

# Talk Early, Frequently To Educate Against Drug and Alcohol Use

ROME – (August 2003) For many kids, a new school year means new friends and new temptations to experiment with drugs and alcohol.

“It’s never too early to start talking to your kids about drugs and alcohol,” said Marion Lindquist, a certified counselor at Rome Memorial Hospital’s Community Recovery Center. “Education and knowledge are essential to help kids make good choices. When we start teaching our kids to say no to strangers, we should also be teaching them to say no to certain substances.”

According to Lindquist, counselors are treating adolescents who started using drugs or alcohol as early as fifth and sixth grade.

“Frequently, these younger users are following in the footsteps of older brothers and sisters that have dabbled in chemical use,” Lindquist said. “Younger siblings look up to their big brothers or sisters and are fascinated by the things they do. Sadly, if they’re poor role models, the younger siblings can get hooked on drugs and alcohol. That early experimentation leads down a long road of social, family, legal, health and educational problems.”

Curiosity and peer pressure are among the most common reasons kids give for experimenting with drugs or alcohol, though a growing number say they are trying to escape from stress, Lindquist said. Some teens are depressed, fear failure, or struggle with family problems. They want immediate gratification to satisfy their boredom.

“The biggest excuse I get from kids is ‘everyone is doing it,’” she said, “And I assure them that there are many of their peers who aren’t.”

According to the 2001 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, 10.8 percent of youths 12 to 17 were “current drug users” - had used drugs within the month prior to the survey. Alcohol use was more prevalent with 28.5 percent of 12 to 20 year-olds reporting current use of alcohol in 2001. Of this number, nearly 6.8 million or 19.0 percent were binge drinkers and 2.1 million or 6.0 percent were heavy drinkers.

Substance abuse treatment can help adolescents get back on track, according to Lindquist. “Parents shouldn’t wait for their children to hit bottom before seeking help. As soon as you recognize the signs and symptoms, call to talk to someone about the problem,” she urged.

“In healthcare, we often go to specialists to rule out the worst. We don’t think twice about having a biopsy to rule out cancer. If you think that your adolescent is using drugs and alcohol, have them evaluated. I’ve had many parents tell me that they should have picked up the phone two years earlier when they first suspected that their child had a problem.”

Located at 264 W. Dominick St., the Community Recovery Center offers three groups for treating adolescents with substance abuse problems. The 12-week adolescent group is the first step to recovery

with education and counseling. If a teen continues to make poor choices and has other behavior issues, a six-week anger management program may be recommended. An aftercare recovery group is available for teens that are dependent and have deeper issues to resolve.

“Ultimately, it’s up to them if they are going to stop using drugs or alcohol,” Lindquist said. “We explain the facts and the consequences and share stories about the negative things that can happen. We make them accountable.”

Lindquist advised parents who have adolescents in treatment to set a good example. “It’s not wise to have alcohol in the house if your child is in treatment. It’s too easily accessible and sends the wrong message.”

### **SIDEBAR: Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms of Substance Abuse**

Early intervention is essential to help teens make better choices and avoid a complex life of social, family, legal, health and educational problems associated with drug and alcohol abuse. You may suspect chemical abuse if a number of the following signs and symptoms suddenly show up.

- Change in activity level, including periods of lethargy or fatigue or hyperactivity.
- Sudden increase or decrease in appetite.
- Uncoordinated movements, such as staggering gait, slow movements, dropping objects, clumsiness.
- Change in speech patterns, such as slurred or garbled speech, expressionless speech, fast talking, incomplete thoughts and sentences.
- Red eyes, watery eyes, droop to eyelids.
- Runny nose, increased susceptibility to infections and colds.
- Shortness of breath, hacking cough, peculiar odor to breath and clothes.
- Change in sleeping habits.
- Change in appearance.
- Distortion in time.
- Needle tracks.
- Mood alterations.
- Thought alterations.
- Sudden changes in friends, school performance.
- New idols.
- Problems with authority/legal issues.
- Presence of paraphernalia.
- Flagrant disregard for all rules.

Many of these characteristics are typical of adolescents who don’t use drugs. Parents should look for changes in the exaggeration of behavior as well as combinations of these characteristics.

### **SIDEBAR: 10 Steps to Help Your Child Say “NO”**

1. Talk with your child about substance abuse. Know the facts and challenge the myths.
2. Learn to really listen to your child. Hear what they’re not saying.
3. Help your child feel good about himself/herself. Poor self-concept is one of the most frequent reasons why kids use drugs.
4. Help your child develop strong values.

5. Be a good role model.
6. Help your child deal with peer pressure.
7. Set family policies that help your child say "No."
8. Encourage healthy, creative activities.
9. Team up with other parents.
10. Know what to do if you suspect a problem.