

Adolescence and Risk Behaviours

Adolescence is the time for exploration and opportunity. It is the time when young people lay the foundations for physical, psychological and social maturity. As they enter high school, adolescents face additional social, emotional and educational challenges.

Substance use is but one of many "adult" behaviours explored by youth. Adolescents often use substances to express their independence and autonomy. These behaviours should not be automatically equated with "substance abuse" since most adolescents who use substances do not progress to problem use or dependency.

In addition, it may be difficult to identify whether an individual is using substances since many of the signs and symptoms may also reflect normal adolescent development as illustrated below.

Identification of Drug Use:

A typical teenager may exhibit:

- an increased need for sleep
- mood changes
- changes in behaviour and/or communication
- requests for more money
- physical changes

A teenager using drugs may exhibit:

- an increased need for sleep
- mood changes
- changes in behaviour and/or communication
- requests for more money
- physical changes

You will notice these lists contain the same behaviours. This is why it can be difficult to identify substance use.

Potential Signs of Substance Use

The following chart summarizes physical, emotional and behavioural signs that may indicate substance use. However, it is necessary to keep in mind that many of these may be typical adolescent behaviours or suggestive of other difficulties, such as depression or other mental health issues.

Physical	Emotional	Behavioural
Smell of alcohol or drugs	Withdrawn, cranky, irritable	Significant changes in friends
Weight loss	Not easy to get along with, argumentative	Peer group uses drugs
Difficulty sleeping	Moody, depressed	Lethargic; hyperactive
Red, irritated eyes	Defiant or aggressive	Accident prone
Walking unsteadily	Lack of emotion, persistent apathy	Increased difficulty in concentration, attention, or memory
Slurring words, difficulty talking	Unpredictable responses	Loss of motivation or interest in doing well academically

Faintness, passing out

Drop in grades, absenteeism, lateness
Drug oriented graffiti or
paraphernalia

Adapted from "*Identification and Early Intervention*" presentation, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

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