.

There are times in a parent-child relationship when the help the child needs cannot best be provided by the parent. In cases of substance abuse and addiction, it may be appropriate to seek professional help. Admitting that a situation is beyond your control can be difficult, but may also be critically important to your child's well-being.

When you become aware that your child is in need of help because of drug or alcohol use, remember that the type of intervention you choose should match the level of abuse.

Stages of substance abuse include:

Experimentation – This stage is common during adolescence and can be short-lived. Some adolescents, however, will progress to the next level of substance abuse. **Recommended parent action:** It is appropriate for parents to impose consequences for substance use and to reiterate a clear expectation of abstinence from drugs and from underage alcohol use.

Use – At this stage, drugs and alcohol are used sporadically (e.g., on weekends only). **Recommended parent action:** Consider meeting with a family therapist to evaluate family dynamics, re-establish family rules and develop clear expectations for parents and children.

Abuse – In this stage adolescents rely on mood-altering drugs to help cope or aid in socialization. Frequency of use increases and begins to become the focus of the teen's life. Substance use persists despite negative consequences experienced (drop in grades, being fired from a job, etc.). **Recommended parent action:** Seek professional treatment for the child, which may include individual and family therapy and/or participation in an intensive outpatient program (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous).

Dependence – This stage is characterized by addiction, defined as physical withdrawal symptoms, compulsive seeking of substances, and inability to control the level/amount of substance use. **Recommended parent action:** Seek professional treatment for the child. In the most severe cases, inpatient detoxification is warranted.

The family environment can set the stage for a child's recovery. When one family member abuses drugs or alcohol, everyone in the family is affected. Parents and siblings experience a wide range of emotions: guilt, sadness, depression, resentment, anxiety and despair, among others. If an adolescent moves from experimenting with drugs or alcohol to the next stage of use, family counseling sessions are strongly recommended. By working closely with a professional, self-respect and trust can be restored within the family circle, paving the way for the user and the entire family to heal.