



Is My Child Using Drugs? What Do I Do?

parentingmontana.org/is-my-child-using-drugs-what-do-i-do

Listen to an audio file of this tool.

Introduction

If you are worried that your child/teen may be using marijuana or other drugs, don't panic. You are not alone. Whether you are concerned about the misuse of prescription pain medication, marijuana use, or other drug use, there are many resources and help available. Let's explore the signs and symptoms of substance use, ways to talk with your child/teen about concerns, and options you have for getting your child/teen help. The earlier you intervene, the easier it is to get your child/teen back on track!

Signs and Symptoms of a Problem¹

There are several warning signs that your child/teen may be using marijuana or other drugs, and these signs can be divided into three categories: physical, behavioral, and psychological.

Physical signs:

- Red, bloodshot eyes
- Change in eating or sleeping patterns
- Lack of coordination
- Change in or not caring about physical appearance
- Shakes or tremors, particularly in the morning
- Injuries or bruises

Behavioral signs:

- Change in behavior at school – missing school, skipping class, slipping grades
- Change in interactions with family — can range from unusually giggly to more withdrawn
- Using incense or other deodorizers to cover up smells
- Sudden change in peers or a switch in where they hang out and what they do
- Money or valuables missing
- Hiding from you, locking doors, or being secretive

Psychological signs:

- Moody, irritable, or easily angered
- Change in personality
- Change in level of motivation – seems spacey, unmotivated, or lethargic

- Prone to paranoia
- Appears withdrawn or depressed

What Do I Do First?

Start by having a conversation with your child/teen. If you are worried that your child/teen is using drugs, prepare for this conversation so that you do not enter the conversation panicked, anxious, or angry. If you are angry and upset, your child/teen will react similarly and get defensive. Remember that the goal of your conversation is to gather information, listen to your child/teen, and share your concerns. The strategies for [intentional communication](#) will come in handy during this conversation.

- Make sure you have enough time set aside for this conversation, so it is not rushed or interrupted.
- Set the stage for the conversation by starting with an open-ended question to gather information. It might be something like, *“I have noticed that you have been quiet lately, and your grades are slipping a bit. I worry when you don’t seem your usual self. What’s been going on?”* You could also follow up with, *“Catch me up a little bit about how things have been going.”*
- If your child/teen responds with “Nothing” or something equally uninformative, you could say, *“Unfortunately, when you don’t tell me anything, I am left assuming things and creating scenarios in my head, but you can help me sort out the truth.”*
- You could also start the conversation with a direct approach regarding marijuana or other drugs. This might sound something like, *“Tell me what you think about marijuana”* or *“What are some of the stories you hear from your friends about using marijuana?”*
- Let your child/teen know that you are there to support and to provide whatever help and resources your child/teen may need.
- Several short discussions held frequently rather than a one-shot, long drawn-out conversation will have lasting “sticking” impact over time (meaning: multiple, ongoing conversations/dialogues are more effective – not a one and done approach).

Now What?

There are generally two outcomes that result from having a conversation with your child/teen about drugs. One outcome is that you as a parent or one in a parenting role feel better and are reassured that your child/teen is not using drugs. The other outcome is that you are still concerned. Let’s explore both outcomes and discuss strategies that can help in both situations.

I Have Talked With My Child/Teen, and I Am Reassured That My Child/Teen Is Not Using Drugs.

Even if you are reassured that your child/teen is not experimenting or using drugs, it is still important to assure your child/teen that you are available should they have questions about drug use or concerns about a friend who may be using drugs. It is also important to reinforce to your child/teen that if they are ever in a situation where they or their friends have used marijuana or other drugs, that you are available to go and pick them up or arrange a ride for them.

Affirm your child’s/teen’s behavior to not use drugs.

The conversation opener might sound like: *“I’m so glad we can have these conversations, and I appreciate you being truthful with me. I am also glad that you have made the choice not to use marijuana or other drugs.”*

Invite your child/teen to engage with you in conversation in the future if they have a friend they are concerned about or if they make the choice at any point to use drugs.

These conversation openers could look something like this:

- *“I’m proud of the choices you’ve made and you should be too. I know that the pressure to try marijuana at your age can be intense. Tell me a little more about what you know about your friends’ use of marijuana and other drugs.”*
- *“You should be proud of the choices you’ve made. It can be hard when your friends are using marijuana or other drugs and you decide you’re not going to. Please know that in the future, if you make a different choice, I will come get you wherever you are to keep you safe.”*
 - In this situation, it would be valuable to follow up with your teen the next day (or in a few days) when you feel they are open to talking. You may choose to apply [logical consequences](#).

Most Montana high school students (79%) do not use marijuana. Compared to the students who don’t use marijuana, students who do use marijuana are 7 times more likely to also use other drugs.²

I Have Talked With My Child/Teen, and I Am Still Concerned That My Child/Teen Is Using Drugs...

...And My Child/Teen Is Concerned as Well.

It is scary to realize that your child/teen might have a problem with drugs or may be struggling with issues that make them vulnerable to drug use. Often, parents or those in a parenting role believe that their child’s/teen’s behavior is a reflection on them and their parenting. This can lead to parents wanting to deny that a problem exists and sweeping the problem under the rug.

As difficult as it can be, it is important to have these tough conversations with your child/teen. It is also important to remind your child/teen that, according to your household rules, drug use is not permissible or tolerated. Drug use includes experimenting or “just trying” and it includes marijuana and prescription medications prescribed for someone else, as well as other drugs. Work to withhold judgement and anger about your child’s/teen’s choices, keep your questions open ended (avoid questions that only allow for “yes” or “no” answers), and be comfortable with silence as you and your child/teen process this conversation.

Possible conversation openers include:

- *“I am concerned about your marijuana use, and it sounds like you might be concerned as well. You also are aware that as a person under the age of 21, using marijuana is illegal. It is also a rule in our household that we do not use drugs, including marijuana. How can we work together to make some changes around this behavior?”*
- *“Addressing your drug use is a priority for me. It sounds like you are also wanting to stop using drugs. The fact that you recognize this is an issue is an important step in making some changes around your use. Let’s talk about some ways that we can get you help to stop. I appreciate you being open with me and am so glad that you want to make this change. Know that I will support you and work together with you on this.”*

...But My Child/Teen Is Not Concerned.

Unfortunately, if a child/teen is on the path of drug use, the likelihood that they will just grow out of it is low. Without intervention, the problem continues to worsen. It is not because your child/teen is not strong enough or doesn't have the will power. Because of the impact that substances have on the brain, it is very difficult for your child/teen to quit on their own.

The earlier you intervene, the easier it will be for your child/teen to get back on track. If your child/teen is using drugs regularly or using illicit drugs, professional help may be necessary. (See below "Additional Support" for more information and resources.)

The things you do can make a difference in your child's/teen's substance use behaviors. Research indicates that strong parent-child communication as well as setting rules and monitoring the child's/teen's activities can help curb adolescent substance use.³

The earlier you intervene, the easier it will be for your child/teen to get back on track!

Your child/teen may appear to deny that they have a problem with drugs. Use language that expresses your concern while withholding judgement and anger about their choices. Avoid questions that will elicit only "yes" or "no" responses and be comfortable with silence as you and your child/teen process this conversation.

You may find that the conversation gets too difficult to continue at some point, and you or your child/teen needs to take a break. Be open to this and agree to continue the conversation at a specific future time if necessary. The conversation starters below assume some level of denial or resistance from your child.

The following possibilities take an empathetic, gentler approach:

- *"I am really concerned about your marijuana use. I've noticed that you are...not keeping up with your school work like you used to...hanging out with different friends these days...not as patient with your little brother...Listen, I know it can be hard to stop, especially when you are using to help with feelings of stress or anxiety. Let's talk about what we need to do to get you back on track."*
- *"I am really concerned about your drug use. Remember, I was your age once, and I know what it's like to deal with pressure from friends and the stress of school and sports. I am here to support you. Because you are still living in our home, I am also responsible to keep you safe and prevent you from behaviors that could ruin your future. Talk to me about what we can do to turn this behavior around."*

The following possibilities take a sterner approach for an ambivalent or resistant child/teen by asking the child/teen to consider the possible consequences of this choice or explore further what led them to this decision.

- *"I am really concerned about your marijuana use. Not only is it illegal under the age of 21 and not permitted in our household, drug use at your age can have serious consequences. What kinds of things do you think can happen if you are caught?"*
- *"I am really concerned about your drug use. I am responsible for your safety and am committed to helping you through this. That's why I'm going to get some professional help for us. I've made an appointment for tomorrow and will be taking you to see a doctor."*

Additional Support

Even if you and your child/teen are both concerned and committed to working on strategies to stop their use of marijuana or other drugs, your child/teen might benefit from some extra help and support. And, if your child/teen is not ready to acknowledge that their drug use is a problem, extra support can help encourage needed change. Help is available and treatment works.

To find help in your community:

- Your child's/teen's pediatrician or doctor can provide health-based educational information for your child/teen. They may be able to provide an assessment and brief counseling for your child/teen. Often doctors can also give information and referrals for additional counseling or treatment.
- Reach out to the counselor(s) at your child's/teen's school for recommendations and support. They can offer help to your child/teen during their school day and are often familiar with local resources that are useful.
- Call the National Helpline at 800-662-HELP (4357) for information on treatment and referrals.
- Find treatment resources using SAMHSA's locator tool available at <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>

Harm Reduction

While you are seeking support and your child/teen is working on stopping their drug use, there may be a period of time that their drug use continues. During that time, you can consider harm reduction strategies. These are things you can do to reduce the likelihood your child/teen will experience preventable harms from their drug use behaviors.

If your teen is using drugs, including alcohol or marijuana, or misusing prescription pain medication, they should not drive. You could provide alternative transportation options and ensure they do not have access to a vehicle.

If your child/teen is currently using drugs, there are some key things you can do right away to help keep them safe. Make sure they don't drive and have naloxone available in case of overdose. Reach out to your healthcare providers or school counselor for support in getting your child/teen help to stop using drugs.

Misusing prescription pain medication (or opioids) or using heroin places individuals at risk of overdose death. If you know or suspect your child/teen is misusing opioids or using heroin, you should be aware of this risk. Illicit drugs are also sometimes laced with fentanyl, a type of opioid that is dangerous and is associated with high risk of overdose. Harm reduction strategies to prevent overdose death include regular check-ins or supervision of the individual and having naloxone available. Naloxone is a medication that reverses overdose and is available as an injectable or nasal spray. It is available at many pharmacies in Montana; no prescription is needed, and it is often free. More information on overdose signs and naloxone is available at www.naloxone.mt.gov.

Intravenous drug use comes with other potential harms, such as infections (hepatitis, tetanus, abscesses, etc.). Using only clean needles, using them only once, and disposing of them safely are important harm reduction strategies for intravenous drug use. Look for a needle or syringe exchange program in your area for more information.

Closing

Remember that whatever your child/teen shares with you about why they decided to use drugs, it was likely a valid choice in their mind. It is important to listen without judgment and communicate that this is not a safe or healthy choice for them and that the behavior will need to cease.

Reassure your child/teen that you will support them in getting help to stop. Keep in mind that while the choice to begin using drugs may have been a result of peer pressure or the desire to “look cool,” their use may also be a way for your child to manage deeper issues like depression, anxiety, or stress. Work with your child/teen to uncover the core issues and identify appropriate treatment to handle these issues in a healthy and appropriate manner.

More information about teen drug use is available at teens.drugabuse.gov/parents.
Connect with other Montana parents about youth drug and alcohol use at LetsFaceItMt.com.

Download and print the at-a-glance resource highlighting key information about youth drug use.

References

[1] National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2018). Marijuana: Facts Parents Need to Know. Available at https://www.drugabuse.gov/sites/default/files/mj_parents_facts_brochure.pdf

[2] Montana Office of Public Instruction (n.d.). *2019 Montana Youth Risk Behavior Survey: High School Results*. Helena, MT: Author. Retrieved from https://opi.mt.gov/Portals/182/Page%20Files/YRBS/2019YRBS/2019_MT_YRBS_FullReport.pdf

[3] Kuntsche, S., & Kuntsche, E. (2016). Parent-based interventions for preventing or reducing adolescent substance use – A systematic literature review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, *45*, 89-101.

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