

10 reasons why Teenagers take Drugs

1. Peer Pressure

For many teenagers, there comes a point when doing what their friends think is more important than the respect they have for their parents.

Teenagers are caught halfway between being a child and an adult; they're trying to find out where they fit into the world. This transition feels a lot safer and less risky when you attach yourself to a group where you feel you belong. Teenagers are looking for reassurance from each other and so they want to stay part of the 'group' whether it's by wearing the right clothes, having the right friends or even taking drugs.

The strange thing about peer pressure is that the very people that these teenagers feel under pressure from are doing exactly the same thing! And hey presto! peer pressure becomes a never-ending cycle of one teenager trying to keep up with the other one, just to feel like they belong.

The problem is that you can soon get into a situation where the pressure is so great and you've come so far that you just have to keep on going, hence the rising trend in teenagers experimenting with illegal drugs. Smoking has almost become like a rite of passage: unless a teenager has very firmly made up their mind that they're not going to smoke.

The Schools Health Education Unit have discovered that around 10 to 15% of the average Year 9 class will have tried drugs in the past few months. The pressure to conform, when at least 4 members of your class are experimenting with drugs is immense, especially if those 4 are your friends.

Parents need to understand the influence of friends and peers on their children. There's no doubt that building a close relationship in the early years of childhood, with openness and respect, will pay dividends in the teenage years. Resist the temptation to pick your child's friends - it will only result in them choosing the opposite - and concentrate on trying to keep communication open.

2. Yet More Peer Pressure!

TV, posters, magazines. In whatever form, the media has a huge impact on teenagers. Whilst some magazines take a responsible approach with articles on drugs, many of them subtly undermine it by the general 'if it feels good, try it' tone of the magazine.

Some are a great deal less subtle. Piers Hernu, editor of 'front' (the new magazine for teenage lads which roughly translates as a junior version of hit 18-24 year old magazine 'Loaded') says:

“We have to reflect what is going on in the world and what fascinates and intrigues the young male. We can’t be harking back to the 1930’s.....I have to take on board the influences of society.”

So what we have here is a generation of young people under the influence of the media, who in turn feel that they need to keep up with the teenager or their advertiser’s product isn’t going to sell.

Parents have to draw the line somewhere on what their children watch or read, but remember that you won’t be able to screen everything...like what they read from friends at school. Using magazines or programmes that take a questionable line as a discussion starter may be a better bet to get your children thinking..

3. The pressure cooker mentality

Anyone who works with teenagers will tell you that there are some young people for whom turning to drugs or alcohol is simply a way of dropping out and forgetting their problems.

Things can get so bad, at home, in school or in a relationship that teenagers get past the worrying and being upset stage and moved on to the ‘don’t care’ stage. Like a pressure cooker, if a teenager is faced with enough problems and hassles, they will eventually explode at the slightest thing. Alcohol, drugs or cigarettes are a way of forgetting about it all; blanking out the hurt.

And it’s not just about kids who have had a difficult family background or experienced a tragedy in their lives. It’s also those seemingly successful ones, those who are in every extra-curricular club at school, always do well in exams and perform duties around the house. The expectations and the pressures piled onto some of these kids can become unbearable. Unable to live up to them anymore, they take what we would see as the easy way out. and turn to smoking, drinking or other drugs to calm down.

Someone to talk to can make a huge difference to young people under pressure. parents need to accept that they won’t always be the right person for this. Youth workers, teachers and grandparents are often good listeners too.

4. Me = Nothing

The fact is that teenagers who think little of themselves don’t care about what they do to themselves.

There’s not always a clear reason why some teenagers suffer from low self-esteem. Many teenagers really do hate the way they look, feel, act or dress, in fact almost everything about themselves. It’s not always as serious as that, but it is an issue for almost every teenager; such is the pressure to be beautiful and successful.

Some come from very supportive family background, secure environments where they know they are loved; but they still think very little of themselves. So, when it comes to the decision to take drugs, smoke or drink, they see it as a way of being with the ‘in’ crowd

which will in turn boost the way they feel about themselves. What they think about themselves is dependent on what others think of them.

Teenagers who place little value on themselves may spiral out of control, not caring what happens. It's not that they don't know the dangers of taking drugs...it's that they don't really care about them.

They say it takes five compliments to off-set one criticism. Teenagers find negative comments from parents very difficult to cope with. Many parents are surprised at how negative they are when they sit down and think about what they've said to their teenager in the last week.

5. It's inevitable

Teenagers who end up on the street culture (kicked out of home or from care) are often drawn into the drug scene. As one fifteen year old says "well if you had no money and someone gave you £40 for carrying some gear across town - what would you do?"

6. It's her age!

One of the reasons, teenagers take drugs, smoke or drink is that, quite simply, it's their age. They are experiencing more and more independence, making more and more of their own decisions. There's something about being a teenager that makes experimentation the norm.

In fact, the scenario is very familiar. Remember when they had just started learning to walk and you couldn't leave the room in case they bumped into the table, played with the sockets or touched the gas fire? Although you were able to stop them from doing the things that might harm them, a small child can't always understand why.

The teenage years is another experimental age: they're constantly changing their image, the music they like, what's in and what's out.

The problem now of course is that they don't obey you without question anymore! They see you as not understanding their situation or how they feel.

Parents need to be there as a constant resource but not in an "I told you so!" role. When they do genuinely want your input they need to know that they are going to get it without a lecture, without shouting, without criticising their friends.

7. Everyone else is doing it

When everybody else is doing it - why shouldn't you? Teenagers are in a culture where smoking and drinking are not necessarily a big deal. And taking drugs is rapidly achieving the same status. The sheer scale of drug use means that teenagers who decide not to take drugs are increasingly going to be seen as the 'different' ones, the odd-ones out.

Certainly one of the pressures can be when teenagers see parents, older brothers and sisters or teachers, smoking and drinking. It's hard for them to believe that they shouldn't do the same, simply because of their age.

It's not what you say, it's who you are. Teenagers have a keen sense of hypocrisy and won't listen to parents who break the rules they set for them. Being a positive role model is more important to your children than many parents realise.

8. Hey, look at me!

Part of being a teenager is rebelling: testing the boundaries so you can work out what's right and wrong. Most teenagers know that if they lit up in front of the TV at home, or came in to the room brandishing a Martini they're going to provoke a reaction! If you're looking for attention, for someone to sit up and take notice, then getting involved in smoking, drinking or taking drugs is a sure way of doing it.

Teenagers who aren't getting on with their parents have been known to look for the thing that is going to wind them up most. It's almost an automatic reaction.

Sometimes taking a different approach works well. Not letting them go ahead and do something illegal, but perhaps being prepared to talk through what's happened without a shouting match or tears.

9. The roller coaster of boredom and excitement

If something's illegal, it makes it just that little bit more exciting for a teenager! And excitement is something they're looking for.

The most common phrase used by teenagers has to be "I'm bored!"...even though today's teenager has probably got more to do than ever before! Smoking cigarettes is illegal before the age of 16 and most children start experimenting around the start of High School. The novelty soon wears off after this and whilst they still might do it, they perhaps turn more of their attention to alcohol. There's no doubt that one thing can lead to another: 54% of 14 and 15 year old smokers had tried other illegal drugs, but only 2% of non-smokers had done so, according to a MORI poll. Once the pattern is set, research shows the stakes get higher.

Parents may find their teenagers complaining of boredom, whatever they try and do to entertain them! Don't despair! Taking a firm line if they do end up doing something illegal will, at least, make it clear where the boundaries are.

10. Because they can!

Teenagers are, on average, better off than they have ever been. They've got more money and they're at an age where they've got more freedom to go out and do what they want.

In other words, they've got more opportunities to take drugs, start smoking and drink to excess because they can and as 'Billie' the pop star says 'because they want to!'

Of course, the answer is not to shut your teenager away for the next 5 years of their life until you think they're mature enough (however tempting that thought might be sometimes!). But parents can impose simple, fair and mutually agreed conditions. Believe it or not, teenagers actually want guidelines for what they can and can't do.

Sarah is 14 and lives in Newbourne, Suffolk and is allowed to go out once a week to the Rollerink but must be home by 11pm. She says: "I'm sure my parents don't let me go out with much money 'cos they're worried about me spending it on alcohol or cigarettes or worse, though I wouldn't. I know people who smoke and drink and some who say they take drugs, but I don't. My parents would be hysterical."

Some parents seem to give their teenagers more freedom and allow them out until late at night or even to smoke underage. Although their friends look at them with envy, many of the children in this position see it as their parents not caring for them and wish they would impose more rules.

"Don't get too depressed" says one youth worker, "parents feel they're not making much progress but you'd be amazed how much you *can* help your child just by knowing what the pressures are."