

Youth Substance Misuse and CASA Intervention

Useful tips on how to communicate with your case youth about their substance abuse issues

If you believe your youth is using substances and it is interfering with daily life, share this with your Advocacy Supervisor so you can discuss the situation, create any action items, and minimize possibility of backlash/trauma to your youth. Be mindful, observe, and talk with your youth before you make any conclusion and alert the professionals on the case.

After speaking with your Advocacy Supervisor and if appropriate, talk with the youth's HHSA social worker, the minor's attorney, and the caregiver, and request a larger meeting be held to support the youth's recovery. Please also remember that CASAs are not allowed to give medical advice or assign their youth to any recovery program.

When approaching your youth about substance misuse, avoid confrontation and instead start a conversation one on one. During this difficult conversation, stay steady and calm to support your youth, and have a plan for staying that way throughout the conversation. Remember that what your youth needs most is a thoughtful and caring conversation about what you have seen and how their behaviors concern you. They need loving guidance from you as a trusted adult. Instead of avoiding the topic, this guide is to provide you with effective tips on how to talk to your youth about drugs, their misuse, and how they can get help.

What should I do before talking to my youth?

1. **Observe Changes:** Keep an eye out for any shifts in your youth's behavior, appearance, habits, health, or school performance.
2. **Take Notes:** Make mental or written notes of instances when your youth breaks rules or does something worrisome.
3. **Call your Advocacy Supervisor.** Your Advocacy Supervisor can help support you as you approach this sensitive topic with your youth as well as guide you in appropriate next steps throughout the process.

Red flags that indicate your youth may be misusing drugs:

Please remember, a youth who presents one symptom or troubling behavior does not necessarily have an addiction or problem with substances. Always review their background and reflect on the effect the trauma may have on their behavior.

However, if you observe the following behaviors multiple times, you should alert your Advocacy Supervisor and prepare for a conversation with your youth:

- **Neglecting Normal Responsibilities**
Youth who normally take care of chores, school, and other responsibilities may skip them. Normally respectful youth may talk back and refuse to follow through when they misuse substances. Some youth find ways to use substances during school hours.

- **Noticeable Changes in Appetite and Weight**

Young, specifically teenage bodies grow and change over time, but dramatic weight loss or unexpected changes in appetite are not normal for a youth. These changes suggest something physically harmful is happening in their body.

- **Changes in Friend Groups and Social Behaviors**

Substance misuse is often done within social groups that support the behavior. Be aware of whether your youth has suddenly moved away from stable friendships and is hanging out with a crowd which may negatively influence them.

- **Dramatic Mood Changes**

While youth may experience mood swings during adolescence, a youth who misuses substances may have little control over their emotions. It may seem that every mood is exaggerated, regardless of the situation.

- **Problems With Money**

A person misusing substances has to find ways to acquire and purchase them. Youth may resort to borrowing or stealing money, or spending all the money they get their hands on.

- **Changes in Self-Care and Personal Hygiene**

People who struggle with substance misuse often stop caring about their personal hygiene. Your youth may not be concerned or aware they have let their self-care slip.

- **Physical signs of intoxication are clear red flags for drug and alcohol misuse.**

Symptoms may include:

- Slurred speech
- Bloodshot eyes
- Difficulty walking and controlling body movements
- Body tremors
- Excessive drowsiness
- Flushed face
- Constant runny nose or sniffing
- Excessive itching

Do's and Do Not's about Discussing Substance Misuse

If you have observed warning signs of your youth using drugs, it is time for an honest conversation. To make sure this goes well, do some planning and preparation with your Advocacy Supervisor, and with the other professionals involved with the youth, including their caregiver, as appropriate. You do not know how your youth will react, but you can do whatever is necessary to remain calm and rationale. They may not like it, but they need your stability and steady presence more than ever.

Do:

- Choose a time and place that provides privacy and adequate time for discussion.
- Ask them straightforward questions.
- Listen carefully to them when they speak.
- Explain the changes you have seen in them.
- Discuss the risks of their substance habit.
- Show them how much you care.
- Offer your complete support in helping them stop using.
- Ask what you can do to support them.
- If they are involved in therapy, encourage them to speak to their therapist about their substance use to find healthier ways to cope.

Do Not:

- Have the conversation in an overly public place.
- Bring up the conversation when they are under the influence.
- Assume you know what they have been doing.
- Raise your voice.
- Monopolize the conversation.
- Make them feel guilty or ashamed.
- Invite additional people into your conversation.
- End the conversation prematurely.

Having one conversation may not change anything. You may need to approach your youth several times before they understand the seriousness of their situation. Be consistent and show your youth they can count on you to help them.

Prepare yourself for your youth's reaction. Many youth are not happy when approached about substance use. That is to be expected. What you might not expect is to be called a liar, a fake, or a snooper. Think about how you will handle these accusations if they come up. Remember:

- Do not take it personally.
- Remain calm.
- Assure your youth that you are here to support them.
- Remind the youth that your intention is to help them.

More information:

<https://www.therecoveryvillage.com/teen-addiction/drug/confronting-addiction/>
<https://drugfree.org/article/having-tough-conversations/>