



Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula®  
**BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SERVICES**  
Clint Eastwood Youth Program



# The road to addiction

How to steer your child in another direction

*The earlier an adolescent begins using drugs and alcohol, the greater the chances of his/her use progressing into chemical dependency.*

(Journal of Substance Abuse, 1997)

Teens who start drinking by age 13, have a 43 percent chance of becoming an alcoholic. If there is a family history of alcoholism, the likelihood of that 13-year-old becoming an alcoholic increases to 58 percent. In contrast, a person who starts drinking at 21 with no history of alcoholism in the family has a 10 percent chance of becoming an alcoholic.

Why does this happen? From birth to 18, the brain is growing and developing, taking clues from the environment to determine the amount of chemicals it needs to produce. Serotonin and neurotransmitters are chemicals that affect how the brain regulates functions such as sleep, mood, and appetite. Using drugs or alcohol during this brain-growth period may stop the brain from producing neurotransmitters as it confuses the drugs or alcohol as neurotransmitters. This results in a chemical imbalance and a craving for the drug or alcohol to correct the imbalance of serotonin and other neurotransmitters.

## What else leads to alcohol or drug use and addiction?

- To maintain the desired effect of drugs and alcohol (the high), the user must increase the amount of drugs used.
- Stimulant drugs (such as cocaine or methamphetamines) cause dopamine to be released in the body in large amounts. This “rush of dopamine” makes the user develop a tolerance to the drug and he or she may experience a loss of pleasure unless more drugs are used.
- Drug use may be a social event. As the importance of one’s peers increases (as it does in middle and high school) drug use may become a bonding activity and may take on “a life of its own.”
- The 1997 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse found that:
  - adolescents were 39 percent more likely to have used marijuana in the past year if they had friends who had already tried marijuana.

- Adolescents were 10 times more likely to use marijuana in the past year if they thought their parents would not be very upset if they found out about their drug use.
- If drugs are readily available and easy to obtain, drug use will likely increase.
- Use of alcohol and drugs — even legal drugs — by parents increases availability to the teen and appears to increase the likelihood of adolescent use.

## What's a parent or teacher to do?

- Be involved. Spend time together. Go out for ice cream together. Have conversations while driving. Eat meals together whenever possible. Play cards or take a fun class together.
- Ask where your kids are going. Tell your child you expect to know who they will be with and what they will be doing. Know their friends and their friend's parents.
- Provide supervision. The “danger zone” for drug use and other problem behaviors is 3–6 p.m.
- Make your position on drugs and alcohol use clear! Talk about drug and alcohol use. Let them know you forbid them to use these dangerous substances.
- Listen to your kids. Improve your “active” listening skills. Give support — don't criticize, belittle, or lecture. Ask questions.
- Seek help when you don't know what to do or if there is a problem.
- Talk about your concerns and your hopes for their life. Be positive about what they are doing well. Encourage activities that keep them healthy.

## But how do I tell my child not to do something I did? Isn't that hypocritical?

When you come out strongly against drug and alcohol use your child may ask about your use at their age. Be prepared to answer honestly. Many parents did try drugs and alcohol during their adolescence, but we now know more about the dangers of substance use than we did when we were teens. Give examples of others who have had trouble from their use of drugs (the neighbor who crashed his car while high, the uncle who is addicted to alcohol, the teen who dropped out of school and is working at a low-paying job he hates, the rock star who committed suicide).

Use this question as an opportunity to talk about why drugs and alcohol are dangerous; why we may be attracted to using them; why we want our children to avoid making the mistakes we (or others) have made.

This information is brought to you by Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula's Clint Eastwood Youth Program, providing a structured program to treat drug and alcohol abuse as well as mental health problems.

For more information or to schedule a free screening, please call

**373-0924 or 800-528-8080**



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