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What to do if your teen has a drug problem

According to an [NHS survey](#) published in 2017, secondary school children in the UK are now more likely to have tried illegal substances than cigarettes, with cannabis being the main drug of choice. The research also found that 25% of 15-year-olds had tried recreational drugs at least once, down from 30% in [2014](#).

More than experimenting?

Experimentation is one thing but what if your teen's drug use is starting to have a negative impact on their life? This was the experience of Rachel* whose 17-year-old son, Tom*, had progressed within a year from smoking cannabis to snorting cocaine.

She told us: "I suspected drugs for several months as Tom's school work and behaviour had deteriorated, but he would only admit to [drinking alcohol](#). Then, one night he didn't come home. We found him around 4 am wandering the streets, totally aggressive and out of control. Next day, he was very subdued but he finally told us the truth. Funnily enough, I was calm at that point. I just felt relieved that there was an explanation for his awful behaviour. It was something that I could help him sort out."

Tom adds: "Young people take drugs for different reasons, like curiosity or to get a high that you can't get from alcohol. You don't think about the risks because other people using drugs give you reassurance, or because you've done it before and it was fine."

He continues: "The trouble with drugs is you don't realise you are going too far. In my case, friends stopped talking to me because I was high every weekend. Sometimes I was the only person using drugs but I didn't face up to it until my close friends threatened to tell my mum. Then I knew I had a problem. I didn't think of myself as an addict because you imagine that's someone who uses every day. But even taking drugs at weekends can make you an addict if you feel you can't stop."

** Names have been changed to protect confidentiality.*

Difficult conversations

How you respond to your child's disclosure of drug use is very important, according to Rob Stebbings from [Adfam](#), a charity that works to improve support for parents and carers affected by drugs or alcohol.

He says: "Communication can often become tricky as your children start to grow up. When you do speak with your child it is important to speak to them as a young adult, and communicate your feelings in a way which doesn't judge or criticise them. Teenagers need freedom so they can learn to take responsibility for themselves, but they still need boundaries which show them that you care."

However, frustratingly for families, you can't force a young person to accept help. Gerry from [Cocaine Anonymous](#) explains: "The more you tell someone what to do, the more they clam up and get defensive. This can lead to isolation on both sides."

He suggests instead keeping a dialogue going by reassuring your teen that you're there for them, that you want to help, and are worried that their drug use is harming them. Leaving drug information booklets around the house can also prompt teens to face facts.

Gerry adds: "Drugs are not the underlying problem – they are a sign that someone isn't feeling good about themselves or their world. This means that issues around [unhappiness](#), low self-esteem and disconnection often need tackling first – for example, through counselling – before a user feels empowered to give up drugs."

Spotting the signs

Teenagers are typically moody, occasionally rude, and spend quite a bit of time in their rooms. They might also go out a lot with friends, not answer their mobile phones when you call them, and be secretive. So, how do you know when any of these normal behaviours are becoming sinister?

Stebbing explains: "Many possible signs of drug taking are just like the normal signs of growing up." However, worrying signs could include:

- Sudden or regular changes of mood.
- Unusual aggression.
- [Loss of appetite](#).
- Gradual loss of interest in school, hobbies or friends.
- Unusual drowsiness or [tiredness](#).
- Lying and secretive behaviour.
- Having a 'drunken' appearance.
- Money being spent with no visible evidence of what it's being spent on.

Where to get help and support

For a drug user, the most important step is to admit to a problem and ask for help - for example, by speaking to a trusted family member or teacher.

Tom says: "Surround yourself with the right people who will be there when you need them. Don't push them away or make them give up on you, because you'll regret it."

Rachel adds: "Our GP suggested support groups in our local area. Tom went to Cocaine Anonymous because the groups were user-led and frequent."

Keep in mind that the journey towards a drug-free life might not be smooth. Gerry says: "Many users experience setbacks so don't be disheartened. Be patient and tolerant and keep the dialogue open. Coming off drugs can create restlessness and discontentment as the user looks for alternatives to make them feel good. The hardest thing for parents to accept is that they're powerless over their teen's thoughts and behaviour. All they can do is to remain positive and supportive as their teenager takes each step towards sobriety."

However, this doesn't mean accepting chaotic or aggressive behaviour. Set clear boundaries for your teenager and limit their access to things that can enable drug use, such as money, WiFi or mobile data.

The organisations below can provide help and advice:

- [Cocaine Anonymous UK](#) offers free group-led support to all who state a desire to stop using cocaine and other mind-altering substances. It's based on the highly effective 12-step programme.
- Adfam has a [map](#) of local groups for families affected by drugs and alcohol. Also check out their comprehensive [guide](#) for parents and carers.
- [Families Anonymous](#) is where parents and carers can get support from others in a similar situation. Helpline 0845 1200 660.
- [Talk to Frank](#) provides information about drugs, and advice for drug users, parents and carers. Helpline 0300 123 6600.

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