



5 Steps for Professionals Who Recommend Substance Use Treatment

Helping a teenager who is using drugs or alcohol is never easy. The first thing to realize is that substance abuse often starts as a part of early teen socialization. Often, it isn't immediately problematic. For some teens, over a short time, it becomes destructive to themselves and their families.

Early Interventions are Often the Most Successful

Just as adolescence is about a process of change, so is substance use. Going from simple experimentation to a severe disorder is multiphasic. The research suggests that early interventions are the most successful, just like with other illnesses. Professionals often play a pivotal role in helping families become aware of how alcohol and drug use is a problem.

As a professional, expect resistance from those you are trying to help. Parents find themselves too close to the storm to understand and accept the problem. Like their child they look for an easier, simpler way to change their child's behavior. They still hope their teen will just stop and everything will return to normal. Behavioral health professionals find themselves negotiating to

get help for a seriously ill teen when the problem and recommendations appear obvious.

As an orthopedic surgeon you would never have a parent say, "My son doesn't need his broken ankle surgically repaired." An oncologist may never hear, "I know you recommended 12 radiation treatments, but can we just have 4 or 6 treatments?" On the other hand, therapists who recommend substance use treatment often hear, "Are you sure this is really necessary?"

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Most parents don't understand why therapists recommend substance use treatment. They may not realize (or are in denial) that a child's regular use isn't just poor behavior or bad luck. Changing this attitude will help the teens you see. There are 5 Steps to improve the prospects of a teen entering necessary treatment and they start by reducing denial.

STEP 1: HELP THE PARENT ADMIT THAT THERE IS A PROBLEM.

Parents are often afraid that if their child has a substance use problem, others will judge them. Additionally, if they seek help, their son or daughter won't cooperate. Today's parents are more concerned about their child loving them and appreciating the sacrifices they make, instead of guiding their child down a needed path. As the expert, you have to provide them with the facts and help them understand the risks of doing too little, too late. I meet parents regularly whose young adult children died from heroin overdoses. They are left with the guilt of not doing something when alcohol or marijuana abuse were the primary problem. Each of us want to avoid this.

STEP 2: ASSIST PARENTS AND CLIENTS IN FINDING A COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT.

All assessments are not created equal. A qualified substance use assessment starts with a clinician trained in chemical dependency or addictions **not** just general behavioral health. This evaluation must include meeting with the teen, talking to the parent(s), and independent testing to help confirm the diagnosis. A 50 minute individual clinical interview with a teenager is inadequate to provide the necessary information or to validate its accuracy. Here are the four components to a comprehensive assessment for teen substance use.

1. An interview with the teen
2. A meeting with the parent(s)
3. Objective, validated testing
4. Time to share and explain the rationale for the conclusions and recommendations

STEP 3: ENCOURAGE PARENTS TO ACCEPT THE PROFESSIONAL'S RECOMMENDATIONS.

As a professional, you see individuals and families who don't follow your recommendations. This can occur in spite of your best effort. Acceptance of these recommendations and follow through with SUD treatment is less likely with other behavioral health issues. Why? Parent beliefs play a large role in refusing treatment.

- When a parent believes stopping drug use should be easy, resistance to treatment rises.
- Thinking this is just bad judgment or being unlucky increases resistance to treatment.
- A parent expecting their adolescent to want to come to treatment makes resistance even more intense.

Parents must have a paradigm shift. A change from "substance use is bad behavior and should be punished" to "substance use disorders are treatable illnesses" represents huge growth in a parent's schema. When this occurs, early interventions with substance abuse is seen like other illnesses: treating it early provides the best chance for a healthy future.

STEP 4: HELP PARENTS AND THE ADOLESCENT GET EVERYTHING POSSIBLE OUT OF THE TREATMENT PROCESS.

Treatment programs offer myriad interventions to assist in the process of continuous recovery. Adolescent Substance Abuse Programs, Inc. (ASAP) has a philosophy of individualized treatment, where coordinating care with the referring professional, physicians, courts, and schools is the norm. Additionally, parents and teens receive guidance that is specific to their experience. Parental engagement is of paramount importance with children and adolescents. If parents won't engage in the process, their child will not be successful.

The treatment process also continues outside of treatment hours. Clients and parents need to engage in mutual support meetings. Additionally, they need to think deeply about what they are learning in treatment and act upon their new knowledge.

STEP 5: DON'T LOSE SIGHT OF THE GOAL.

Because it is easier to be the same than to be different, change is hard. For those who embrace recovery, new friends, commitments, and attitudes are a beginning. These changes lead to developing a philosophy consistent with doing whatever it takes to stay on a path to good health and being drug free. Teens who continue in recovery become prepared for new opportunities by staying closely connected to supportive people and family. They don't become their 'old (pre AOD use) self' but a 'new (better informed and healthier) self.' Mistakes are seen as growth opportunities rather than bad actions.

Where do I start?

When you have a client or patient where substance use is interfering with their treatment, call us at 513-792-1272. We will provide you with free consultation to assist you in referring them to a higher level of care. As the referring/recommending professional, you remain a positive force in their lives. We encourage our clients to remain connected to their therapists, and we want to work with you to help your client become clean and sober so they can continue to work on their other mental health issues. Clinicians can follow their clients through treatment and continue treatment once a more intense level of care has ended.