

CASA Conversations



CASA

Court Appointed Special Advocates
FOR CALIFORNIA CHILDREN

Drug and Alcohol Use by Teens

Introduction

It is very common for all young people, including the ones we serve, to experiment with alcohol and other drugs. Experimentation can range from a one-time experience all the way to physical addiction.

This CASA Conversation focuses on experimentation, not full blown addiction, which calls for very different interventions.

Our teens can benefit from having an adult to talk to about drug and alcohol use, to help them separate fact from fiction, and to make good decisions around drug and alcohol use.

The Facts

- Studies show that foster youth exhibit higher rates of illegal drug use than youth who have never been in foster care (33.6% vs. 21.7%), and recent studies indicate high rates of lifetime substance use and substance use disorders for youth in the foster care.
- There are many reasons youth use or abuse drugs and alcohol: self-medication because of stress, unhappiness, or social issues; adventure; experimentation; peer influence; curiosity.
- Risk of injury and assault dramatically increases while inebriated or under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.
- Drugs lower inhibitions and affect a person's judgment, making it more likely we will do dangerous things we wouldn't usually do, like engage in unsafe sex, drive drunk or ride with a drunk driver, or take other drugs.

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- Drunk driving is one of the leading causes of teen injury and death.
- Marijuana use by adolescents declined from the late 1990s until the mid-to-late 2000s, but has been on the increase since then. In 2012, 6.5 percent of 8th graders, 17.0 percent of 10th graders, and 22.9 percent of 12th graders used marijuana in the past month; 6.5 percent of 12th graders now use marijuana every day.
- Alcohol use among teens has dropped to historically low levels. In 2012, 3.6 percent of 8th graders, 14.5 percent of 10th graders, and 28.1 percent of 12th graders reported getting drunk in the past month, continuing a long-term, downward trend.
- Fewer teens smoke cigarettes than smoke marijuana. Cigarette smoking by high-school students peaked in 1996–1997 and has declined continuously since then. While 17.1 percent of 12th graders were current (past-month) cigarette smokers—the lowest it has been in the history of the survey—22.9 percent were current marijuana smokers.

*“Keeping it real with a youth is important ... Flat out tell me, ‘weed is not going to help with the depression’”
- Josh*

Starting a CASA Conversation

The best way to be able to talk to youth about drugs and alcohol is to have a strong trusting relationship – see *Starting a Conversation: Values and General Tips*

- Talk regularly and talk often. Many “mini-conversations” about drugs are better than long boring lectures.
- Have a two-way conversation with your teen. Listen to them and respect their opinion. Provide your teen with information that is meaningful and balanced, without emotion or drama so that he/she feels empowered to make healthy choices about drugs.
- Many of our youth and children have seen their parents abuse drugs and alcohol – this may be the reason they aren’t living with their families. Be careful not to denigrate their parents. Do let them know they are at higher risk for addiction if they have addicts in their immediate family, and share with them the negative consequences of drug/alcohol use/abuse.
- Think about how you will answer the question ‘have you ever done drugs’ or ‘do you drink?’. It is best practice not to share your experiences you may have had with illicit drugs or alcohol, but keep the conversation focused on the youth’s experiences and concerns.

“I used to spend time with my uncle who would always tell me he didn’t drink, but he was lying to me. I found beer bottles in the back of the fridge and he would say they’re not his. Tell me that you did it; don’t tell me that you haven’t.” - Lawrence

“Drug use among foster youth is inevitable; you can’t really prevent it from happening. But make sure they’re being safe.” - Fabian

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- Help your youth have a safety plan – what can they do if they are somewhere and become under the influence, or their ride is under the influence? Who can they call to get them home safely? If possible, include their care provider in this discussion.

“Give them alternatives – if you’re going to the movies with your CASA, gives you a good reason not to get high” - Unique

“Be a part of something. I quit using when I joined CYC. I didn’t have time for that anymore.” - J

“I have a lot of siblings and they look up to me as a role model. And I asked myself ‘would I want them to do this?’” - Alex

Help your youth find other outlets for risk-taking impulses, such as trying a new adventure like rock climbing, training for a marathon, or learning a new language.

Be prepared for them to talk about the “fun” or appealing aspects of alcohol and other drug use. For example, if your youth says she likes how friendly and happy she feels when she is drinking, acknowledge the reality of this for her, and talk about ways to get this feeling in a less risky way (perhaps get her to remember a time when she felt in a really good mood).

Pitfalls to Avoid

Be aware of your own biases, values and perspectives on drug and alcohol use. If you are in recovery, or grew up in a home with alcohol or drug abuse, this can influence your attitudes about drug use. It may be helpful to reflect on questions like: is all youth drug use drug abuse? If not, when is it abuse?

Use is not addiction, and your conversation with the youth will be more productive if you avoid an “all or nothing” attitude. While no one is suggesting that alcohol or other drug use by youth is a good idea, if you take the attitude that there is no difference between drinking alcohol at a party and being an alcoholic, the youth will not talk to you, and will not listen to you either.

Be straightforward about the consequences and risks, but take an approach that is sensitive, and keep a dialogue going.

This does not mean condoning behavior you think is dangerous; it means acknowledging that experimentation does not equal addiction.

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Additional Resources

Health Canada How to Talk with Your Teen about Drugs – Communication Tips for Parents

<http://www.drugprevention.gc.ca>

Substance Use and Substance Use Disorders as Foster Youth Transition to Adulthood

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2786185/> *Substance Use and Need for Treatment among Youths Who Have Been in Foster Care*<http://www.samhsa.gov/data/2k5/fosterCare/fosterCare.htm>
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration

Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH)

<http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/2k5/FosterCare/FosterCare.htm>

Vaughn, G., Ollie, M.T., McMillen, J.C., Scott, L. & Munson, M. (2007). Substance use and abuse among older youth in foster care

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2633867/>

Center for Disease Control Adolescent and School Health

<http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/alcoholdrug/index.htm>

Center for Disease Control Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Report 2011

<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/ss/ss6104.pdf>

National Institute of Health Efficacy of Harm reduction

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2528824/>

“Talking with Your Teen about Drugs”

<http://www.nationalantidrugstrategy.gc.ca/pdf/parents/talking-aborder.pdf>

