

Arrested Development

What parents need to know about adolescent and young adult substance abuse

The teenage years and young adulthood are times of pushing boundaries, taking risks, and learning through experience. But when alcohol and other drugs are in the mix, risk taking can bring increasingly dangerous and potentially irreversible consequences, including psychological and emotional damage as well as a greater likelihood of developing addiction later in life.

Hazelden's Center for Adolescents and Young Adults in Plymouth, Minnesota, specializes in assessment and treatment of addiction and co-occurring disorders for young people ages 12–25. Our experts at the Plymouth campus explain that, in terms of psychological and emotional development, adolescents and young adults are especially vulnerable to the harmful and lasting effects of alcohol and other drugs. Five key considerations for parents are discussed below.

1. The adolescent and young adult brain is not fully mature.

Development of the brain's prefrontal cortex—the center for logical thought, judgment, and higher order decision making—continues until a person reaches their early- to mid-20s. Use of alcohol and other psychoactive substances, including marijuana, other illicit drugs, and prescription painkillers, can alter or impair healthy brain development.

2. Teen substance use increases the likelihood of other risky behaviors.

Teenagers and young adults tend to feel invincible and many are prone to impulsive behavior. Their focus is less on the consequences and long-term effects of their behavior and more on fitting in socially, testing norms, and experimenting. Alcohol and other drug use can impair the young person's still-developing capacities for logical thinking and impulse control.

3. Substance use threatens a young person's emotional development.

Adolescents and young adults learn to delay gratification through practice and experience. For example, a young person learns he must study to earn good grades or show up for work on time in order to receive a paycheck. Emotional health and a sense of well-being come as a result of making small efforts on a day-to-day basis that lead to long-term benefit. This important learning curve is interrupted for teens who use—and come to rely on—alcohol or other drugs as a shortcut to feeling good.

4. Drinking or drug use at a young age is a risk factor for addiction.

It is well established that regular use of alcohol or other drugs during the teenage years increases the likelihood of developing a full-blown substance use disorder. Substance abuse in adolescence is also associated with a number of adverse consequences such as increased medical and mental health problems, absenteeism and disciplinary problems in school, as well as unintentional injury and even death.

5. Parents shouldn't wait for their teen or young adult to ask for help.

If you sense that your son or daughter is drinking or using other drugs, trust your gut and get answers. Don't count on your son or daughter to see and accept the truth if he or she has a problem with drinking or drugs. In fact, what you can count on is your teen insisting he or she does not have a problem.

“Substance abuse profoundly threatens a young person’s psychological and emotional development.”

—Tim Portinga, PsyD, LP

*Clinical Supervisor, Hazelden’s Center for
Adolescents and Young Adults*

The good news is that treatment works.

Young people can and do get sober every day. Hundreds of young people find freedom from addiction every year at Hazelden’s Center for Adolescents and Young Adults. Families find help and support at Hazelden too. Learn more today by visiting hazelden.org/youth or by calling **855-348-7043**.

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