

# Ten Questions Parents Ask FCD

## 1. What drug or drugs frighten you the most? Why?

All drugs should frighten us because all drugs have the potential of being abused. It is easy to make the case that tobacco is the most frightening drug because smoking of tobacco is the chief cause of avoidable death in our society – some 470,000 people die each year from smoking-related illnesses even though they realize that smoking is harmful to their health.

In terms of adolescents, alcohol frightens us the most at FCD because alcohol-related accidents are the leading cause of death among young people 15 to 24 years of age. Alcoholism is one of the most serious health problems in the US today. Although considerable progress has been made in public understanding of alcoholism, it continues to be misunderstood and misdiagnosed, and is frequently shrouded in stigma, myth, or stereotype.

Approximately one in ten drinkers experience negative consequences from their use of alcohol and continue to drink. The earlier a teen starts drinking, the greater his or her chances of becoming an alcoholic or alcohol abuser later in life. In a survey of 42,000 adults, it was found that those who began drinking before age 15 were four times more likely to develop into an alcoholic than those who waited until they were 21 or 22 to drink.

According to the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, the chances of becoming an alcoholic drop by 14% with each year a teenager delays drinking. According to Buzzed: The Straight Facts about the Most Used and Abused Drugs from Alcohol to Ecstasy, an excellent book on drugs and drug use, alcohol is the drug used most often by high school seniors: "Though the problems associated with underage drinking are well known, we know very little about how alcohol affects the brains of young people. Recent studies using animals have shown that when the brain is young it is more vulnerable to some of the dangerous effects of alcohol, especially on learning and memory function. If this turns out to be true in humans, then children and adolescents who drink may be powerfully impairing the brain functions on which they rely so heavily for learning."

## 2. How much influence do parental attitudes and role modeling have on teenage drinking and other drug use?

A tremendous influence! Research shows that children whose parents talk to them about drugs are less likely to use drugs. Parental attitudes and modeling are powerful, untapped prevention tools. In the same way that parents can influence their children to not use drugs, well-intentioned adults can also inadvertently support teenage drug use by sending mixed messages about alcohol and other drug use. Making statements such as "What a hard day! I need a drink"; finding humor in drunkenness; assuming that adolescent experimentation with alcohol and other drugs is inevitable; portraying drinking and/or drug use as "cool" – all of these behaviors encourage kids to drink, or to feel abnormal or ostracized if they do not. Most weddings, graduations, dinner parties, and celebrations of all types center on alcohol. Is it any wonder our children are in a hurry to drink?

An FCD teacher once asked a group of fourth graders, "When do adults drink?" "When they take their coats off," a boy replied. Unsure of what he meant, the FCD teacher asked him to explain. "Whenever anyone comes to our house my father says, 'May I take your coat and would you like a drink?'" This father may not realize that he is sending a message that says alcohol is part of every adult social interaction in their household.

FCD is not an "abstinence-based" program. We believe that there is nothing wrong with moderate and responsible adult drinking, and take pains to point this out to teens and parents alike. But we do wonder why children aren't getting equal exposure to a message that says if you choose not to drink, this, too, is normal and rewarding. Where are the estimated one-third of all adults who don't drink? Why are they so invisible?

### **3. What are FCD's views on teen party supervision?**

Teen parties should be supervised. Each family needs to determine methods of supervision and what the child's responsibilities will be in communicating and enforcing rules and expectations. The following guidelines can be used when hosting a teenage party in your house:

#### *Before the Party*

- Establish ground rules: Your child needs to know what they are, why you are setting them, and what your expectations for him or her will be.
- Assume *your* responsibilities: It is illegal to offer alcohol to guests under the age of 21 or to allow guests to use drugs in your home. You may be brought to court on criminal charges, and/or have to pay monetary damages in a civil lawsuit if you furnish alcohol or other drugs to minors.
- Limit the scope: Consider keeping the party small. Smaller groups are easier to handle. Set a time when the party will end. Open-hour parties are more difficult to control and your guests' parents will appreciate having a time limit set. This will help ensure that all teenagers will be home at a reasonable hour.
- Alert neighbors: Talk to your neighbors ahead of time if you anticipate that the size of the party might impact the neighborhood (i.e., parking, loud music, outdoor lighting, etc.).

#### *During the Party*

- Be present and visible: Enlist other parents to help you so that you will have enough chaperons for the number of teenagers present. While you don't need to hover or join the party yourself, make your presence known by periodic visits to "check" on the food.
- Be alert to signs of alcohol or other drug use by teenagers at the party: If you serve punch, taste it occasionally. Do not let guests leave the party and then return. This reduces the opportunities for off-site drinking and other drug use.
- Be prepared to be the "bad guy": You may need to refuse entry to uninvited crashers, notify parents if their child arrives under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, and/or ask guests who bring drugs to leave. Anticipate where you would go in the event that medical treatment is needed for a guest.
- Monitor teens who are driving: Never let anyone drive under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. You may have to take car keys, call a cab, call a parent, or ask a sober guest to drive someone home. Don't forget that it can also be unsafe to allow a sober teenager to drive inebriated passengers who may be rowdy and out of control.

#### 4. What should I do if my child tells me that a friend is using drugs?

The younger students are when they first experiment with alcohol and other drugs, the greater the risk that they will become substance abusers or addicts later in life. Therefore, it is essential that parents and young people become aware of the warning signs of substance abuse and learn how to intervene appropriately.

First, recognize that your child's coming to you with her concern is a tremendous expression of trust. Reward this trust by offering all the support you can as your child deals with this difficult and confusing situation.

Present chemical dependency to your child as a health issue rather than one of deficient morals, willpower, or character. Discuss ways to help the friend as opposed to getting the friend in trouble. Then walk your child through the steps of an early intervention:

- Express concern in a caring, non-judgmental way: Help your child to identify specific incidents and examples that illustrate her friend's substance abuse. Use I-statements -- "I'm worried about you" -- as opposed to "You're ruining your life."
- Use specific examples: "I was really upset when you got drunk at Cindy's party and I had to walk all the way home" as opposed to "You have a drinking problem."
- Pick the right time: Only talk to a friend when he is sober and clear-headed. Talking to a person under the influence is a waste of time.
- Set limits: Help your child to recognize that people can inadvertently enable a friend's drug use by lying, covering up, or making excuses for him. While your child may not be able to change her friend's behavior, she can set limits that protect her from awkward or dangerous situations. ("I'm not going to do your homework for you." "I only want to spend time with you when you're sober.")
- Don't expect miracles. Most people who get help for alcohol or other drug problems do so because family or friends have lovingly intervened. But such interventions rarely work the first time. Your child should not get discouraged if her friend doesn't immediately change his behavior. Such a change may not occur for years. But if and when it does, your child's expression of concern, added to subsequent interventions by other concerned friends, will have made a big difference.

Finally, make sure that your child has support while dealing with this issue. A caring parent may be enough, but your child may also want to talk to her school counselor or doctor, or even attend Alateen or Al-Anon meetings.

#### 5. Where do you think the main pressure on kids to use drugs originates?

Teens give a variety of reasons for using alcohol or other drugs:

- Emotional Reasons

To...

- ...feel more grown up
- ...feel better about themselves
- ...feel more self-confident
- ...escape problems
- ...reduce stress and anxiety
- ...take a risk
- ...assert independence.

- Physical Reasons

To...

- ...feel relaxed
- ...stop pain
- ...get a rush
- ...feel good
- ...increase energy and endurance
- ...be able to stay up late

- Social Reasons

To...

- ...loosen up
- ...be accepted by peers
- ...overcome shyness
- ...escape loneliness
- ...be recognized or admired by friends

- Intellectual Reasons

To...

- ...reduce boredom
- ...satisfy curiosity
- ...experiment
- ...be more creative
- ...improve attention span

- Environmental/Cultural Reasons

- ...movies and songs that portray drug use openly and approvingly
- ...stores that sell drug paraphernalia
- ...easy availability of alcohol or other drugs
- ...family and friends who use drugs

## **6. Do you think marijuana poses a greater health threat to young people today than it did in the 60's? Why?**

It is not that marijuana poses a greater health threat now than in the 60's; it is that in the 60's we didn't have as much information about marijuana or how the brain functions as we do today. Marijuana is a mind-altering drug which has THC as its major psychoactive ingredient. People's experiences with marijuana can vary widely depending on how the drug is ingested and how much of it is taken. According to Buzzed, "When someone smokes a single joint, hundreds upon hundreds of chemical compounds enter the body. This makes it impossible at present to truly understand all of the effects of marijuana."

According to Dr. Joseph Liptik, a psychologist and substance abuse specialist, "There are both physiological and psychological effects of chronic marijuana use. These include deteriorating psychomotor performance, diminished attention span, and diminished memory capacity. These factors promote learning difficulties, and can reduce a student's ability to incorporate and process information, impairing his or her ability to work effectively in school and learn from experience. Chronic users can also experience reduced physical strength, amotivational syndrome, lethargy, and depression. Chronic users are sedating their central nervous system, and therefore not feeling their feelings. The most profound impact is that chronic marijuana use interferes with the normal psychological development of adolescents".

Marijuana is an especially insidious drug for adolescents because they don't recognize its risks. They think of it as a "soft," natural, harmless drug when, in fact, we know that it impairs lung functioning, poses a cancer risk, suppresses hormones that regulate reproductive systems, hinders concentration, increases the chances of accidents while driving, decreases mental flexibility, and inhibits the formation of new memories.

### **7. What should I do if I discover that my child has used or is using drugs?**

First, go on a fact-finding expedition. Learn everything you can about the incident. What drug was taken? Do you believe it to have been a one-time-only event, or evidence of a chronic pattern? What lesson(s) did your child derive from the experience?

Based on the answers to these questions, you have a number of options: discussion, discipline, and/or professional evaluation. Discussion can help you to understand your child's feelings and motivations; the drug use may have been an effort to make friends, reduce stress, relieve boredom, etc. Helping your child to find alternative methods for achieving these goals may eliminate the problem. Since a child's drug use diminishes the parents' trust in his judgment and responsibility, disciplinary consequences that reflect this are often appropriate. These can include grounding, loss of driving privileges, earlier curfews, etc. While punishment *may* stop a child from further experimentation, it will not usually stop more chronic alcohol or other drug use.

If a more serious problem is suspected, a professional evaluation should be undertaken. Most families do not seek professional help because they fail to understand the nature of chemical dependency, hope the problem will go away, or enter into their child's denial. They may consider drug use an inevitable "right of passage." A professional evaluation can determine the extent and seriousness of a young person's alcohol and other drug use. Evaluations assess family chemical use, emotional and academic issues, and possible physiological and psychological factors. A properly conducted evaluation provides a structure for understanding the child's use and risk potential, and offers the family recommendations and support for resisting further chemical use. Chemical dependency is a primary disease and must be addressed; counseling and/or medication will not be effective so long as drug use continues.

### **8. When or under what circumstances is teen alcohol use permissible?**

This is a very personal family decision. As a general rule of thumb, we encourage adolescents to delay experimentation with alcohol for as long as possible. Teenagers from families with a history of alcoholism are at particular risk for alcohol abuse later in life. Drinking during the teenage years may never be a wise choice for these children. In many families, alcohol is used as a part of religious traditions or family celebrations. Parents will need to make their own decisions regarding their children's use of alcohol within the home. When doing so, they need to remember that there is a great difference between a supervised glass of wine, and unmonitored access to free-flowing champagne at a wedding party.

### **9. How did you (the FCD teacher) make your own decisions regarding alcohol or other drug use when you were a teenager?**

Most of us who drank during our teenage years can't recall making a conscious decision to drink -- it just seemed to happen. Those of us who chose to not drink or use other drugs during our teenage years seem to have considered our options much more thoughtfully. We may have had peers or adults in our lives who supported us in that choice, an alcoholic parent whose behavior turned us off to drinking, or interests and activities that filled our lives. FCD encourages parents to re-live their adolescence and think about who or what influenced their use of alcohol, tobacco, and/or other drugs at that time. This helps them to understand the forces at play in their own children's lives (e.g., parents, friends, media, feelings, etc.).

## 10. How can parents best help their child(ren) to remain drug free during the teen years?

- Choose "teachable moments." Bring up the subject of alcohol and other drugs casually, as opposed to sitting your child down for a formal "talking to." Teachable moments come up in response to newspaper articles, current events, public policy debates, and portrayals of drinking and other drug use in movies, on TV, and in advertisements.
- Listen! Children of all ages are more likely to talk with parents who listen. Giving too much advice or pretending to have all the answers blocks the lines of communication and discourages children from turning to their parents for guidance. Provide a forum where your child can express views and ask questions without being grilled, lectured, or judged.
- Bolster your child's self-esteem. Help your child to develop interests and attitudes that will help her to feel capable and confident. A child who feels positive about herself is more likely to have the self-respect to say "no" to alcohol and other drugs.
- Articulate and model family values. Strong family values and expectations regarding drug use can help your child to maintain healthy behaviors and make healthy choices in the face of temptation and cultural and social pressures.
- Scrutinize your own attitudes and behaviors. Example is a parent's most powerful teaching tool.
- Recognize the power of peer pressure in your child's life. You can help to ensure that peer pressure is a positive force in your child's life:
  - Spend time with your child.
  - Teach your child to value his individuality.
  - Explore the meaning of "friendship" with your child.
  - Give your child the support and refusal skills he needs to say "No."
  - Help your child to identify and avoid situations in which drugs are used.
  - Know your child's friends.
  - Encourage your child's involvement in school activities, sports, hobbies, or music.
  - Help your child to experience safe, alternative "highs" (e.g., relaxation techniques, meditation, yoga, extreme sports, volunteering, etc.).

Parents can help their children to remain drug free by joining forces with other parents. There is power in numbers. If your child's school does not have a drug education and prevention program, insist that it develop one. Let your kids know that you talk with other parents, and that parents check to make sure that parties are chaperoned.

**Some of the information in this handout was adapted and/or excerpted with permission from:**

A Parent's Guide to Teenage Parties, Wisconsin Clearinghouse, 1989  
Drawing The Line: A Parents' Guide to Substance Abuse Prevention, The Holton-Arms School, Inc.,  
Talking with Youth About Prevention, National Crime Prevention Council, 1992