

SIGNS OF ADDICTIVE BEHAVIORS THAT PARENTS CAN LOOK FOR AS THEIR CHILDREN RETURN TO SCHOOL



By: Theresa Benonis,
MS, CADC

Addiction can be a compulsive and impulsive disease. Substance use, including experimentation, can start in early adolescence. Typically, when adolescents begin to experiment with substances, they might use them recreationally or socially. Addiction is progressive though. For some adolescents, experimentation can turn into addiction or dependence, which means that, as time passes, they can begin to experience higher tolerance and engage in behavior that is increasingly risky and not typical of their normal self or other same-aged peers.

The task for parents is to distinguish between the red flags of substance abuse and dependence and the normal, and often unpredictable, ups and downs of the teenage years. As the summer winds down and students head back to the classroom, here are some common signs of experimentation, addictive behaviors, physical symptoms, and ways to address substance use for parents to consider.

Experimenting with drugs or alcohol does not always lead to tolerance or abuse; however, early use can be a risk factor for developing a more-serious problem in the future. Risk of drug abuse can increase significantly during times of change or transition, such as entering a new school or grade, or during high periods of stress.

Some physical signs of substance use that parents should be mindful of include: unexplained and/or sudden weight loss or weight gain; clothes that are not fitting properly; a drastic change in appearance (e.g., dark circles under the eyes, red/watery eyes, dilated pupils, runny nose, or extreme sniffing not due to a cold or illness); changes in eating patterns; not taking care of self (e.g., not showering or washing hair); pale skin; lack of motivation; paranoia; or aggression. One of the most prominent physical signs of addiction is acute physical withdrawal, which can present as intense physical sensation and appearance of flu-like symptoms. However, the characteristics of withdrawal will depend on what substance is being abused.

One of the important components of treating the disease of addiction is recognizing the early signs and symptoms. In terms of behavioral signs of addiction, there are some common factors that can be more prevalent in adolescents. As an adolescent's behavior begins to change and become noticeable to family members, this can be a sign that experimenting with substance use has increased in severity to the point of addiction or dependence.

Ask yourself these common questions: Has your adolescent begun to isolate himself/herself or stay in his/her room for hours and not communicate with you? Is he/she sneaking around and demanding more privacy? Are there trust issues between you and your adolescent? Is your adolescent beginning to withdraw from activities that he/she once enjoyed? Does your adolescent have new friends/new peer group with whom you are not familiar or you may not know their parents? Is your adolescent missing work, school/school assignments, or daily activities that once brought

him/her happiness? Is your adolescent experiencing sleep issues, whether it's not falling asleep at a normal hour, trouble staying asleep, or having disturbed sleep patterns? Is your child having disciplinary problems at school? Is he/she leaving the house without permission or staying out late?

Because addiction is a disease of progression, it is important for parents to take notice if their adolescent appears to exhibit a loss of control over the amount and

rate of use or continued use despite facing consequences from either parents or another external force. Other emotional/psychological manifestations of addiction are: unexplained mood swings, appearing fearful, anxiousness, inattentiveness, anger outbursts, rage, increased irritability, paranoia, increased energy, lack of motivation, unexplained change in personality or attitude, and withdrawing from people. Feelings of apprehension, anger, confusion, and

resentment can surface when parents learn their child has experimented with substances. It is important to remain composed when confronting your teen and only do so when everyone is clear-headed. Explain your concerns and make it clear that your worry comes from a place of love. It is important that your adolescent feels supported. Professional counseling is available to help guide you through the process and answer all of your questions.

Theresa Benonis, MS, CADC has worked in the drug and alcohol field for 13 years and is currently the Director of Outpatient Drug and Alcohol Services at Penn Foundation, which includes three locations and several levels of treatment. She previously worked with adolescents at an outpatient provider for 8 years, running both outpatient and intensive outpatient groups for teens. She earned her undergraduate degree in Administration of Justice from Penn State – Abington and her graduate degree in Health Education from Arcadia University.

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