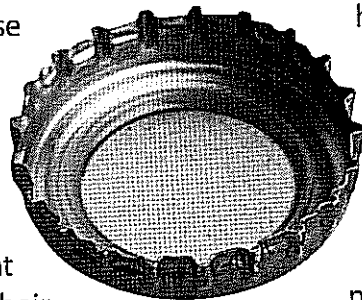


Underage Drinking

If you know for sure that your teenager is using alcohol or drugs, you need to take the following actions to deal with the problem.

Know Where You Stand

Think about your personal position on substance use. You may have used marijuana in college and feel like a hypocrite asking your child not to do the same. But remember that the earlier a child begins using alcohol or drugs, the more likely they are to develop a drug or alcohol problem. Further, people that get through the age of 21 without smoking, abusing alcohol or using illegal drugs are virtually certain never to do so. As a parent, letting your child know you don't want them to use substances and telling them your reasons why is perfectly acceptable and responsible. Teens need parents, not more friends. But remember also that you're up against the fact that many teenagers consider their drinking or smoking marijuana reasonable, harmless fun. Remember too that teens' definition of casual use may be quite different from yours: you might be talking about a few drinks total per month, while their definition might mean getting drunk only one night each weekend instead of both!



Let Your Child Know You're Concerned

Let's assume your teenager is using his alcohol or drugs. Wait until you child is sober and you are calm enough to have a discussion rather than an explosion. Your initial overture to your child should be based on concern, not contempt. Don't tell him he's a loser, a waste, or a disgrace. This will only alienate him further. But do tell him about the changes you've noticed in his behavior and the reasons you're worried. Use the words "love and "i care" or "we care." And make it clear that you're not prepared to drop the issue until it's addressed. If he gets angry and defensive, don't take it personally. His reaction is intended to minimize the significance of the problem. Don't cover for him. If he's in trouble, let him experience the consequences. With or without his consent, go on to the next step.

Monitor Their Behavior

If you're trying to help your teenagers stay away from harmful substances, you'll need to keep a close watch on their activities. Let them know that you'll be doing this. In effect, you're saying to them, "I can no longer trust your word because you've been going behind my back and lying to me, so I'll need to be more actively involved with your life." This means you'll have to make some sacrifices. For starters, set curfews. Make sure you're awake when they get home, and check in with them before they go to bed. This will let you see whether they're clean and sober. They may not like this, but they'll get used to it.

Also, check with their friends' parents to find out what they know. Ask them how your teenager acts at their house. If these parents are also concerned about their own children, get together and plan how to restrict where and how the teens spend their time. Of course, you should tell your children you're doing this. The less room they have to manipulate, the better. Finally, randomly check to find out if they're where they've told you they would be. This might mean checking to see that their car is parked outside the friend's house where they're spending the night, or stopping by the movie theater or restaurant to make sure they're really there. This monitoring will really annoy your teenagers, but remind them that their past performance has led to this. Once they've regained your trust, you can stop such extensive reconnaissance. And while you're checking up on them, be subtle and unobtrusive; they're already humiliated, so there's no point in adding insult to injury.

Use Drug Screens

Drug screens are particularly helpful for marijuana smokers. The active ingredient in marijuana, THC, stays in the bloodstream for up to thirty days. It can be detected through a urine test that can be done in your pediatrician's office or in a local laboratory that runs such tests (you can get a referral from your doctor). All you need to do is call them and arrange to have your teen's urine sample taken, and they'll have the laboratory results back in a few days. Of course, you should inform your child that you'll be doing a random drug screening to find out if she's getting high. Tell her that you are taking this tough measure

as a supportive tool to help her change her behavior. Explain that drug use can easily become habitual and compulsive. Even if she honestly tries to stop taking drugs, she may relapse several times as she struggles to quit using. This does not make someone a bad person, and repeated effort pays off. The drug test can show where more effort is needed and also will show her progress. Emphasize that your motivation is caring. The test will tell the story, and then you can hold her accountable for her actions. In the event that your child refuses to take a drug screen, tell her that you'll assume she's using and proceed accordingly.

Teens often try to find a way to fool these tests. I've heard about kids drinking excessive amounts of water, spraying Lysol in their urine samples, or drinking herbal tea. The best way to ensure they don't try is to not give them advance notice of when they'll take the test. Watch them closely during the testing to make sure they don't try to swap their urine for a clean sample from a friend. To test for alcohol, some parents buy Breathalyzer tests. Requiring that children take such tests for alcohol, or even just threatening to do so when things are getting out of control, sends a no-nonsense message.

Search Their Rooms

I advocate respecting your teenager's privacy, but there are exceptions to this rule.

If you suspect drug or alcohol use, search his room for incriminating evidence because you are so concerned about his safety. If you find any drugs, drug paraphernalia, or empty beer cans or bottles, take action. This can range from weekend

restrictions to requiring him to attend a weekly drug prevention program. You'll need to find out the nature and extent of his problem before making this determination. If you're still unsure about the extent of his use (and it's often in question), have a drug counselor do a thorough evaluation.

Even the smell of the room can tell you something. Maybe she just likes incense and scented candles –

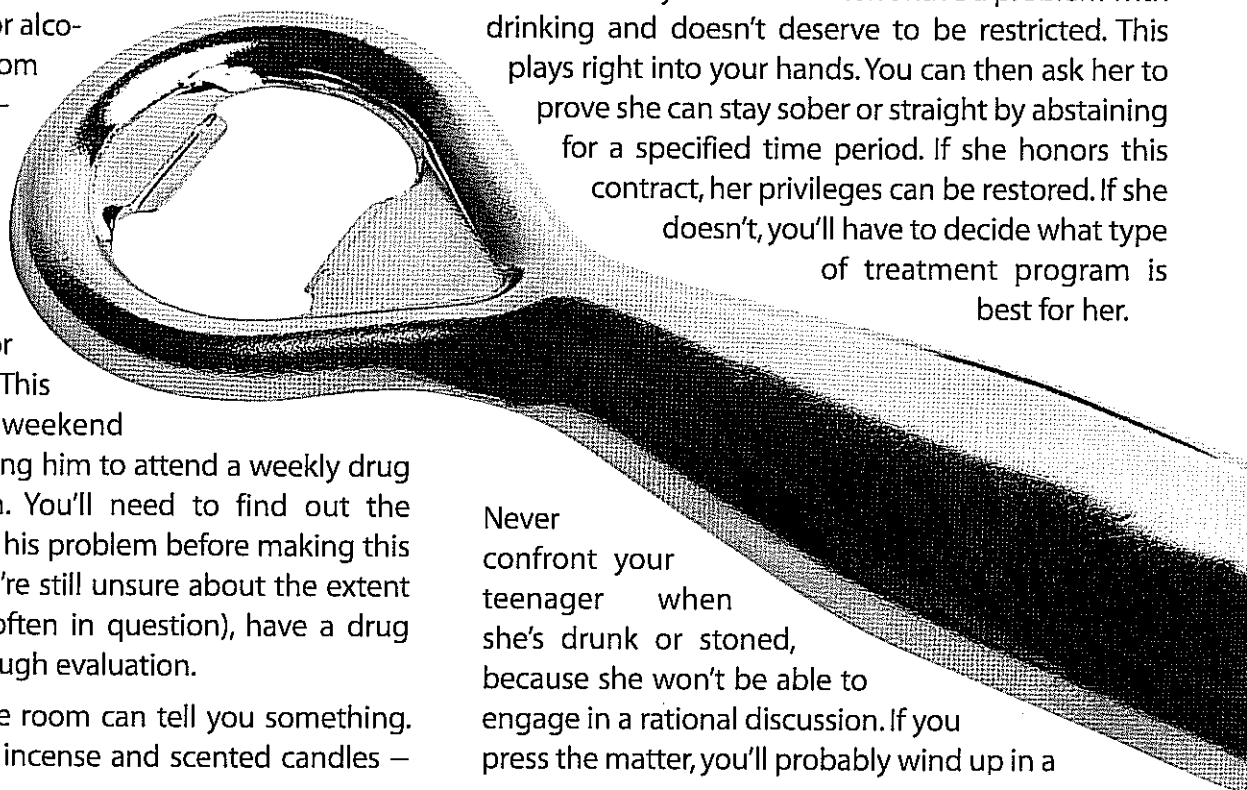
there are plenty of teens, especially girls, who do – but it could also cover up a suspicious, drug-related smell. Excessive Lysol spraying is an even clearer giveaway. And don't overlook the obvious. If your teen's room is filled with alcohol and/or marijuana posters, it doesn't automatically mean they're using, but it means they've got some level of interest. Of course, it depends on the nature of their posters too. Big pot leaves, lists of marijuana terms, issues of High Times, and posters of cool drinking games are a bit of a clue that they may be involved with substances. If you think something's up, address it directly. Ask, "Why do you have pictures of pot leaves up in your room?" or "Why is there always incense burning in there?"

Set Clear Limits

In no uncertain terms, tell your child you won't tolerate any further use of alcohol or marijuana. From now on you'll expect her to tell you where she's going, with whom, and when she'll be home. You should certainly restrict her privileges on Friday night and Saturday night, which are, I would say, the most likely times she'll be in a drug- or alcohol-related situation, like a party or informal get-together. You may also want to make her use her new free time to attend drug or alcohol education classes, or sit in on an AA meeting or group therapy session for drug abusers.

Your child may insist she doesn't have a problem with drinking and doesn't deserve to be restricted. This plays right into your hands. You can then ask her to prove she can stay sober or straight by abstaining for a specified time period. If she honors this contract, her privileges can be restored. If she doesn't, you'll have to decide what type of treatment program is best for her.

Never confront your teenager when she's drunk or stoned, because she won't be able to engage in a rational discussion. If you press the matter, you'll probably wind up in a

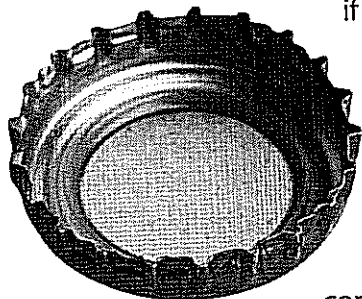


meaningless argument that you'll both regret afterward. So please, wait until the morning or afternoon after, when you'll have a relatively alert, captive, and probably scared audience to discuss consequences.

Of course, when you define the bottom line, there's always the chance that your teenager will flagrantly disregard your limits. What if your child is adamant that you can't tell her what to do? If she refuses to be grounded or abide by rules you impose, ignore her threat. Just assume she hasn't said this and proceed accordingly. It may be that her protests are all talk -- she's just venting her anger at you, and deep down

she does respect your authority. But

if she continues her illicit activity -- in effect, daring you to try and stop her -- you'll need to show her you mean business by moving to the next stage of severity.



If the drug problem is serious, consider using outside support

to help you with this problem. This is a hard step for many parents to take, but you often need the support of others to take a stance against drug abuse. Dealing with a child who is a serious substance abuser is a terrible situation that can make home life a living hell -- lies, broken promises, screaming fights, constant worry or even violence -- with no apparent way out. There are many resources in your community, including drug treatment programs, mental health clinics, self-help groups, and law enforcement agencies. They can direct you to more specific help and provide information about further options. Knowing that others are behind you can lighten your burden. The many other parents who have survived similar situations can be a great comfort as well as an invaluable resource. Seek out local support groups for yourselves. Remember that your child's alienating behavior obscures the love he feels for you so that you are not struggling with your child as much as with his overriding compulsion to take drugs.

There are times when teenagers run away home because they feel trapped and see no way out of their situation. Their substance habit has become the most important thing in the world to them, and you're trying to get between them and their drug. When this

occurs, you'll need to take immediate action. If they've run away from home for more than twenty-four hours, notify the police, who can often track down a runaway and bring her home. And when she returns, seek professional assistance immediately.

Make an appointment to see a mental health professional who specializes in substance abuse. And tell your child if she doesn't attend the appointment, you'll have to make important decisions about her future without her present. If your child still refuses to cooperate (and this is not unusual), you can contact the juvenile court system or inform his school that he has a serious drug problem and ask for their support. They'll advise you on the most prudent course of action. In an extreme situation (if, for instance, your child is deeply rooted in the addiction phase of alcohol or drug use), you'll need to consider placement in a residential drug treatment program. The problem is too great to handle on your own.

POLL NUMBERS

- 56% of students in grades 5 to 12 say that alcohol advertising encourages them to drink.
- 2.6 million teenagers did not know you could die from an overdose.
- Of the 20 million junior and senior high school students in America, half of them report drinking on a monthly basis.
- Although a majority of parents believe peer pressure to be the primary reason teenagers drink or use drugs, teens say:
- A study of ninth grade students from four urban high schools showed that the best predictor of risky sexual behavior was alcohol and/or drug use.
- In 1993, 67% of 8th graders had tried alcohol.

A 1990 survey of Massachusetts 16- to 19-year-olds found that 49% were more likely to have sex if their partner had been drinking.