

How To See Warning Signs of Teen Drug Abuse

By Sally Cook

Is my child using drugs? This is hardly a new question. Whether we're talking alcohol, illegal drugs (marijuana, cocaine, heroin, et al.) or, these days, over the counter drugs, this has been an issue for many families for a mighty long time. Can't you just hear a couple of parents, back in ancient Rome, discussing their son, Marcus Antonius, driving the family chariot while blitzed? Again? Well, it easily could have happened.

Seriously, though, this is a scary topic. But, even if your child is experimenting, it very likely isn't the end of the world. After all, we know so much more nowadays about identifying drug use, treating it, and – better yet – preventing it.

Are we talking enforced drug testing?

Well, that is one approach. But as the national headquarters of the Parent Teachers Association (PTA) sees it, there are a number of reasons to forego enforced testing in schools. The principal ones are:

- It is, simply, an invasion of the child's privacy. As a parent, you have the right and responsibility to know if your child is doing something illegal, even it invades their privacy. However, it may not do wonders for your relationship.
- It can't distinguish between drug use and abuse, and there is a difference.
- Enforced testing disrupts the trust that needs to exist between child and adult, whether it's the parent who allows it, or the teacher, coach or administrator who performs the test. Communication can't exist without trust. If your child (or student) is doing drugs, or considering doing so, you want them to be able to talk to you about it, right?
- It has been proven that testing doesn't reduce the amount of drug use, but may force the child – or even encourage him or her – to devise new means of hiding an existing problem.
- Testing is not always conclusive. For one thing, a positive result may actually be incorrect. In addition, to avoid being detected, a child may choose to use a drug (perhaps a more dangerous one) that's less likely to register on the test.
- Most teenage drug use takes place between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m., not during school hours. And why? Because too many kids are on their own; bored, and have nothing constructive to do.
- This is the least important reason on its own merits, but when taken in conjunction with all the other issues, it's significant: the expense. These tests are costly, besides being disruptive, emotionally, psychologically, and practically (breaking up the regular school schedule. Field trips

and assemblies are one thing, but this . . .).

What are the alternatives?

Well, as you just read, the most likely times for a child to do drugs is between the end of school and dinner time. Per the PTA suggestions, parents can insist that the school district invest the money that would otherwise go into testing in a number of other, more positive ways.

Specifically:

- The development of after school extracurricular activities. Sports, arts and crafts, music, study sessions -- there are plenty of possibilities. No matter how you look at it, this is a great idea, isn't it? Wouldn't it ease your mind to know your kids were involved in well-supervised, constructive activities?
- Invest money, too, into science-based drug education. Off school grounds, of course, your child could supplement this program with a religious-based support group.
- Finally, let's be practical. No matter what, there will still be kids who develop drug issues, so it's important to invest money, also, into treatment programs.

Signs to Look for

Here are just some of the common signs you could look for, but remember kids (especially teens) are changeable so don't jump to conclusions. For school kids, these are the two most common drugs:

- Marijuana: loss of memory; signs of paranoia; the smell of burnt rope on clothing or breath; bloodshot eyes; decreased concentration.
- Inhalants: found in paint thinners, felt tip markers, glue, gasoline, cleaning fluids and other common household aerosol products. These are cheap and easily obtainable. Symptoms: slurred speech, bleary vision, much like alcoholic intoxication.

As previously stated, be cautious about making assumptions based on too little evidence. The best thing you can do is learn to talk to your child. Even for young kids, there are books and videos that explain, in a non-threatening way, why they shouldn't do drugs. Ask for them at your local bookstore, or talk to your child's teacher, school counselor, or school librarian. Above all, set the best example you can, and make the time to get close to your child.