



HOPE Newsletter - Issue 84

What To Do If You Think Your Kid Is On Heroin

By Seth Ferranti

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Having a child addicted to drugs has to be the worst feeling in the world. The powerlessness and hopelessness, the lack of control and constant fear that something is going to happen. Staying up late at night and waiting for your child to come home, hoping that you won't get that phone call that spells catastrophe. It can be a nerve-racking predicament, but one that many parents have been through.

The fact of the matter is, kids on drugs don't care. They'll disappear for days with no concern about their parents or families or anyone. They'll steal money or belongings from the family home. Because when you're in the throes of addiction, the only thing that matters is that next hit. With heroin being pumped into our country by the Mexican cartels at an unprecedented rate, more and more teenagers are experimenting with the drug and becoming addicted to it. Or even worse, overdosing and dying, throwing their families' very existences into turmoil.

"When a teenager starts using, we call it substance use. They are experimenting, they are trying alcohol, trying marijuana, but they don't really have any negative consequences at that point," Kelly Lowry, a 44-year-old recovery coach and alumni specialist at Preferred Family Healthcare, a St. Louis treatment facility that focuses on decreasing harmful drug involvement with teens, tells *The Fix*. "Usually when they start experiencing negative consequences is when they come to us.

"Our goal is to slow down the progression from regular use to abuse. The kids that are transitioning from substance use to abuse to dependency, we educate them that the only way to get better is through recovery."

With recovery and addiction there are no quick fixes, and usually the family suffers just as much as the addict. But at the end of the day, substance abuse is treatable. If your kid gets the help they need, the whole family can recover together.

When you're dealing with a teenager, it may not have progressed to the level where it's affecting areas of their life negatively. But drug use is progressive, and the first stage is identifying that your child is on drugs.

FIRST INDICATOR—PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

"The first major thing is their physical appearance," Kelly tells *The Fix*. "That doesn't necessarily mean they start wearing all black. It means they might stop bathing. They're not brushing their teeth. They're not worried about their physical appearance as most teenagers are." It could be a change from wearing nice, preppy clothes to walking around in sweats all the time.

"Or it may just be less," Patrick Reidy, a 29-year-old clinical supervisor who works with Kelly, adds. "Not like they're not bathing at all. It may just be less than what they were doing previously. I think the main thing for parents or whoever has contact with an adolescent should remember is that any sort of changes can be a sign of mental illness or a sign of substance abuse. It may be issues with their peers or friends. There is probably something that is causing that change in behavior." So if your kid used to play sports all the time with his friends and now hangs out in his room listening to music alone, you might want to investigate that.

"Any type of change is a red flag. Parents tend to rationalize things like they're sleeping more, but they have football. Or they're sleeping more because they have finals. But anything that feels instinctively wrong, it's probably a red flag and needs to be followed up on," Kelly tells *The Fix*. "If they've changed the people they hang out with, that can be an indicator. Grades falling or not wanting to go to school. Not following rules in the home." There are all kinds of indicators and it doesn't necessarily mean your child is on drugs, but it does mean that you as a parent should look into the changes to make sure.

SECOND INDICATOR—DECREASING ENGAGEMENT IN ACTIVITIES

"Things that they used to do and don't have an interest in anymore," Patrick continues. "There's a relationship of when they used to be involved in positive activities and the age of onset when they started using. An example would be when a kid says, 'I used to ride my skateboard every day.' Well, when did you stop doing that? 'Around 13.' Well, when did you start using marijuana? 'At 12.' There's oftentimes a relationship between those two things where they start neglecting the positive things they used to be involved in. Or the responsibilities like school or a job or engagement in family or religious activities. Any of those changes are indications that it may be something to look into."

It's a scary feeling to have to be investigating your child. But these days, with heroin in pill capsules (called beans and buttons that sell for \$5 to \$10 a pop) it's better to be safe now than sorry later. And if you do discover that your child is on drugs, its time for action—but not the action you might think to take, or even the action you might want to take. The first sign of addiction is denial. So no confrontations, please.

WHAT NOT TO DO—DO NOT IGNORE THEM!

Once you've identified unusual changes in behavior, don't jump to conclusions. Seek support from family and community.

“The first thing is to not ignore [the changes in behavior],” Patrick tells *The Fix*. “It may not be a substance use issue, but there is some reason for those behavioral changes. Families need to know that there is a high level of support out there. The first thing that you should do is use existing support you have in your life like family and friends or your primary care physician, local law enforcement, your child's school and your spiritual support. Seek those people out for some guidance. See if they know what might be a good fit. Go with the people you feel comfortable with and see if they know anyone that can help.”

RESOURCES—NAR-ANON FAMILY GROUPS

[NAR-ANON](#) is a 12-step resource group for the families and friends of the addict. Not only do you need to treat the addict, but you need to treat the family as well. It's a family disease that affects everyone. And Kelly brings up an important point.

“Parents need to face their own fears,” she tells *The Fix*. “The hardest part is being a parent and thinking that maybe my kids might be abusing drugs. With the heroin epidemic around here, the stigma of being a heroin addict as a teenager is profound. That stigma is being reduced, but parents are scared. They don't want their kids to be categorized as that kid, but they need to have the courage and face that fear and reach out to those supports that are already existing.”

It's as easy as Googling “substance abuse and teens.” If you Google that in your zip code, there's going to be all types of stuff that pops up. Phone numbers, hotlines, treatment facilities—there's tons of services out there. All types of facilities. You start somewhere and if that's not your fit, you get a referral to someplace else. But even when you gather all the necessary information, you have to talk to your child before any action is taken.

THERE IS A SOLUTION

“There has to be a conversation with your child first,” Patrick says. “Before you start doing some of these other things, ask them what's going on. We have a lot of parents out there that don't want to be the ones to go to a 12-step NAR-ANON program or a treatment facility. They don't want to talk to their doctor about their child having a

substance abuse problem. Starting off confrontational isn't the best way. Identify the changes you noticed and ask about the changes. When you are addressing this, remember that it's not that your kid is bad and they need to be good. It's just that they are not healthy. It's a medical condition that you can treat and recover from. The initial response from teenagers will be, 'I'm fine.' But at least have that first conversation, because they may say they're fine, and then two weeks later they might come back and say, 'I'm not fine.'"

And when you get to the treatment stage, it is important that you know what is going on and what the implications of the addiction can be. Not all kids that are experimenting with drugs are addicts. A lot of kids experiment and then move on, but some get stuck and progress in their use and these are the kids that need professional help before they go off the deep end.

"I always educate my family and the kids on the addiction triangle," Kelly tells *The Fix*. "The triangle has three cornerstones. I make sure to say, 'I'm not saying you're an addict or any of these things, but your chances of being an addict go up if each one of these cornerstones are fulfilled.' The first cornerstone is however young a kid is when he or she starts using or drinking alcohol—his chances of becoming an addict go up. Thirteen is young, seventeen is still young. The second is heredity—if there's addiction in your family, your chances go up. The third cornerstone is environmental. Whether you are being raised in a home or family where every party and every funeral, everything, revolves around alcohol. If you walk out to family get-togethers and smell pot at ten years old, then you think it's okay. The addiction triangle is a three-fold way to determine the potential to becoming an addict."

The most important thing to remember is that recovery is a process. You're not going to have this conversation and have your kid jump in the car and say, "Let's go to treatment." It doesn't work like that.

"My advice to parents is less is more," Kelly tells *The Fix*. "When you sit down to have that conversation, make sure the timing is right. Tell them, these are the things I'm seeing. I love you and I worry about you and I want to help you. Please know that I am here. Face that fear, have the courage to sit down with your kid and take the approach that we are going to walk together. Meet that kid where they're at and walk that journey with them. Don't walk in front of them and tell them what to do. Don't walk behind them and try to push them into something, but walk with them. This is something that families have to do together."

Seth Ferranti has been a regular contributor to The Fix since 2012. He also writes for Vice. He has a book out—The Supreme Team.

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