

# Commentary: What to Do When You Notice Changes in Your Adolescent's Behavior

by Tisha Miller and Shawna Weaver



It's no secret that adolescents will be presented with the temptations of drugs or alcohol in their young lives. By the age of 15, one out of every two teens will have had at least one drink<sup>1</sup>; more than 60 percent of teens have said that drugs were sold, used or kept at their school<sup>2</sup>; and one in four teens has misused or abused a prescription drug at least once in their lifetime<sup>3</sup>. There is an evident need for preventative education and support for adolescents and young adults, as well as parents. This includes not only the skills to recognize the signs of a child who is using drugs or alcohol; but

learning to find constructive ways to intervene, communicate and get the appropriate support needed.

As we prepare for holiday gatherings, longer breaks from school and home-bound college kids, a wary parent can be best equipped by taking time to become acquainted with the warning signs of drug and alcohol use and effective tactics to prevent and discuss substance use with an adolescent or young adult. Below are a few signs and symptoms related to adolescent alcohol and/or drug use to consider. Look out for:

Behavioral changes such as being unusually clumsy, stumbling, lack of coordination; hostility or anger; decreased motivation; loud or obnoxious behavior; being deceitful or secretive.

Personal appearance changes such as an unusually messy, careless appearance; red, flushed cheeks or face, poor hygiene; or burns or soot on fingers or lips.

Personal habit changes including smell of smoke on the breath or clothes; avoiding eye contact; secretive phone calls; heavy use of over-the-counter preparations to reduce things like eye reddening (eye drops); nasal irritation; or bad breath.

School or work changes including truancy or loss of interest in schoolwork; a drop in grades; or failure to fulfill responsibilities at work or school.

An important thing to keep in mind is that because an adolescent's brain is still in development, and will be until approximately age 25, some of his/her behaviors are simply natural – it's when you begin to notice changes in your teen's "normal behavior" that drug or alcohol use may be in question. You can learn more about normal behaviors through The Parent's Guide to the Teen Brain website at <http://teenbrain.drugfree.org>. It's also important to note that an adolescent's experimentation with drugs or alcohol can have lasting, harmful effect on his/her health because their developing brains may be more prone to damage. The Time to Act guide is a great resource for next steps when anyone suspects substance use or abuse in an adolescent and wants to understand how or when to intervene.

Just because an adolescent may be experimenting with drugs and/or alcohol however, doesn't mean a future of addiction. It's important, however, to trust your instincts and to be alert and aware of the signs and symptoms that your son or daughter may be abusing drugs or alcohol. One of the discouraging things about adolescent drug and alcohol use is that not enough people are talking about it. Take advantage of the available resources to begin a more open conversation about drug or alcohol use in the home.

Need help? Call Alcohol Drug Council of NC 800-688-4232