

Worried that your child is using alcohol or other drugs?

An Action Guide for Maine Parents



Maine Office of Substance Abuse
Department of Health and Human Services



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If you think that your child may be using alcohol or other drugs, take action. Ask your child. If you are unsure whether you'll get an honest answer, don't give up. It is critical to talk, and listen, on an ongoing basis. While you should be open and ready to receive the information that your child will give you, it is also important to set clear rules about alcohol and other drug use and then enforce them fairly and consistently.

If you are a parent seeking assistance for your child's alcohol or drug related problems, you are not alone. Many parents don't know what to do or where to turn for help. Here is some information about steps you can take to help your child.

How do I know if my child is using?

Listed below are some signs of alcohol and other drug abuse. However, these could also be signs of depression, suicidal ideation or other mental health issues. If you have a concern or think there may be a problem, talk with your child. Believe in your power to help, but don't be afraid to seek support if you feel overwhelmed, uncertain, or simply want more information.



Some of the following signs may simply be “normal” adolescent behavior. What is not “normal,” however, is if more than a few of the signs are present; this could indicate a serious problem.

Family: deteriorating relationships with family; behavior changes, such as withdrawal or anger

School: truancy; drop in grades; behavior problems

Social life: deteriorating relationships with old friends; developing a network of friends who are using alcohol or other drugs; loss of interest in sports or other favorite activities

Behavior/Emotion: noticeable personality changes; unexplained and sudden mood changes; decreased appetite or continually hungry; memory problems; delayed response time; fatigue or hyperactive behavior; sleep disturbances; apathy

Appearance: red or blood-shot eyes; carelessness with grooming; weight loss or gain; circles under eyes; persistent runny nose or coughing; slurred or rapid speech; smell of alcohol on breath; sudden, frequent use of breath mints

Circumstantial evidence: disappearance of beer or liquor supply; money or valuables missing; signs of drug paraphernalia; use of incense; excess money or missing money

Searching and Drug Testing

While ‘proving’ that your child is using may feel like a critical and immediate piece of the puzzle, what is most important is moving forward in your relationship and keeping your child safe and healthy. Any specific actions that you take to confirm your child’s use, such as searching their room or demanding they take a drug test, need to fit the context of your relationship and family expectations. If such actions don’t fit your parenting style and are different from what your child has come to expect from you based on past experience, suddenly taking these actions may unintentionally cause damage to your relationship. It is critical that you find out whether your suspicions about your child’s substance use are correct, but it is also very important that you do it in a way that helps you strengthen your relationship and that will help your child to ultimately stop using.

Whatever actions you take, make sure you are open and honest with your child, and that you explain over and over again that you are doing what you feel you need to do because you love them and you need to make sure they are safe. Sometimes the ‘best’ scenario is when a child is caught by school officials or law enforcement, because this may give you sufficient ‘evidence’ to address the issue without having to confirm your suspicions first-hand. Even if your child denies using substances, if you feel your concerns are warranted based on the best information you have, start with the “First Steps” outlined on the next page. Starting with communication and education provides you a healthy foundation for your relationship.

First Steps you can take if you think your child is experimenting with alcohol or other drugs:

1. Keep communication with your child open.

It is critical to talk, and listen, on an ongoing basis. Even if your child doesn't want to talk, don't give up. Often, someone who abuses alcohol or other drugs is unable to recognize it as a problem. Tell your child that you understand the temptation to use alcohol and other drugs, and that you would like to help. Let your child know that alcohol and other drug use is not acceptable, and make clear what the consequences will be for violating these rules.

2. Build alliances/share information.

Find allies in your community who care about your child. People with a substance abuse problem often try to keep family, friends, and other caring adults from talking to one another, so that no one has enough information to confront them. If they can convince themselves and others that all of their problems are somebody else's fault, they are able to keep using without facing the consequences. Connecting with someone at your child's school system can allow you to share information, and help you stay informed. You may at first feel like you are giving more information to school officials than you are receiving in return. Confidentiality laws prohibit school officials from sharing certain information about students. Work to build a partnership using whatever information can be shared freely, and try not to be resentful of the restrictions that keep others from sharing confidential information.

In addition to the school, there are other partners in your community. Your family physician can help educate your child about the health consequences of substance use and the dangers of addiction. Communicating with other parents can give you greater knowledge of where your child is and what they are doing when they are not with you. The parents of your child's friends can be especially important allies.

3. Educate yourself and take positive steps.

To best support your child, learn more about addiction and how it is different for adolescents than adults. There are many good information sources.

For a place to start, you can check out the books and web sites below. The books can be borrowed from the OSA Information & Resource Center.

Books

Our Children are Alcoholics: Coping with Children who have Addictions. *Sally B., Islewest Pub., 1997.*

Short stories are presented from parents who have found serenity even in the midst of chaos. An addict's recovery is not contingent on what parents or others do or don't do, although parents may play a role if they have accurate information about the disease, and if they learn helpful ways to react.

Our Drink: Detoxing the Perfect Family.

Chris and Toren Volkmann, Elton-Wolf Pub., 2004.

Chris Volkmann overlooked her son Toren's symptoms thinking that since he graduated from college with only a few slip-ups, he was not only OK, but successful. When Toren finally confesses he is an alcoholic, Chris and Toren together tackle the question, "Now what?" Alternating chapters are written by mother and son.

Choices & Consequences: What to do When a Teenager Uses Alcohol/Drugs. *Dick Schaefer, Johnson Institute, 1996.*

Provides valuable information about substance abuse, addiction and possible ways to intervene.

Web Sites

Maine Parents Net – www.maineparents.net

Sections of the Maine Parent's Kit are online and include: Monitor Your Teen, Medical Impact, Maine Law, and more.

The Partnership for a Drugfree America – www.drugfree.org

Sections include: Get Help, For Parents and Caregivers, For Teens. Also has many related pages about substances, including "7 Steps to Take If You Suspect Your Child Has a Drug Problem."

Parents - The Anti-Drug – www.theantidrug.com

Sections include: Drug Information, Is Your Teen Using? – Learn, Evaluate, Take Action.

Additional Steps to take if you think your child is using regularly:

4. Seek Support for yourself.



Talk with trusted family members, friends, or a professional counselor to ensure that you are setting appropriate boundaries and keeping yourself healthy. There are also Al-Anon meetings throughout the state. Al-Anon is a free, anonymous support group for family members of alcoholics. Attending meetings can help you learn about the disease of addiction and how to keep yourself healthy as you work through this issue.

5. Talk with your child with the goal of getting them an evaluation¹.

If you suspect that your teen might need more help than you are able to provide, a good next step is to try to convince him/her to go for an evaluation. A professional evaluation can help determine if there is a problem with current substance use.

PROFESSIONAL HELP IS SUGGESTED IF:

- Family relationships are strained or broken;
- Drinking or other drug use is causing problems (for example: truancy, failing grades, poor health);
- A healthcare provider, law enforcement officer, or school administrator recommends it;
- The steps you have taken so far don't seem to be working.

¹ Some treatment agencies use the term assessment.

What Services are Available?

Screening and Evaluation

The starting point for obtaining professional help for substance abuse is to determine whether someone needs treatment and, if so, what type is most appropriate. Free screening is available in some Maine school systems through the Juvenile Treatment Network on referral from designated school personnel. To find out if this is available at your school, visit the OSA web at www.maineosa.org/treatment/jtnlist.htm. Based on the outcome of this screening, your child may be referred to a local agency for a substance abuse evaluation. Even if your school is not part of this network, they may have other substance abuse services available. You can also call one of Maine's treatment agencies directly and ask about arranging a substance abuse evaluation for your child.

TREATMENT

If treatment is needed, different treatment options may be recommended:

OUTPATIENT COUNSELING programs offer individual, group and family sessions, usually for an hour or ninety minutes once a week.

INTENSIVE OUTPATIENT programs provide intensive and structured substance abuse counseling, three to four days a week. The programs usually last three or four weeks and may be conducted during the daytime or in the evening.

RESIDENTIAL REHABILITATION programs offer substance abuse treatment in a twenty-four hour residential setting for up to a full year. Treatment includes lectures, groups and individual counseling.

Finding and Accessing Services



There are many licensed substance abuse treatment facilities throughout the state, offering services that range from initial evaluations to counseling and treatment. Some accept health insurance and/or have a sliding fee scale based on your ability to pay for services. If you have insurance coverage, call your insurer to ask about your benefits and approved providers.

WHEN CONTACTING SUBSTANCE ABUSE AGENCIES, CONSIDER ASKING ABOUT THE FOLLOWING:

- Available times for appointments**
- Qualifications of the provider**
- Cost of services**
- Eligibility for reduced or sliding fees**
- Medicaid/MaineCare eligibility**
- Waiting list information**
- Appointment cancellation policy**
- Availability of family services**
- If needed, process for requesting interpreter services, handicap accessibility, etc.**

FOR A LISTING OF LICENSED SUBSTANCE ABUSE TREATMENT AGENCIES, GO ONLINE TO www.maineosa.org/directory or call the OSA Information & Resource Center.

If your child is resistant to help

As a parent, one of the toughest jobs you have is to figure out what you can control and what is your child's responsibility. There are many resources (print and professional) on how to navigate this uncertain road. It is very important that you set boundaries for yourself, identify ways to communicate about unacceptable behavior and follow through on consequences for choosing that behavior. The OSA Information & Resource Center has many books available for free loan with suggestions on how to work through this issue.

One of the most important things you can do is inform yourself about addiction and take care of yourself. The more you understand the disease, the better equipped you are to make decisions as they are needed. Becoming involved in a support group for family members can help you learn about the disease of addiction and how to keep yourself healthy through this difficult time.

For More Information

The Office of Substance Abuse Information and Resource Center provides Maine's citizens with alcohol, tobacco and other drug information, resources and research for prevention, education and treatment.

You can search our website online, or contact us for free listings of licensed treatment agencies, support group meetings, books, brochures, and more. If you are unable to access any of the web sites listed in this brochure, contact us and we'll print what you need and mail it to you.

Office of Substance Abuse Information and Resource Center

Department of Health and Human Services
AMHI, Marquardt Building, 3rd Floor
#11 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333-0011

1-800-499-0027 (Maine only) or
(207) 287-8900

TTY: 1-800-215-7604 (Maine only) or
(207) 287-4475

Fax: (207) 287-8910

Web: <http://www.maineosa.org>

E-mail: osa.ircosa@maine.gov

DHHS 24-Hour Crisis Hot Line 1-888-568-1112

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