

Parents in the Dark

Survey finds parents underestimate risks associated with alcohol/drug use in their children

Despite severe and lasting consequences of teen alcohol and other drug use—accidents, unintentional overdoses, violence, sexual trauma, and legal issues—the majority of parents today are relatively unconcerned about the threat to their children. A recent survey collected by Q Market Research on behalf of the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation suggests that most parents are both underconcerned about the dangers of children using alcohol and other drugs and overly confident that they, as parents, would recognize signs of use.

Surveyors polled a total of 2,454 parents with children between the ages of 12 and 24, with households mirroring the U.S. population in terms of geography, income, and race/ethnicity. The survey was designed to “take the pulse” of parent attitudes and beliefs around adolescent alcohol and other drug use and abuse.* Key findings are shown below.

Lack of concern by most parents.

Nearly 6 in 10 (59.2 percent) parents of youth ages 12–24 say that they are not concerned about their children’s possible use or abuse of alcohol or other drugs, despite government surveys showing that illicit drug use among teenagers remains high.

Easy access to drugs and alcohol.

One in four homes reports having prescription painkillers (opioids) in unlocked cabinets or accessible to children. More than half of the homes surveyed (54.4 percent) store alcohol out in the open.

False sense of knowledge.

Even though almost 8 in 10 (78.9 percent) parents think they have adequate education about child alcohol and other drug abuse, on average they could name only 2 out of 38 commonly known warning signs, or indications that a child is drinking or using drugs.

Don’t know where to turn for help.

Approximately one in five parents (18 percent) admitted they would not know where to turn for help if their child were struggling with alcohol or drugs. One in five (20 percent) said they would seek out their primary care physician.

Most doctors, however, lack training in identifying substance abuse. Less than 20 percent of primary care physicians consider themselves “very prepared to identify alcohol or drug dependence,” compared to more than 80 percent who are very comfortable diagnosing hypertension and diabetes, according to the National Center on Substance Abuse at Columbia University.

Parents play a key role

Talk early. Talk often.

If your child is old enough to recognize words or images associated with alcohol and drugs, your child is old enough for you to bring up the subject.

Establish consequences.

Set clear limits regarding alcohol and drug use and communicate these expectations regularly with your child, focusing on your concerns about overall health and safety. If you don't want your child to use alcohol until he or she reaches the legal drinking age of 21, say so.

Know the signs and symptoms.

The first signs of alcohol and drug use often show up at school—lower grades, skipping classes, hanging out with a different crowd. Unusual mood swings, lack of hygiene, unexplained cash, or loss of money are other signs.

Trash your stash.

Discard unused prescription medications and be aware of what your kids have access to in your home.

At the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation's center for adolescents and young adults in Plymouth, Minnesota, parent involvement is integral to the treatment and recovery process. Even after a child is discharged from treatment, the center provides parents with free recovery coaching and support groups. Learn more about our programs for adolescents, young adults, parents, and siblings at hazelden.org/youth.

*The survey of 2,454 U.S. parents was conducted by Q Market Research, Eagan, Minnesota. Findings have a confidence interval of 95% and a margin of error of +/- 1.9%.

Parent involvement is needed.

"Research has shown that parental involvement is an effective way to prevent chemical use and addiction among youths. Yet this national survey revealed a remarkable lack of parental awareness and concern about this important issue."

—Audrey Klein, PhD

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Hazelden, a national nonprofit organization founded in 1949, helps people reclaim their lives from the disease of addiction.