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Knowing the warning signs of adolescent drug abuse

Adolescent behavior can be startling and confusing to parents. The normal challenges of growing up inspire teenagers to try new ways of behaving. It's part of learning who they are and what they will become.

Nevertheless, some behavior may signal drug abuse. Parents and teachers should be alert when they notice the following signs:

- Sudden change in behavior, mood or attitude.
- Resistance to discipline (coming home late, skipping school).
- Intolerable behavior (unreasonable demands for freedom, avoiding family activities, refusing to do homework).
- Notable decline in performance at school.
- Increased need for money; borrowing more often, stealing from family, friends, employer.
- Change of friends, particularly if new ones use drugs.
- Secretiveness; refusing to talk about activities and friends.
- Inability to concentrate, express thoughts clearly or remember well.
- Physical deterioration. May sleep less, lose weight, have red eyes.

Remember, these behaviors are not positive evidence of drug use. The only way to be certain a child is using drugs is for him or her to admit it or proof to be found—drugs or drug paraphernalia in the child's possession or clear drug intoxication.

If you suspect or a child IS using drugs, discuss the issue with firmness and understanding. Make clear to the child the risks of drug use, but do so in an informed and realistic manner. Reiterate family values about drug use. Above all, set a good example. Discussions will be less effective if parents themselves abuse alcohol, tobacco or drugs.

Drug abuse is a serious and even life-threatening problem. Professional care and the continued love and support of the family form the best means for a healthful resolution. Parents can turn to the school staff, their physician, hospital, drug information services and drug treatment centers.