



Parenting a Teen with Active Substance Abuse

When a parent brings their teenager for an assessment, they are often confused, overwhelmed, and shell shocked by the unending battle of parenting a teen with active substance abuse. Beyond a doubt, parenting a teen with active substance abuse can feel hopeless. Consequently, parents tolerate and accept behaviors that can surprise clinicians.

Shell Shocked from the Battle

Often a parent has great trauma related to their adolescent's substance use. They may have been lied to, publicly humiliated by a child's arrest, stolen from, or have people imply they aren't good parents. With this in mind, the professional who assesses a teen for substance use disorders expects an ally in the parent. In fact the opposite may be true, the clinician finds a parent who openly wonders whether anything will help and becomes worried about the personal cost.

Shockingly the parent will defend their teen's use of alcohol and other drugs as 'just teenage experimentation' even when they are suffering the consequence of their child's serious illness. Even with irrefutable evidence of a serious illness, the parent enables by giving in to their child. This decision isn't about loving their child less; it is about a parent's experience with powerlessness.

These same parents would do anything to follow a doctor's recommendation of dietary restrictions for diabetes, medication and exercise for high blood pressure, or physical therapy for a broken leg. How is this possible?

Today's Parenting is about Facilitation and not Leadership

Leonard Sax explains, "Parents are incapable of speaking to their children in a sentence that ends in a period. Every sentence ends in a question mark." Today's parenting is about facilitation and not leadership. This change is harming adolescents.

Leaders teach their children the difference between right and wrong and how to have a meaningful life. They want to keep their children safe and to prepare them for adulthood. A facilitator transports; they expect gratitude and don't have the stomach for conflict or being the authority figure. Leaders make hard decisions and work to make them happen. Facilitators allow the child's interests and desires to overtake what they know may be the right thing to do.

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Helping a child develop a skill set for a successful life is advice for parents of 'normal' teens. This process cannot start when an adolescent is using substances. Imagine you're a competent parent driving on a highway, your car is driving smoothly except for a few avoidable potholes and suddenly you are in the middle of a minefield. It stops you dead in your tracks wondering what is your next move. Parents of teens with substance use disorders drive through mine fields daily, but they don't realize it's abnormal.

A Good Assessment Gives Parents A Pathway to Leadership

Sax found that developing healthy skills is an adolescent's best predictor of success in adulthood. At an [assessment](#), parents can relearn to assert this healthy point of view. They can regain their primary role as the family leader. However, parents need a professional providing guidance and good alternatives. Parenting a teen with active substance abuse is nearly impossible on your own. Marijuana and alcohol use won't permit normal parenting without help and guidance.

While it is distressing to clinicians when parents are willing to support whatever their teen 'wants' to do, it is important to realize these parents experience 'shellshock'. As a result, they first experience anger, fear, and pain that give way to numbness and exhaustion. Parents permitted disrespect, isolation, and substance use hoping that it would get better with age, however they find the problem has gotten worse.

An assessment helps these parents remember that their teen needs parental guidance. Giving them a clear direction is like clearing the minefield. When recommended, entering treatment can be the first step in recovery. As a consequence the child has the best chance to start a journey to become a healthy adult and a parent can take satisfaction in their leadership role.