

# Parenting Positively

Helping teenagers to cope with

## A Parent's Problem Drug or Alcohol Use

**TÚSLA**  
An Ghníomhaireacht um  
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach  
Child and Family Agency

  
Barnardos



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Tusla - Child and Family Agency is the dedicated State agency responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children. Tusla has responsibility for the following range of services: child welfare and protection services, including family support services; family resource centres and associated national programmes; early years (pre-school) inspection services; educational welfare responsibilities; domestic, sexual and gender-based violence services; and services related to the psychological welfare of children.

Barnardos supports children whose well-being is under threat, by working with them, their families and communities and by campaigning for the rights of children. Barnardos was established in Ireland in 1962 and is Ireland's leading independent children's charity.

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**There is information for teenagers on coping with a parent's problem drug or alcohol use on [www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp](http://www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp)**

# Introduction

**This booklet is for parents of teenagers who are affected by a parent's drug or alcohol use. If you are a parent who has a problem with alcohol or drugs, or if your partner has a problem, you may be concerned about how this is affecting your teenager. This booklet is also for any other adult who is concerned about a teenager such as a grandparent, guardian or friend.**

**Children of all ages suffer when a parent has a problem with drugs or alcohol. While a parent might be there physically, for the child it may seem like their mum or dad is not emotionally present. It can cause feelings like confusion, worry, anger, shame or self blame.**

**If a parent has a problem with drugs or alcohol, it can be a complicated issue. Sometimes there can be money problems, family arguments, domestic violence or a breakdown of communication. Life can become chaotic or unpredictable and, for many children, there are serious welfare risks. Every situation is unique, however, and different families can be affected in different ways.**

**All families have strengths and ways of coping with difficulties. As a parent, you are responsible for your child's well-being and this booklet will help you to support your teenager and build on your strengths. It will help you understand how your child is being affected and give you tips for talking about it and keeping your teen safe.**

**Finding Help at the back of this booklet will link you to helpful services and resources.**



When a parent has a problem with drugs or alcohol it can affect a child emotionally and psychologically.

Adults can help by talking with the teenager about the problem and by making sure that they are safe.

While a person is misusing alcohol or drugs, they are unable to parent effectively and their child's welfare and safety is at risk.

### Key messages

When a parent gets help or treatment, this can lead to positive changes for the whole family.

If a parent has a problem with drugs or alcohol, their child may have emotional, physical or mental health problems.

Having support from family, friends or other professionals can make a real difference in a child's life.

## What we know about alcohol or drug problems

- According to Irish research in 2008, almost one in ten clients entering drug treatment were aged 40 years or over and the main problem drug was heroin. *Alcohol and Drug Research Unit (2009)*
- In a 1998 report to the European Union, at that time in Ireland it was estimated that between 61,000 and 104,600 children had problem drinking parents. *Eurocare and Coface (1998)*
- In 2009, an ISPCC study found that one in 11 children in Ireland was impacted negatively by parental alcohol problems. At the moment, there are no figures available for the impact of drug use on children in Ireland.

## Teenagers needs and rights

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (which Ireland signed up to in 1992) provides many rights to all children and young people in order to protect them, promote their well-being and help them to develop to their unique potential. These include the right:

- To be safe.
- To be protected and live free from violence, abuse or harm (this includes witnessing violence and abuse).
- To be brought up by their parents in a family, unless it is not in their interests.
- To express their views and to have them taken into account in matters affecting them.
- To have decisions that will affect them made in their best interests.
- To be treated with dignity, respect and fairness.
- To be free from discrimination, bullying and harassment of any kind.



# The Teenage Years – A Time of Great Change

The teenage years are a time of transition between childhood and adulthood. There can be physical, psychological, emotional and behavioural changes. There are also many changes in how your teenager develops socially. It can be a time for understanding their wider world and establishing a place in it. Friendships become more important and emotional attachments or close relationships develop.

All of these changes are important parts of growing up and becoming more independent. This can be a challenging time for your teenager, however, and family support is very important.

While every teenager will develop in their own unique way, common behaviours may include:

- Seeking greater independence from parents and control over their own decisions.
- Friendships becoming more important and more intense.
- Moodiness and mood swings.
- Appearing self absorbed, self conscious and very aware of differences between themselves and others.
- Valuing privacy and personal space. Personal feelings may be hidden from parents.
- Experimentation (e.g. with different identities and friends) and risk-taking.
- Forming emotional attachments and often romantic, intimate relationships.
- Developing strong opinions and challenging the views of others like parents or authority figures.
- Tending to go back to childish behaviour, particularly when stressed.

For more information about teenage development, check out the booklet **Teenage well-being** in this series.



# Drug and Alcohol Problems

## What do we mean by alcohol or drug problems?

The term 'alcohol or drug problems' (sometimes called substance misuse or abuse) describes a pattern of harmful behaviour involving the misuse or overuse of substances for mood-altering purposes. In today's society, there is a broad range of substances which may be used in this way. These include alcohol, over-the-counter drugs, prescription medication, illegal drugs (also known as recreational drugs) as well as inhalants and solvents. Illegal drugs include marijuana/cannabis, cocaine, heroin and LSD.

Drug-like products are also sold on the internet. These products are now easier to access and may include incense blends, smoking mixes or party pills. Many of these synthetic products are unsafe and they can have very serious consequences for the user.

## What effects does drinking or taking drugs have on people?

The effects of drugs and alcohol on a person can depend on what type of substance has been taken and the individual person, as different people may experience different effects.

If a person takes drugs or drinks too much, they may become tired and sleepy, agitated, upset, impulsive, anxious or even violent. Alcohol or drugs can also cause people to be distant, indifferent or preoccupied.

At other times, the person may become tearful, use emotional blackmail (making people feel guilty, e.g. 'If you loved me you would do such and such') or make grand declarations of love and caring which



do not feel genuine, or can be confusing because their behaviour is not matching what they are saying.

When a parent has taken drugs or alcohol they may be absent from the home on 'benders'. A 'bender' is another word used to describe going drinking or taking drugs for blocks of time, such as days or even weeks. Alternatively, the parent may be physically present but absent in every other way such as being emotionally distant. Either situation can be very difficult for a young person to live with.

Poly drug use or dual use is when two or more drugs are used together, or when problem drinking is combined with problem drug use.

*'It hurts her to see me stoned all the time, not to be like a normal father. I'd say she has missed out on other things. I know we were there 24 hours ... but we weren't really, we were stoned.'*

**Drug-using father of 12-year-old girl, Ireland**

Alcohol use is widely accepted in Irish culture. The majority of people who use alcohol do so in a social way that does not have a negative effect on their family life. However, when a parent drinks too much or too often, this gets in the way of the job of parenting. The acceptance of alcohol in our society often causes it to be less visible as a problem to those outside the family. Often the 'hidden harm' of a parent's problem drinking is minimised and underestimated. Hidden harm refers to the deep and long-lasting impact for a child when a parent has a problem with drugs or alcohol.

*'All children and adolescents have the right to grow up in an environment protected from the negative consequences of alcohol consumption.'*

*World Health Organisation (2001)*



## Is it a problem for everyone?

Alcohol and drug use happen at different levels. Not everyone who uses substances has a problem or is addicted.

It is socially acceptable to drink alcohol and some people may enjoy its taste or relaxing effect. Sometimes people can take drugs for a pleasurable effect. However, even small amounts of drugs or alcohol can alter moods, cause drowsiness or inhibit judgement. Similarly, careful use of medication (as prescribed) can also affect the mind or body, for example there may be a loss in appetite or drowsiness. Any of these reactions affect how a parent cares for or responds to their child.

Problems arise when alcohol or drugs are over used and guidelines are not followed. This can be when someone uses alcohol in a way that isn't consistent with legal or medical guidelines, e.g. underage drinking, binge drinking or drinking excessively. Or a person could be using legal drugs in a way that is different to their intended use, such as using someone else's medication, taking wrong amounts of their own medication or inhaling solvents. Or a person could be taking illegal drugs.

When someone is intoxicated or under the influence, it can seriously impair their judgement. If a parent has a problem with drugs or alcohol, it can be upsetting, confusing or dangerous for children or others in the home. The user may feel a strong need to take alcohol or drugs, even though they know it can have dangerous health risks. It may feel like being caught in a trap. The parent may be aware that they have a drug or alcohol problem yet they will turn to alcohol or drugs as a way of coping or managing feelings.

## What is addiction?

**Dependence**, also known as **addiction**, refers to more long-term use of alcohol and drugs. The person may use greater amounts of the drug as their body can tolerate larger amounts. There can be serious withdrawals if they cannot get the drugs or alcohol that their body and mind craves. When a person is addicted, life becomes more centred on using or

drinking. The person is no longer in control and it is difficult to stop despite the fact it is causing harm. With addiction, there is a physical (in the body) or psychological (in the mind) dependence on the substance.

Addiction is considered by some to be a chronic, progressive illness. However, many people working in the field prefer to call it a 'condition' that has some similarities to an illness in that the affected person can have symptoms of an illness such as vomiting, headaches, shakes, appearing very sleepy or slurring of speech. Also, signs such as severe mood swings, staying in bed all day or being unable to carry out normal day to day tasks can be signs that the person is not coping mentally.

Unlike an illness, however, it is not possible to recover from addiction by a visit to the GP or by taking an antibiotic or headache tablet. Over time the person may become ill and develop a mental illness, such as paranoia, or a physical illness, such as liver disease.

Addiction is not easy to recover from and can require medical or specialist help.





## What happens when people are addicted?

Addiction means that a person can be in one of these three states:

1. **Preoccupation or anticipation:** Constant cravings are a sign that addiction is taking hold. There is an overwhelming urge to use and the person can be preoccupied with this, despite other events or responsibilities in their life. This means spending time and money getting drugs or trying to work out or plan the next time they can drink or take drugs. Irritability, mood swings, tiredness and depression are a part of this stage.
2. **Under the influence:** The person is not in control of themselves or the situation around them. They are either intoxicated from alcohol or 'high' on the drugs or substances they have taken.

As the drug or alcohol is taken frequently, the person may take larger amounts to experience similar or greater effects or highs. This 'bingeing' pushes the effects of drug or alcohol use to dangerous levels. Recovery from episodes can be physically painful and the user may be unable to carry out day to day tasks due to symptoms.

3. **Withdrawal:** This brings serious physical pain and psychological anxiety (mental distress). The person may become upset or agitated and feel panic or anxiety. They may be unable to sleep or show signs of paranoia (distorted thinking). Other possible effects include tiredness, muscle pain, seizures, headaches, nausea or sweats. Avoiding these frightening and painful symptoms becomes the main priority and 'preoccupation' sets in, so the addiction cycle continues.

Addiction can have a significant impact on a parent's capacity to look after their children and the quality of family life.

# Drugs, Alcohol and Parenting

## When we talk about harmful parental drug or alcohol use, what do we mean?


This is when one or both parents are using alcohol or drugs in a way that is causing problems for them and for those living with them. It includes drinking or using drugs regularly, or having periods where there is binge drinking/drug taking. The effects can be very serious for the parent, impacting on their physical and psychological health as well as their parenting skills.

When there are parental drug or alcohol problems, family life can be chaotic, stressful and a child's emotional well-being and safety put at risk.

*'I'm scared; I'm always scared in case he's sick in his sleep or something. So I'm always...whenever he falls asleep.... I'm always turning him over and all that.'*

Kate, 16

Not all families living with drug or alcohol misuse experience serious difficulties, however. For example, a parent may be dependent on methadone, a synthetic opiate which can be prescribed to treat heroin addiction, or other medication, but because they avail of treatment and support services they may function well. In other cases, the person who is misusing will choose to use at a time when there are less risks, for example, when children are in bed and there is another responsible adult in the home to ensure safety. Despite this appearing to be a safer option, however, it is still a gamble which has the potential to lead to danger.



There is always the risk that while under the influence someone may become urgently ill, their behaviour may become aggressive or accidents could happen.

Also, the other parent or young person who has to take on the extra responsibilities may feel under pressure during times when the person is using and less able to parent. There is also an ongoing risk that the drug or alcohol use could become more serious.

While some families are better able to cope with drug and alcohol problems, it is always a serious issue and it can be a great strain on family life.

## **My partner has always been a heavy drinker. As a family, we have learned to adapt. How can I tell when it becomes a problem?**

When someone has a drug or alcohol problem, they may not be in a position to make decisions that are in their own or their family's best interests. For the person, being able to drink or take drugs can become their main priority and other things can seem to be less important.

### **Important questions to ask:**

- Is the behaviour putting the teenager or other children at risk?
- Can the person make good judgements regarding the children's needs?
- Could this person independently care for the children or do they need the support of another adult?
- Is the person likely to be unsafe, physically violent or emotionally abusive towards children or others in the home?

## How does substance or alcohol abuse affect parenting?

As already described, alcohol and drug problems have serious physical and psychological effects. While a parent may have a range of strategies for protecting their child from their problem, it is highly stressful and can be a huge pressure. The pressure and stress the parent is feeling can also affect other people in the family home.

Drug and alcohol problems are associated with unpredictability and family life can be a rollercoaster ride through spells of stability or times of chaos. There can be a feeling of 'walking on egg shells' or a fear of the unknown within the home.

Also, research tells us that physical abuse and neglect are common forms of child abuse among parents who use drugs. In the U.S., children of parents with drug or alcohol problems are nearly four times as likely to be physically abused and more than four times as likely to be neglected as children of parents who do not have problems with substances (*Drug Addiction and Families, 2007*).

If your child is being physically hurt or neglected, this is a serious welfare issue. Your child needs to be protected and you should get help as soon as possible. Contact your local HSE social work department, your child's school or your GP for advice. If there is domestic violence happening in your home, the booklet *Coping with Domestic Abuse* in this series may be of use to you.



## Will my teenager be affected by the drug or alcohol problem?

Every family is unique and each person in the home will have their own individual experiences of the situation. When a parent has a drink or drug problem, or if they have become addicted to either, it's a serious issue. There can be long-term effects for children. The teenage years are a time of many changes and coping with this family problem is an added strain for your child.

Several studies have identified some of the basic (unhealthy) 'rules' which can operate in a home where there is a parent with a drug or alcohol problem.

### Unhealthy rules:

1. Don't talk about family problems. It may be forbidden to talk about the issue and there is a pressure to pretend everything is 'normal'.
2. It is not acceptable to express feelings openly so things stay bottled up.
3. Limit communications. Family 'secrets' are not talked about. Also, because of unpredictable behaviour from the parent, children may feel safer if they limit communication in general (for fear of causing trouble).
4. Nothing is ever good enough. Your teenager may strive to be 'perfect' and may often feel a sense of personal dissatisfaction or failure.
5. You have to work for the benefit of others and you can't be selfish. Thinking about personal needs is selfish, inappropriate and may lead to punishment.



6. 'Do what I say, not as I do'. Many parents with drug or alcohol problems urge their children not to engage in similar behaviour. However, parents are significant role models in a child's life and what they do on a day to day basis can strongly influence how their child thinks or behaves.
7. Whatever else, avoid conflict. Disagreements may result in the parent becoming aggressive or punishing the child. At other times, the parent may use arguments as an excuse to have a drink or turn to drugs and the young person may end up feeling guilty and that they are to blame.





## What might my teenager be feeling?


There are many feelings your teenager may have. These could include some of the following:

- Worry and feeling unable to enjoy life.
- Stress due to an unpredictable home life.
- Embarrassment about the parent's behaviour while under the influence.
- Uncertainty due to the parent's changing moods or inconsistent responses.
- Guilt for feeling embarrassed or ashamed about their parent.
- Upset at seeing the parent make bad choices.
- Hurt because of arguments, abusive language or insults.
- Resentment due to family difficulties such as stress, arguments, financial strain.
- Vulnerable if physical needs are not being met, e.g. not being properly fed, clothed or cared for.
- Loneliness for the parent when they are under the influence and emotionally absent.
- Anxiety when the parent is away from home or missing, concerns about their safety.
- Pity for the parent, feeling sorry about what is happening to them.
- Fear of family breakdown or parental separation.
- Fear of physical abuse when the parent is drinking or taking drugs. Also, fearful in case other people in the family may get hurt.
- Unloved because it seems like the parent's main priority is alcohol or drugs.
- Responsible: Your teenager may believe that there are times when they do something 'wrong' which causes the parent to drink or use.
- Uneasy about the parent being linked with crime, e.g. using illegal drugs or being involved with dealers or money lenders.
- Frustrated because the parent will not stop using drugs or taking alcohol.

- Denial about the issue or thinking it's 'normal'. This may be because family life has always been like this, or everyone else (including the parent with the problem) is down-playing what is happening.
- Overburdened by extra responsibilities they have taken on because the parent can't cope.
- Concern that addictive behaviours may run in the family – Will it happen to me?
- Disgust at the parent's behaviour when they are under the influence.
- Angry with the other parent for not 'making' it stop or for standing by their partner and 'letting' it happen.
- Relief when binges or episodes of using are over.
- Hopeful during times of sobriety, maybe the parent will have the strength to fight the problem.
- Mistrust during times of sobriety and preparing for a let-down in case the parent relapses.
- Hopelessness when the cycle begins again and the drinking or using continues.
- Depression, feeling alone and thinking their family is the only one with a problem like this.
- Loss and feeling that they have missed out on part of their childhood.

*'It worries me because sometimes I think "What if I turn out like my mum? What if I treat my kids like the way my mum has?" It just goes through my head every now and then. But I realise I can do it, I don't need to go in my mum's footsteps.'*

Rachel, 17



If you are concerned and notice patterns of withdrawal, anxiety, depression or illness, your teenager may be experiencing serious problems. If you notice behaviour that is uncharacteristic and outside of the 'norm', your teenager will need your support, or support from elsewhere.

Check out Finding Help at the back of this booklet for other services that may be able to offer advice. The parent's booklet on **Teenage Well-being** in this series may also be of use to you.

## How will I know if my teenager is affected?

Teenagers often show their feelings or worries through their behaviour, but at times it may be difficult to distinguish between 'normal' teenage changes in behaviour or behaviours which are a result of something more serious.

All young people are different and cope with stress in different ways. Your teenager's reaction to the situation may depend on:

- Their age, gender and personality.
- The circumstances at home – the level of the problem and how long it's been happening.
- Protective factors such as family support, strong friendships, having hobbies/interests, enjoying school.
- Resilience – being optimistic, confident, hopeful and feeling some personal control about their own life.

*'I want her to do it, stop using drugs...well how much can I say? I can't say how much 'cos it's the most in the world. You can't really say a number can you?'*

Jane, 14

**Things to look out for:**

- Being sad, withdrawn, crying and spending a lot of time alone.
- Being irritable or angry.
- Change in appetite, sleeping patterns.
- Feeling tired, distracted, distant, sighing.
- Feeling unwell – stomach problems, back ache, headaches.
- Staying out late or away from home to avoid the problem.
- Talking about peer problems, e.g. being bullied or isolated by others.
- Loss of interest in hobbies or activities.
- Difficulties with school work or reports of concern from teachers.
- Avoiding bringing friends to the family home.
- Changes in behaviour – acting out, breaking rules or defying authority.
- Taking on more adult-like behaviour – carrying out a parental role.
- Becoming aggressive or hostile towards one or both parents.
- Showing feelings of guilt, e.g. 'If I didn't make Dad angry he wouldn't have gone to the pub' or 'If I helped more, Mam would be less stressed and stop taking the tablets!'
- Frequently finding excuses to stay at home to 'keep an eye' on the situation.
- Engaging in risk taking behaviour such as trying out drugs, alcohol or self-harming.

## Will the drug/alcohol abuse affect my child in school?

Yes, if a parent has a problem with drugs or alcohol, it can affect school life for their child. Stress and anxiety can make it difficult to concentrate. Your teenager may be overwhelmed by feelings of anger, shame, fear or stress. They may worry about their family life all of the time, even when they are away from the situation.

If peers know about the problem, there could be episodes of bullying and name calling, e.g. 'Your Ma's a junkie.' Watch out for the signs of bullying and link in with the school as soon as possible. The booklet in this series on **Coping with Bullying** may be helpful for you.

On the other hand, school can offer young people a safe, stable break from the situation. Being with friends and taking part in activities allows your teenager to enjoy life, free from worry. Trusted friends can be supportive. Teachers who know about the problem should be able to understand and respond to the young person's needs. Your teenager may be able to link with the school counsellor for help. With permission from your teenager, it may be a good idea to talk in confidence with the school about your family situation.



## How might this affect their friendships?

When a parent has a drink or drug problem, it can affect friendships because your teenager may feel that no one would understand. They may not talk about the problem with anyone and may try to keep it a secret. They might lie to friends to cover up. They could feel isolated and like their family is different.

Constant anxiety about home life means your child may not enjoy activities with friends. They may be embarrassed about bringing friends into the home and fearful that something could happen when they do.


Living with this problem can affect your child's self esteem and confidence. Carrying so many feelings could result in your child having angry outbursts among friends.

Your child may also be more likely to engage in risky behaviour. If healthy choices are not happening at home, this influences the choices your child makes elsewhere. If alcohol or drugs are part of their daily life, your child may accept this as normal and begin to experiment either at home or with friends.

## My son is getting into trouble a lot due to his behaviour. Is this due to our family problems?

Secrets can be harmful if it means a young person has to deal with all kinds of feelings which are building up inside. These may then come out in how your teenager behaves. When feelings are very strong and we don't manage them well, they tend to come out in our actions and behaviour. These actions may not always be the best way of dealing with how we feel and can get us into more trouble and not make us feel any better.

Some young people start breaking rules, maybe staying out late to be out of the house, and getting in trouble with Gardai or people in



authority. School attendance can be affected, there could be troublesome behaviour evident in school or teachers may become concerned. Other young people may become withdrawn because of the sadness they are feeling. They may be exhausted and weary, and disinterested in school, hobbies or being with friends. None of these actions are good choices for your teenager and may only make life harder.

Recognising how your teenager feels and encouraging them to talk to you, a close friend or family member will help them to get the support they need.

## Could my teenager become addicted to alcohol or drugs?

*'I don't know, it sounds a bit wrong because I hated smack. I just hated the stuff, I hated the people... I'd be like "smack head". I hated them and I wouldn't go out with them and then, like one night, I just thought, I wonder what it's like to run... a line of heroin.'*

Karen, 18

Home and family are a child's first and primary source of understanding what is 'normal' or acceptable. This relates to a parent's use of alcohol, cigarettes or other substances/medication. Parents are important role models and their actions can strongly influence their child's behaviour.

According to a 2010 study carried out by the NACD (National Advisory Committee on Drugs), substance use by parents or siblings increases the risk of a young person using the same substance. If parents or siblings drank alcohol, smoked cigarettes, used cannabis or other drugs, there was an increased likelihood that the young person may do the same.



However, in the same study, parental concern and involvement were described as things which have a positive influence on a child's life. Other protective factors included having a positive school experience and positive relationships with supportive teachers.

There could be increased risks if:

- The parent with the problem is depressed or has other psychological problems.
- Both parents have a drink or drug problem.
- The parents' problem with drugs or alcohol is severe.
- The parent's drinking or drug taking has led to other serious issues at home such as violence, aggression, family stress, reduced parenting skills or not supervising children properly.
- There is a relaxed attitude towards the use of drugs or alcohol.
- There is easy access to drugs and alcohol.

Communication, support and education about drugs or alcohol are extremely important for teenagers who may be at risk. Other key skills and important behaviours include:

- Recognising, understanding and talking about feelings.
- Learning how to cope with stress or pressure.
- Engaging in satisfying, fun activities such as hobbies and spending time with friends.
- Having a support network that includes family, friends, professionals or members of the community.
- Knowing how to solve problems or get help if needed.
- Feeling self confident and having good self esteem.
- Having the ability to link actions with consequences.



# Talking With Your Teenager

## Should I talk with my teenager about the situation? How can I talk about it?

Yes, talking about the situation is very important. If it's not talked about, your teenager gets the message that it's not okay to raise the subject. This can be a big burden.

Teenagers need:

- Someone to talk to.
- Someone to listen to them and acknowledge their feelings.
- Someone in whom they can confide their feelings and fears.

Talking helps your teenager make sense of what's happening so they will feel less alone, sad or overwhelmed. Teenagers also need to be involved in making decisions in your family and helping to find solutions if problems arise. This will help them to feel more in control and less isolated. By hearing your teenager's experience, you will be in tune to their needs and learn what help they need.

### Talking tips

- Spend one to one time with your teen away from the situation to provide opportunities to talk.
- Take an interest in their friends and activities so you know what's happening in their lives.
- Let your teenager know that you respect their views and feelings and that you take them seriously.
- When speaking or listening, give your full attention and allow them to express themselves in their own words.
- If your teenager comes to talk to you when you are busy, explain that now is not a good time, and that you want to be able to listen properly. Make an arrangement to touch base at another time and make sure you follow through on this.
- Be calm, patient and open.
- Acknowledge their feelings and share some of your own but remember you are the supportive adult. Do not overwhelm your teenager with your own fears or worries.
- Avoid phrases like 'It's not that bad' or 'It could be worse.' This is only belittling their worries and gives the message that their feelings or concerns are not important.
- Let your teenager know that understanding their feelings is important to you. The best way of doing this is by taking the time to talk and listen.
- Use clear, straightforward language.
- Ensure your teenager knows its okay to express feelings, e.g. to cry, question things, feel anger, worry etc.



## What things could I say?

Try saying some of the following:

- An alcohol or drug problem can be serious and similar to an illness. It is something which develops over time.
- A problem with drugs or alcohol is a problem in itself. Family life or stresses do not cause someone to become dependent on alcohol or drugs.
- Most people do not set out to misuse or to hurt themselves or their family.
- You are not the cause of this and you cannot be blamed in anyway.
- You cannot cure the problem or stop it.
- You are not alone. Other families you know may be experiencing something like this. This does not make the problem any better, but it's important to know that others can understand how you feel.
- It's okay for you to hate the problem and love the person at the same time. It's normal to feel like this, even if it feels confusing.
- Drinking too much or using drugs makes people do things they normally wouldn't such as hurting others or disappearing from home.
- For someone who uses, drugs or alcohol may become their main priority. This is how an alcohol or drug problem can affect the mind and body.
- People can recover. This is very difficult, however, and requires specialised, long-term help.
- Sometimes people can relapse. Recovery from drugs or alcohol is a life-long commitment and requires lots of energy. If someone relapses it doesn't mean that they have failed or cannot be drug or alcohol free again.
- Many children who have parents with an alcohol or drug problem grow up to be happy, healthy adults.

- Remember the 7Cs (developed by the National Association for Children of Alcoholics). I didn't **C**ause it. I can't **C**ure it. I can't **C**ontrol it. I can **C**are for myself. I can **C**ommunicate about my feelings. I can make healthy **C**hoices. I can **C**elebrate myself and be proud of who I am and my own achievements.

## What other advice can I give?

- It is important for you to talk to people about how you are feeling – your friends or someone you can trust.
- There is lots of professional support available for families who experience problems like this. They understand and can offer our family help if we need it.
- It is not your job to become like a parent at home. You should be able to enjoy school and a social life with your friends.
- Your safety is **ALWAYS** important. If you are not safe, you need to find help as soon as possible.



## What else can I do to help my teenager?

- Talk honestly and openly about the problem when opportunities arise, but make sure the child does not become your confidante. As a parent, you will need your own, separate support systems such as your friends or a support group.
- Learn as much as you can about how this could affect your teenager. Visit [www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp](http://www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp) to give you more information from a teenager's perspective.
- Maintain routine at home as much as you can. When you make plans, ensure that you carry them out. Rituals, routines and celebrations are very important in family life, especially if there is addiction or problems with alcohol or drug use in the home. If you make promises, keep them.
- Acknowledge your child's worries or concerns, but don't overburden them with yours.
- Think about how much you may rely on your teenager to help with daily tasks. Every teenager should have responsibilities or chores but make sure you aren't expecting too much.
- Encourage your teenager to take time out for friends, hobbies and interests.
- Set aside times when your child can welcome friends into the family home. If you notice that there are patterns or periods of stability, take advantage of these opportunities.
- Link in with your child's school so you will be aware of any changes in behaviour or school work.
- When disagreements or arguments arise, avoid drawing your child into taking sides. Do not share your child's opinions or use these to 'get back' at the alcohol or drug dependent parent. This creates distrust and could prevent your child from talking to you.
- Find out about support groups or services in your area. If you think this will be helpful for you or your family, avail of these supports. This shows your child that getting help is important. When a parent has a problem with drugs or alcohol, it affects the whole family and when each person is ready, recovery can happen together.

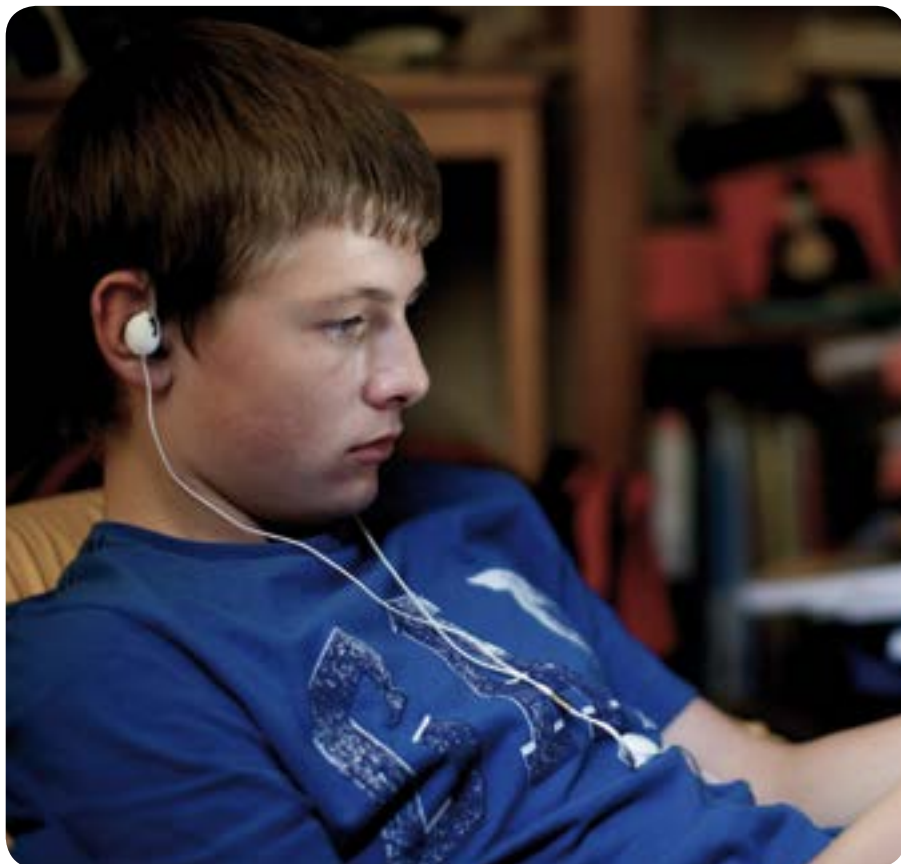
## My teenager is worried that alcoholism might 'run in the family'. What should I say?

- Be honest with your teenager and explain that addiction can run in families. Explain what 'risk' means. A risk means that something is more likely, **but not definite**.
- Discuss drug or alcohol use with your child, inform them of how it can affect the mind or body.
- Together, come up with a list of reasons why it is better not to use drugs or alcohol and explain how this is the safest option of all.
- Inform your child of the serious health risks connected with drug or alcohol abuse.
- Explain how taking illegal drugs is linked with criminal behaviour.
- Talk with your child about the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle.
- Discuss peer pressure with your child. Together, prepare a list of things your teenager could say if they are offered drugs or alcohol.
- If your teenager indicates that they want to try out alcohol, offer advice and information about knowing their limits and keeping safe.
- Talk about healthy ways of reducing stress and the importance of getting help when needed.

Talking things through with your teenager will help them to make sense of what is happening.

When you are talking about healthy choices, it is important for your teenager to be able to come up with their own ideas. Sometimes we tend to give lots of advice, 'You should do this...You shouldn't do that...', its almost like we are talking **at** the child and not **with** the child.

Ask your teenager questions about what they may do in a particular situation or what they think about certain issues. This will help them to think about things a little more and can build independence and self awareness. It will also give you better insight into what they are thinking. At the same time, you can still give additional information and make suggestions as to why some choices can be good and other choices may not be.





## I am a parent in recovery, how can I talk with my teenager?

Before you talk with your teenager, think about the effects your drug or alcohol use has had.

- What did your child know about your drinking or drug use?
- What were they exposed to?
- How was your relationship with your child during that time?
- How serious was your drug or alcohol use?
- Who was there to help?

Go to page 14 for more information about the effects of parental addiction.

Remember, your child will have a range of feelings. They may be angry or resentful about the past. They may be relieved that you are well, but anxious about the future. It is important that you acknowledge and accept all of the feelings your teenager has. It can be hard to hear and accept the damage and pain caused by your actions but it is very important that your child gets your support.

Give your teenager opportunities to talk about things but only at their own pace. Addressing the past may be part of your recovery process, but it's important to remember that your child will only be able to do this when they are ready.

As a parent in recovery, you will more than likely be availing of professional support and treatment. It is important that you have a support system in place as rebuilding family relationships may be a challenging time for you. Also, professional services that specialise in addiction can advise you about how best you can approach this. Check out Finding Help at the back of this booklet for more information.

**It is important that you acknowledge and accept all of the feelings your teenager has.**

## Keeping Safe

- Protect your teenager from directly witnessing drug taking or excessive alcohol use. Ask your teenager to spend time in another room away from this behaviour.
- Advise your teenager **never** to get into the car with their parent if they are under the influence.
- Do a safety check at home regularly. Make sure alcohol or drugs are stored away or out of reach.
- Never draw your teenager into arguments. Stop them from becoming involved if they do so voluntarily.
- Make a safety plan with your teenager. This will be important if there are times when you cannot help or you are not in the home. Make sure your child knows who to call or where to go if things become dangerous, e.g. phone a family member or go to a neighbour's home. Keep some 'emergency money' in a safe place in case a taxi is needed.
- Ensure that everyone in your family knows what to do if there is a medical emergency at home and how to contact emergency services.
- Remember that there are risks of violence or physical abuse for your child. This may be something that is kept hidden from you. Watch out for bruises or unexplained injuries. If your child is being physically hurt, this is child abuse. It is your responsibility to get your teenager away from this situation as soon as possible.
- If you have safety concerns, it is important to put your children's needs first. If you are unsure of what to do, contact your local Gardai. You can also contact your local Tusla Social Work Dept.

If domestic abuse is happening in your home, the booklet in this series on **Coping with Domestic Abuse** will be helpful for you.

# Finding Help

## Useful contacts

### **Barnardos**

Barnardos supports children whose well-being is under threat, by working with them, their families and communities and by campaigning for the rights of children. Barnardos was established in Ireland in 1962 and is Ireland's leading independent children's charity.

Christchurch Square, Dublin 8  
Tel: 01 453 0355  
Email: [info@barnardos.ie](mailto:info@barnardos.ie)  
[www.barnardos.ie](http://www.barnardos.ie)

### **Tusla - Child and Family Agency**

Tusla - Child and Family Agency is the State agency responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children. It is responsible for child protection, early intervention and family support services in Ireland.

Brunel Building, Heuston South Quarter, Dublin 8.  
Tel: 01 771 8500  
Email: [info@tusla.ie](mailto:info@tusla.ie)  
[www.tusla.ie](http://www.tusla.ie)

### **Family Resource Centre National Forum**

A support network working with the Family Resource Centres (FRCs) located in communities throughout Ireland.  
[www.familyresource.ie](http://www.familyresource.ie)

### **Family Mediation Service**

Family mediation is a service to help married and non-married couples who have decided to separate or divorce, or who have already separated.

For contact details of local centres see [http://www.legalaidboard.ie/lab/publishing.nsf/content/Family\\_Mediation\\_Service\\_](http://www.legalaidboard.ie/lab/publishing.nsf/content/Family_Mediation_Service_)

## Support for parents

### **Al-Anon**

Al-Anon is for people who are affected by a problem drinker. Visit [www.al-anon-ireland.org](http://www.al-anon-ireland.org) for more information about Al-Anon and a list of contact details for groups in your area.

### **[www.alcoholireland.ie](http://www.alcoholireland.ie)**

Alcohol Action Ireland have a searchable online guide to alcohol services. The Alcohol Action Ireland Alcohol Service Finder can be found at: [www.alcoholireland.ie/get-help](http://www.alcoholireland.ie/get-help), at [www.drinkhelp.ie](http://www.drinkhelp.ie) and at [www.alcoholhelp.ie](http://www.alcoholhelp.ie) or by searching for 'Alcohol Service Finder' on Facebook.

### **Ana Liffey Drugs Project**

48 Middle Abbey Street, Dublin 1  
Tel: 01 878 6899  
Freephone: 1800 78 68 28  
[www.aldp.ie](http://www.aldp.ie)

### **Citizens Information Service**

Tel: 0761 07 9000  
Email: [info@ciboard.ie](mailto:info@ciboard.ie)  
[www.citizensinformationboard.ie](http://www.citizensinformationboard.ie)

### **Free Legal Advice Centres**

Tel: 01 874 5690 /  
1890 350 250  
[www.flac.ie](http://www.flac.ie)

### **HSE Drugs Helpline**

Tel: 1800 459 459  
(Mon - Fri 10am and 5pm)

### **Merchant's Quay Project**

Provides services aimed at reducing harm related to drug use and homelessness.

24 Merchants Quay, Dublin 8  
Tel: 01 524 0160  
Email: [info@mqi.ie](mailto:info@mqi.ie)  
[www.mqi.ie](http://www.mqi.ie)

### **Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS)**

Tel: 0761 072 000  
Email: [helpline@mabs.ie](mailto:helpline@mabs.ie)  
[www.mabs.ie](http://www.mabs.ie)

### **Parentline**

Confidential helpline for parents under stress or seeking parenting advice and support.  
Locall: 1890 927 277  
Email: [info@parentline.ie](mailto:info@parentline.ie)

### **Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre**

Tel: 01 878 0255  
Email: [info@paveepoint.ie](mailto:info@paveepoint.ie)  
[www.paveepoint.ie](http://www.paveepoint.ie)

**Samaritans** (24 hour confidential emotional support for people experiencing feelings of distress or despair)

Lo-call: 116 123  
[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

### **The Rise Foundation**

Offers family programmes and support for those who have a loved one with addiction

Tel: 01 764 5131  
Email: [support@therisefoundation.ie](mailto:support@therisefoundation.ie)  
[www.therisefoundation.ie](http://www.therisefoundation.ie)

### **The Rutland Centre**

An alcohol and drug rehabilitation centre which also offers counselling services, family intervention programmes and public workshops/family meetings

Knocklyon Rd, Templeogue, Dublin 16  
Tel: 01 494 6358  
Email: [info@rutlandcentre.ie](mailto:info@rutlandcentre.ie)  
[www.rutlandcentre.ie](http://www.rutlandcentre.ie)

### **Women's Aid**

Tel: 01 678 8858  
1800 341 900  
Email: [info@womensaid.ie](mailto:info@womensaid.ie)  
[www.womensaid.ie](http://www.womensaid.ie)

Contact details for your local Garda Station, Health Service Executive or Hospital can be found in the Green section of your local telephone directory.

## Support for teenagers

Barnardos has support and information for teenagers on [www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp](http://www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp)

### **Alateen**

Alateen is part of the Al-Anon fellowship and is for young people, aged 12 - 17 inclusive, who are affected by a problem drinker.

Visit [www.al-anon-ireland.org](http://www.al-anon-ireland.org) for more information about Al-Anon and a list of contact details for groups in your area.

### **Childline**

Tel: 1800 666 666  
[www.childline.ie](http://www.childline.ie)

### **Children's Rights Alliance**

Tel: 01 662 9400  
Email: [info@childrensrights.ie](mailto:info@childrensrights.ie)  
[www.childrensrights.ie](http://www.childrensrights.ie)

### **Crosscare Teen Counselling**

A service that aims to provide professional counselling services for adolescents and their families who are struggling with behavioural and emotional problems.

Tel: 01 557 4705  
Email: [teencounselling@crosscare.ie](mailto:teencounselling@crosscare.ie)  
[www.teencounselling.ie](http://www.teencounselling.ie)

### **Headstrong**

The National Centre for Youth Mental Health.  
Tel: 01 472 7010  
Email: [info@headstrong.ie](mailto:info@headstrong.ie)  
[www.headstrong.ie](http://www.headstrong.ie)

### **Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC)**

29 Lower Baggott Street,  
Dublin 2  
Tel: 01 676 7960  
[www.ispcc.ie](http://www.ispcc.ie)

### **National Youth Council of Ireland Child Protection Unit**

Tel: 01 478 4122  
Email: [info@nyci.ie](mailto:info@nyci.ie)  
[www.youth.ie](http://www.youth.ie)

### **The Office of the Ombudsman for Children**

Tel: 01 865 6800  
Email: [oco@oco.ie](mailto:oco@oco.ie)  
[www.oco.ie](http://www.oco.ie)

**SpunOut.ie** is an independent, youth national charity working to empower young people to create personal and social change.  
[www.spunout.ie](http://www.spunout.ie)

### **Youth Information Centres**

are available in many towns and cities  
[www.youthworkireland.ie/what-we-do/youth-information](http://www.youthworkireland.ie/what-we-do/youth-information)



# Useful Publications

## **Don't Lose the Head**

A support booklet (produced by Crosscare) for parents/guardians in dealing with the issues of drugs and alcohol in the family.

The following books are available from [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)

## **Adolescence: The survival guide for parents**

E.Fenwick, T. Smith, Dorling Kindersley, 1993

## **Courage to be Me: Living with Alcoholism**

Al-Anon, 1996

## **For Teenagers Living with a Parent Who Abuses Alcohol/drugs**

Edith Lynn Hornik-Beer, Universe, 2001

## **Parenting is Child's Play - the teenage years**

David Coleman, Penguin Books, 2010

Quotes in this book are taken from: *Children's voices. Experiences and perceptions of European children on drug and alcohol issues* (May 2010); *Living with parental substance misuse* Bancroft et al. (2004); *Drug Addiction and Families* Barnard M. (2007); *Parental drug and alcohol misuse: Resilience and transition among young people* A. Bancroft et al (2004).

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This booklet is one in a series on Parenting Positively. Parenting is a very rewarding job but one which can be difficult at times, especially when parents are faced with challenging situations. The aim of this series is to provide information and guidance to you, as a parent of a teenager, to help create a positive, loving and supportive relationship between you and your child.

The series covers teenage well-being as well as the complex life issues of death, separation, bullying, a parent's problem drug or alcohol use and domestic abuse. The booklets outline teenager's understanding of the particular issue and how you can support them through this difficult time. Each booklet also gives further resources that you can follow up for more information and help on the issue covered.

There is also information for teenagers on these issues on [www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp](http://www.barnardos.ie/teenhelp)

*Also in the series:* Parenting Positively for parents of children aged 6–12. Booklets in this range cover a range of topics including death, bullying, separation, a parent's problem drug or alcohol use and domestic abuse. For more information see [www.barnardos.ie](http://www.barnardos.ie)

Tusla - Child and Family Agency, Brunel Building, Heuston South Quarter, Dublin 8  
T: 01 771 8500 E: [info@tusla.ie](mailto:info@tusla.ie) [www.tusla.ie](http://www.tusla.ie)

Barnardos, Christchurch Square, Dublin 8  
T: 01 454 9699 E: [resources@barnardos.ie](mailto:resources@barnardos.ie) or [training@barnardos.ie](mailto:training@barnardos.ie) [www.barnardos.ie](http://www.barnardos.ie)