RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTS ON HOW TO TALK WITH THEIR CHILDREN ABOUT ALCOHOL AND DRUGS

1. **What are some tips parents can use to talk to their kids about alcohol and drugs?**

   The most important thing that parents can do is to actually talk to their children about alcohol and drugs frequently and regularly. It is best to talk with them in an informative, non-judgmental way using questions about their current exposure, if any, to alcohol and drugs from their friends. They should also talk about current events involving alcohol and drugs, using these topics as springboards in which to discuss the dangers, the risks and their concerns for their child’s safety should they consider using drugs and alcohol. One point that often makes an impact with teenagers is the fact that alcohol and drugs will injure their brain. A teen’s brain develops rapidly between the ages of 12 and 22. The brain is very vulnerable and susceptible to injury during these formative years. Drug use during the teenage years will injure the brain more significantly compared to someone who uses drugs or alcohol in their late 20s and 30s.

2. **How can a parent verify whether their child is using alcohol or drugs?**

   Parents should ask and look for signs and symptoms that their child is using alcohol or drugs. Some of the symptoms include:
   - Red eyes, flushed cheeks or face
   - Mood changes or emotional instability
   - A messy, lack of care for their appearance
   - Secretive phone calls or new, unknown friends
   - Unusually clumsy, lack of coordination and balance
   - Inability to focus on tasks or handle stressful situations
   - Disappearing for long periods of time without explanation
   - Reckless driving, car accidents or unexplained dents in the car
   - Truancy or loss of interest in school, extracurricular activities or hobbies

   Parents can also buy urine drug screen cups and breathalyzers to determine if they are using. Having these items in the household and using them on a random basis or when there is high suspicion of altered behavior can be useful for a number of reasons. For some teens, having these tools at home can act as deterrent to using. Also, confirmation of use by hard data will help alleviate concern in a parent or confirm that their suspicions are well-founded and they need to take the next step to getting their child help.

3. **What behaviors should parents avoid if they believe their child is using drugs?**

   First and foremost, parents should avoid ignoring the problem. If a parent thinks there may be a problem, there probably is a problem. Many parents’ reaction is to assume that their child is not using alcohol or drugs. If the thought even crosses a parent’s mind that there may be something going on, then it is essential that they take active steps and measures to address their concern to verify if there is any drug or alcohol use.
4. Should parents look for evidence before engaging in a confrontation?

If parents suspect there is a drug or alcohol problem with their son or daughter, they should activate all strategies to try and verify if there is use of these substances. Parents should not feel uncomfortable about using techniques to find out if there is drug or alcohol use – looking for evidence is well within their right. A child living in their house is under their jurisdiction and it is their responsibility to know what is going on. Parents should feel free to inspect their child’s room, backpack, car or any other area where they think their child may be hiding alcohol or drugs.

If alcohol is in the house, it should be kept under lock and key at all times. Parents should be aware and watch the levels of alcohol in the bottles to make sure it is not decreasing when they are not drinking. Parents should clear all medicine cabinets of any addictive substances like prescription pain medication or tranquilizers that are not being used. If they do need to be used, the medicine should be kept under lock and key somewhere besides the family medicine cabinet.

5. What is enabling behavior? How do parents enable their child’s drug use?

Enabling is behavior that is performed by someone who is attempting to help another person whom they care about. Enabling usually originates from a great deal of love or care for another person. But when we enable someone by trying to protect them from the consequences of alcohol or drug abuse, it is actually very destructive behavior. Parents often enable or deny their child’s drug use because it is so terrifying for a parent to acknowledge that their loved one is abusing substances. A common example of parents enabling is continuing to give their son or daughter money for school or books or gas money for the car, knowing their child might continue to use it on alcohol or drugs.

Parents can avoid enabling behavior by becoming more educated about what enabling behavior is, what alcohol or drug addiction is and the signs and symptoms to look for in their loved one. Through therapy from a trained addiction professional, the parents will learn to take the appropriate steps for confronting and providing restrictions for their child. Then the child will be able to recognize that the parent is changing their behavior and is not going to allow them to continue using alcohol or drugs.

6. When should parents seek professional help?

Parents should seek professional help at the first sign or symptom that their child is abusing alcohol or drugs. Becoming educated on the signs and symptoms and getting ideas and strategies from a trained addiction professional on what to do at home are the first steps. Then taking their child to a professional for a full, comprehensive addiction psychiatric assessment can be lifesaving. All of these specific actions will send a very clear message to the son or daughter that the parents are taking this very seriously and that they care very much about them and will not tolerate this behavior within the family system.

7. Can/should parents raise the issue with the child’s school?

Parents can definitely raise the issue of potential substance use at their child’s school to help understand if there have been any behavior changes observed by others. If the parent talks to the school counselor or the student’s advisor about their concerns of potential substance use, they would probably be able to get much more data about their child’s attendance and potential truancy issues, as well as any change in homework and academic performance. Working in partnership with these school administrators can provide much more data and insight into the magnitude of the problem, if the child, in fact, does have a substance abuse problem.
8. **What kind of treatment should parents seek for themselves and their children?**

Alcohol and drug addiction is a chronic disease that affects not only the child, but the parents and the rest of the family. The latest research from the National Institute of Health recommends that substance abuse should be treated comprehensively, including the assessment and treatment of psychiatric issues, if present, and the use of anti-addiction medications, if necessary. At the same time, addressing medical issues, wellness and nutrition and providing sober peer-based support systems such as AA, Smart Recovery or faith-based programs, are extremely necessary parts of their overall treatment plan.

For the family, obtaining some family therapy will be paramount because the parents’, child’s and sibling’s behavior and communication has been affected by the alcohol and substance use. As a result, it is essential that the family build new, healthy behavior and communication skills so that the healing of these relationships can begin. In some cases, parents and other family members may be experiencing depression or other psychiatric issues that may be important to treat. This type of comprehensive approach is best found in an evidence-based treatment system or through an addiction psychiatrist who, if properly trained and board-certified in addiction psychiatry, can bring a variety of different skill sets to the assistance of both the family and child.

9. **What are the pros and cons of having an intervention?**

An intervention is very helpful when standard discussions and treatment recommendations have not been followed. The benefit of having a credentialed interventionist is that they can provide relief for the parents from having to be the primary referee or instigator in getting their son or daughter to understand that they do need help. One of the problems with alcohol and drug addiction is that it causes brain injury, so people are not able to see that they have a problem. The role of an interventionist is to help the child to see that their only choice of continuing to live with their family is abiding by the recommendation of the interventionist.

A drawback to having an intervention is that they can be expensive. The process could generate negative emotion in the child, sometimes causing alienation. However, the cost and risk of alienation is well worth it because if the child does not get into treatment, the risk of continued substance use and its repercussions will be significantly high.

10. **Should parents call the parents of other children who socialize in their child’s circle?**

Parents should always be in contact with parents of children who socialize with their child. Understanding other parents’ morals and views, including addiction and substance use, is incredibly important and, in this day and age, is a requirement for effective and safe parenting.

11. **Should parents differentiate between one time or occasional use and addiction?**

While there should be a no-tolerance policy toward alcohol and drug use, parents should differentiate between one time or infrequent use and addiction. It is important to keep an open dialogue so the child feels they can talk to their parents about any issues. Alcohol and drug use can be very frightening for a child, especially if they start using too much and get into a situation they do not know how to handle. There should be consequences of alcohol and drug use, but those consequences should be communicated with the child well in advance of any issue. This is why continual, open communication about substance use from an early age is very important.
12. Advising when a child needs drug treatment or psychiatric help.

Many times a parent is not adequately trained to assess whether a child needs drug treatment or psychiatric help. If parents feel that their child may have a drug, alcohol or mental health problem, they need to take them to see a trained addiction psychiatrist or board certified psychiatrist for an assessment. Many times, drug and alcohol use are underlying factors of a behavioral health problem. Parents should not hesitate to seeking help because getting help for their child early can mitigate serious damage to their brain and improves the chances of a positive outcome. The longer a child continues to use substances, the more brain injury will occur and the more difficult it will be for the brain to reboot itself. Although the brain will heal during treatment, continued use will only make it more difficult to convince your child to get into treatment.

13. What if my child blames me for their addiction?

Whether it is a child or an adult dealing with alcohol or drug addiction, when they are confronted with substance use they will blame everyone else within their entire system -- parents, children, work, church, a best friend, etc. They will blame anybody and everybody except themselves. This is a normal part of the disease of addiction. The blame game should not be taken seriously by the family because knowing the alcohol or drug user may be suffering from a brain-injury, their current insight and judgment is extremely poor. Take the blame and let them know that it doesn’t matter who is to blame. Tell them, “At this point, the only thing that matters is getting you treated for this because you are now struggling with on a daily basis.”

14. What if my child won’t answer my questions and just gets upset?

Frequently, a substance abuser or addict will use anger to scare away the people who are trying to help them. If parents allow a child’s anger to scare them away, to shut down the concern and questions about whether there is a problem or not, that will do nothing but make the problem worse. If a child won’t answer the questions, take them to a professional, get an interventionist, ask another family member, friend or someone they respect to come in to help. That is usually the best strategy to get a child into an appropriate treatment program. Remember, that is the goal. No matter what it takes, you need to get the child into an appropriate treatment program that is not solely AA-based. If a program is just focused on the 12 steps, the chances of your child’s success are low. If you use a comprehensive approach as outlined by the National Institute of Health, you have a significantly greater chance of long-term success.

15. Should parents punish or discipline a child that keeps using drugs?

Allowing a child to suffer consequences of their actions is very important. The best way to approach this is to wait until the child is sober; if that is in question, make sure to always use a breathalyzer or urine drug screen. When the child is sober, sit down with them, tell them you are going to help them come up with a contract and help them determine what consequences will apply if they continue to use substances. If the child does not respond to certain consequences at home, they may need to be introduced to a higher level of care. If a child is using alcohol or drugs, they should be in a treatment program – either individual therapy, group therapy or an intensive outpatient program. If they continue to use substances while they are engaged in one of these treatment programs, then they should be taken to a higher level of care, such as inpatient facility.