



Substance Misuse in Teens

With **Fiona Spargo-Mabbs OBE**, founder of the **Daniel Spargo-Mabbs Foundation**

This factsheet covers the substances available to young people, the risk factors, what parents can do to guide and advise as well as signs to watch for if you are worried about your teen.

Research has shown that:

- Over 50% of teens have engaged in binge drinking
- 1 in 10 teens drink regularly by age 17
- One-third have tried cannabis
- 1 in 10 have used harder drugs like cocaine and MDMA
- Drug use among school-age children has risen by 40% since 2014

Despite these stats, only a small subset of teens develop substance use disorders.

Common Substances used by Teens

Substances are increasingly accessible to young people, and it's vital that parents stay regularly informed. They include:

- Vapes
- Alcohol
- Cannabis
- Cannabis edibles
- Cigarettes
- Nitrous oxide
- Ketamine
- Cocaine
- MDMA
- Magic Mushrooms
- Steroids
- LSD, Benzodiazepines, and Nicotine Pouches.



Recognising the Signs of Substance Abuse

1.

Behavioural Changes:

Be alert to signs such as paraphernalia, social withdrawal, shifts in friendship groups, neglect of self-care, and declining school performance.

2.

Physical Signs:

Watch for indicators like dilated pupils, unusual odours, and significant physical changes such as weight change or increased muscle mass.

3.

Mental Health Decline:

Look for changes in mood, motivation, sleep and mental health.



Talking to your Teen about Substance Misuse

While schools have a duty to promote pupils' wellbeing and provide accurate information on drug and alcohol misuse, Parents also need to be clued up and armed with information about the effects and risks of alcohol and drugs.





Assess the Risk:

Understand the age appropriate risks associated with different substances for your child, considering their age and level of risk-taking. Discuss the long term physiological issues associated with addiction, the potential impact on their mental health and possible changes in behaviours.



Understand the Teenage Brain:

Teen brains are still developing, with the pleasure and reward centres maturing first. The areas responsible for assessing situations, weighing risks, making decisions, and controlling emotions and impulses remain underdeveloped until the mid-twenties. The adolescent brain is like a car with a powerful accelerator, but weak brakes.



Managing Emotions:

Beyond experimentation, teens may use substances to manage emotions, feel relaxed or happy, cope with anxiety, improve sleep, stay awake, and manage weight.



Peer Pressure:

Understand its impact on your teen and equip them with ways to resist pressure from peers and make safe/smart choices.



Legal & School Considerations:

Educate teens about the legal implications of substance misuse, such as the prohibition on selling vapes to individuals under 18 and what their School policy is for drug and alcohol education and misuse.



Practical Tips for Parents to Help



Start Early: Begin discussing alcohol, smoking, and drugs with your children as soon as possible. They do listen, and the earlier you start talking, the better.



Open Conversations: Use current events, media, and personal experiences to start conversations about substance use.



Curiosity and Support: Show genuine interest in their world and provide a safe space for them to express themselves without fear of judgement.



Be Prepared: Parents should be prepared to discuss the potential consequences of substance misuse, including addiction and health risks.



Skills Development: Help teens build coping skills, problem-solving abilities, and self-esteem to better handle challenges and stress, and teach them to manage risks safely to stay safe.



Boundaries: Negotiate boundaries and show them that you are aware and experienced - this balance of firmness and understanding helps maintain trust and safety.



Consistent enforcement: Consistency with boundaries is necessary to maintain trust and safety.



Balance Privacy & Safety: If you notice worrying signs or behaviour changes in your teen, it might be necessary to discreetly check their room for substances, but avoid regular intrusive searches to maintain trust.

Dealing with Substance Use

Immediate Action: Address concerns calmly and avoid confrontations, especially if your teen is currently under the influence.

Addiction Awareness: Recognise that adolescence is a critical period for brain development, which heightens the risk of addiction.

Support Systems: Seek professional assistance if needed, including consultations with GPs, local services, and support groups.

Festivals, Social Events & School Holidays

Prepare teens for situations where substances may be present and discuss strategies for staying safe. It is best to do this in the build-up to an event, rather than when they are heading out the door!

Check-in Points: Establish regular check-ins and a plan for emergencies.

Medical and Welfare Awareness: Ensure teens know where to find medical and welfare support at events.

Escape Plans: Create a code word or signal for teens to use if they need to leave a situation.





Emphasise your love and support for your teen.
Encourage open communication and involvement in their
lives to help them navigate the challenges of adolescence
safely.



Fiona Spargo-Mabbs OBE is the director and founder of drug education charity, the Daniel Spargo-Mabbs Foundation. She co-founded the charity in 2014 after losing her 16-year-old son, Daniel, to ecstasy. Fiona is also an award-winning author and works tirelessly with schools, parents, and teens to educate and support them on substance misuse.

There are many sessions on the **Let's all Talk Mental Health hub** for you to view on substance misuse and related issues, including the talks linked below.



[Drinking and
Substance Misuse](#)



[School Holidays and
Substance Abuse](#)