

Eight Warning Signs Your Child Could Be Addicted

Drug use by a child is one of a parent's worst fears. But when alcohol or other drug use becomes an addiction, it can ruin a child's life. Addiction in a child also can destroy the fabric of trust so essential in a family. Early detection and intervention are essential. Here are eight warning signs that your child could be addicted.

1. Physical clues (look for more than one and persistence over time)

- Change in eating habits and unexplained weight loss or gain
- Inability to sleep or wake up at unusual times
- Red or watery eyes, pupils larger or smaller than normal, blank stare, sniffing all the time
- Excessive sweating, tremors, or shakes
- Cold, sweaty palms or shaking hands; nausea or vomiting
- Extreme hyperactivity or excessive talkativeness

2. Sudden and sustained emotional changes

- Loss of interest in the family
- Signs of paranoia, such as being overly secretive or hiding behind locked doors
- General lack of motivation, energy, self-esteem
- Chronic dishonesty
- Moodiness, irritability, nervousness

These changes can become so severe that parents do not "recognize" their child and experience feelings of loss.

3. A pattern of changes in school attendance and grades

One of the first ways addiction shows up is in school, but most schools do not have the resources to identify the problem. Parents must look for signs, such as tardiness and attendance problems or a drop in grades. Talk to the school directly. Don't rely on automated phone messages, which your child can delete before you get home from work.

4. Several instances of unaccountable money or unexplained loss of money

Drug users often become drug dealers who come home with unexplained sources of income. Or, the opposite happens, and children start stealing from siblings or parents. Notice whether any game stations, jewelry, CDs, or tablets are missing. Watch for lies: "I'm just holding this money for a friend," or "I lost the money you gave me." Watch for unexplained debit card problems.

Trust your instincts.

"Parents are usually the first to sense a problem, even if they don't know what it is. If you see signs, seek the help of a professional."

—**Leslie Adair,**
PhD, LP, LMFT

*Director of Mental Health
and Family Services
Hazelden Adolescent and
Young Adult Services*

5. Dramatic changes in friendships

When a child starts abusing alcohol or drugs, one of two things usually happens with friends. The friend group either changes radically, with old friends dropping away and new friends entering the scene, or children suddenly have multiple sets of friends. In either case, children might become ultrasecretive about their mobile phone.

6. Uncharacteristic changes in mood or personality

In many cases, youth addiction is accompanied by mental health issues such as depression. It can be difficult to know which issue came first because many of the signs and symptoms of chemical use are also signs and symptoms of mental health issues. For example, depression or anxiety can be caused by drug abuse or be the reason a child starts using in the first place. A licensed mental health practitioner can help determine whether mental health issues are a concern and, if so, can make recommendations for appropriate treatment.

7. Drugs missing from the medicine cabinet

Many young people with drug abuse issues will search the medicine cabinet at home, while at relatives, with friends, or even while babysitting. Young people are savvy about what medications will get them high, such as ADHD medication and pain pills.

8. Deterioration in appearance

Addicted youth begin to pay less attention to how they look and to their hygiene. As a parent, you will notice their clothes aren't as clean as usual. Lack of sleep may make them appear especially drawn and tired. Fewer baths or showers may increase body odor. They have shifted their attention from taking care of their physical selves to focusing on getting access to drugs. Parents will find themselves commenting on this more often.

Look for any number of these warning signs. If you have concerns, talk to a professional who can help you determine whether your child's behavior warrants a drug and alcohol abuse assessment.



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