



## How To Know When Your Teenager Needs Help

By

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Adolescence is often a challenging time for families. Teenagers frequently test new limits and parents have to adjust to changing expectations and requests for more freedom. While most teenagers navigate this time without major problems, some experience enormous distress and may become involved in destructive life patterns. The challenge for many parents is knowing how to determine when their teenager is OK and when their teenager is At-Risk. Some of the differences between normal and At-Risk behavior are highlighted below.

### **Question Authority vs. Defy Authority**

It is normal for teenagers to question authority and challenge the status quo. At-Risk teenagers, on the other hand, tend to openly challenge authority and defy others to make them comply with rules. They tend to get into conflicts with parents, teachers, administrators, or anyone else who is in a position of authority.

### **Test Limits vs. Ignore Limits**

Teenagers will frequently test limits to see what they can get away with, but will respond appropriately when limits are set. At-Risk teenagers tend to ignore limits and keep pushing the boundaries. They often will respond to limits with anger and defiance.

### **Spontaneous vs. Impulsive**

Teenagers, in general, tend to be very spontaneous and open to new possibilities. At-risk teenagers, on the other hand, tend to be impulsive and often ignore potential consequences. They leap first and then make excuses later.

### **Seek Independence vs. Avoid Family**

Teenagers often seek independence from their family. This allows them to further define who they are as a person and to develop their own goals and direction in life. They use home and family as an anchor to help them stay grounded, while they explore the possibilities of life. At-Risk teenagers, on the other hand, tend to avoid spending anytime with their family or with other adults who might provide supervision. They see adults as “the problem”, rather than as a role model or support.

### **Sexually Aware vs. Sexually Acting Out**

While it is normal for teenagers to become more aware of their sexuality and to begin to develop an interest in sexual relationships, it doesn't mean that they will automatically begin to act out sexually. Conversely, At-Risk teenagers often get involved in risky sexual behavior and pursue multiple sexual partners without regard to consequences.

### **Socially Involved vs. Drinking and Drugging**

It is normal for teenagers to want to spend time with friends. In fact, developing healthy friendships is an important milestone of adolescence. For some, however, socializing often involves drinking or doing drugs. While most teenagers are exposed to drinking and drugs, it is not true that “everyone is doing it.” There are many teenagers that socialize with friends without using drugs or alcohol. At Risk kids tend to seek out alcohol and drugs and over time tend to socialize only with other teenag-

ers that are using alcohol or drugs. The purpose of getting together with friends is to “party” and “get high”. As a result, friendships, over time, become secondary to the drugs and alcohol.

### **Moody at times vs. Mood Swings with Intensity**

It is normal for teenagers to have a variety of moods. The changes in their mood often mirror the stressors that they experience (physical, emotional, social, etc.). Generally, teenagers work through these moods fairly quickly. At-Risk teenagers, however, tend to have intense mood swings that are greater than the situation that they are in. They often exhibit destructive or inappropriate behaviors during these times, which might include isolation, running away, destruction of property, cutting, or other self-harming behavior.

### **Hopeful vs. Hopeless**

Teenagers, in general, tend to be very hopeful about the future which they see as limitless in its possibilities. At-Risk kids, conversely, tend to be more pessimistic about the future. They may express thoughts such as “Why try? It won't matter anyway.” “Nothing ever works out.” “I hate my life.” or “I wish I were dead.” These types of statements should be a warning flag for parents that their teenager is struggling with deeper emotional issues.

If your teenager is struggling emotionally, don't wait to get them help. Teenagers can be very resilient and with the proper help they can develop the skills they need to thrive rather than struggle.

### **New Dimensions Can Help If You or Someone You Know Is:**

- Depressed or Suicidal
- Stuck and having difficulty making changes
- Dealing with trauma
- Struggling with Panic Attacks
- Having difficulty working or going to school
- Struggling with addictions or substance abuse
- Cutting or doing other self-destructive behaviors
- Struggling with anger issues
- Struggling to get medications stabilized

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### **Don't Be Afraid To Parent**

Kids need parenting, even though they resist it. Kids test limits and would prefer if they had parents that were more like their friends who don't set any limits on them. Parents that try to be like friends, however, often find that their kids end up having less respect for them and that their kids become more defiant of the rules that are set.

Your kids have friends and can always get more friends. While they may have a number of role models in their life, they can't replace you as a parent. You can best help your kids by giving them the tools they need to become healthy functioning adults. Set limits on your kids, but be predictable, consistent and fair.



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## Depression in Teenagers

Most teenagers have days where their energy is low and they feel down or have the “blahs”. These moments usually coincide with life stressors that a teenager is facing and typically are short lived. Some teenagers, however, experience depression, which is a much deeper and more lasting problem than a typical “down day.” Because teenagers tend to be impulsive and have less skills to deal with emotional problems, they are prone to act out their feelings in destructive ways. As a result, it is important to learn to recognize the signs and symptoms of depression in teenagers.

### **Signs of Depression in Teenagers**

- Poor school performance
- Outbursts of anger or rage
- Withdrawal from friends and activities
- Overreaction to criticism
- Sadness and feelings of hopelessness
- Low energy and lack of motivation
- Poor self-esteem or irrational guilt
- Agitation and restlessness
- Defiance of authority
- Substance abuse
- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Difficulty making decisions and concentrating
- Thoughts of suicide or dying

If you notice signs of depression in your teenager, don't ignore it and hope that it goes away. Get them help. Early intervention matters.

## **Drug and Alcohol Use in Teenagers**

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the summer months are when the highest proportion of teenagers try alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana for the first time. This often occurs because teenagers have more unstructured free time and less adult supervision. While many teenagers simply experiment, others begin to actively use or abuse alcohol and drugs.

As a result, when school starts they quickly begin to struggle with the structure and expectations of school. In fact, a drop in school performance is one of the signs that that a teenager may be struggling with drugs and alcohol. Unfortunately, many parents ignore the signs of drug usage, until the problem has escalated to the point where the legal system gets involved. In fact, the criminal justice system

accounts for over 50% of the referrals to treatment for teenagers between the ages of 15 and 17. Here are 5 steps that parents can take to help a teenager that is At-Risk.

### **Don't Slip Into Denial**

As parents, we want to trust our kids and give them the benefit of the doubt. In fact, part of parenting is giving kids the opportunity to make their own choices and experience the consequences for those choices. Drug and alcohol abuse, however, requires a different response. In order to effectively parent kids that have begun to experiment with drugs and alcohol it is important to be honest with yourself and those around you about the extent of the usage. Drug use doesn't diminish when you ignore it, it only increases.

### **Intervene Early**

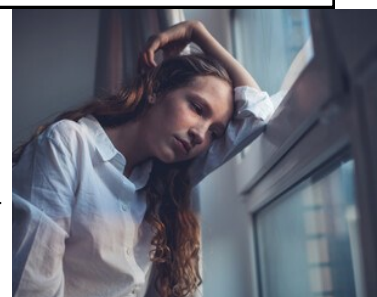
The longer that drug use continues, the more ingrained some of the behavior becomes and the more a teenager's thinking evolves to accommodate the alcohol and drug usage. Early intervention can help prevent addiction from occurring.

### **Expect Sobriety**

Abstinence is important for the physical and mental well-being of teenagers. Don't tolerate using of drugs and alcohol either in the home or outside of the home. Expect sobriety and kids will rise to your expectations.

### **Keep Teenagers Involved**

More unstructured free time that kids have, the more time they have to use alcohol and drugs. Be involved in their life and keep them involved in activities that are productive.



### **Trust Your Instincts**

As a parent it is important to trust your instincts. Most parents can sense when something is not right with their kids, even when their kids are denying it. Don't be afraid to investigate to see if the internal warning bells are accurate. A good rule of thumb with teenagers is “trust but verify”.

Remember that the way a kid thanks you for parenting them is by having good behavior.