



FCD Educational Services Warning Signs of Use: A Parent's Guide

Moody, secretive, angry, tired, flaky, broke. A typical teenager? Absolutely. But these characteristics could also be warning signs of a substance abuse problem. It's hard for parents to know for sure, and the last thing you want to do is accuse a non-using child of drinking or taking drugs. Your best chance for avoiding a false alarm while being alert to possible abuse is to know what the warning signs are – and to know your child. There's no substitute for being tuned in to your child's activities, friends, feelings, thoughts, and dreams.

Following are some behaviors that may indicate substance use and abuse. If you observe these symptoms and behaviors, consider their frequency, duration, and/or intensity. It's normal for adolescents to go through friends and interests as quickly as they do sneakers; to have uncontrollable laughing bouts and temper outbursts; to demand greater autonomy and privacy; to cycle through periods of melancholy and self-deprecation. Your knowledge of your child will suggest whether you're observing your child's healthy, if at times, trying growth, or a problem that warrants intervention and/or professional help.

- Increased need for money
- Sudden changes in mood or attitude
- Withdrawing or isolating from family
- Paranoia, irritability, anxiety
- Abrupt decline in attendance or performance at school or work
- Resistance to discipline at home or school
- Unusual or disproportionate displays of temper
- Loss of interest in hobbies, activities, and/or sports
- Change in eating or sleeping habits
- Abandonment of long-time friends
- Taking up with a new group of friends who use drugs
- Not wanting parents to meet friends
- Heightened secrecy about actions or possessions
- Stealing or other high-risk behavior
- Depression
- Fatigue
- Sexual promiscuity
- Health complaints: cough, runny or bloody nose, nausea
- Trouble getting up in the morning
- Disappearance of alcohol in the house
- Slurred speech
- Lack of coordination
- Dilated pupils, glassy eyes
- Appearing “spaced out”
- Excessive or inappropriate laughter
- Hyper, nervous physical energy
- Evidence of drugs and drug paraphernalia, such as pipes, rolling papers, eye drops, matches, lighters, spoons, straws
- Drug-related clothing and other articles
- Chemical odor on child's breath*
- Sweating without obvious cause*
- Nonsensical speech*
- Plastic bags or rags with a chemical odor*
- Implausible stains on the child's face, fingers or clothing (e.g., correction fluid, paint, glue)*
- Household solvents, cleaners, vegetable, spray, aerosol cans, and/or adhesives in the child's room and/or household trash *
- Child seems dazed or dizzy*

* These signs could be strong indicators of inhalant abuse, which can cause permanent brain damage or death from even one incident. Studies show that inhalants are the most frequently abused substance for middle schoolers, with one in five children having tried them by the eighth grade. If you discover that a child is high on inhalants, ventilate the room and call for emergency medical assistance immediately. Stay calm and avoid exciting the child, as this can trigger hallucinations, violent behavior, or heart failure. If the child should lose consciousness, initiate CPR at once.