

# Points to Ponder for Parents

## Talking With Your Teen About Drugs and Gambling

Being informed about substance use and gambling is a critical first step in helping to prevent your teen from developing problems with substance use or gambling. As a parent, you need to be informed, so you are prepared to discuss the facts with your teen.

The substances teens are most likely to encounter in junior high school are tobacco, alcohol and cannabis. However, for the majority of teens this age, not using drugs is the norm. Teens are also unlikely to have problems with gambling. But it is still important to begin, and to continue, having conversations with your teen about substance use and gambling, and the effect it could have on their lives.

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But substances of use may also include all other drugs, including prescription medications, over-the-counter drugs and other illegal drugs.

### Tobacco

Nicotine, the drug in tobacco products like cigarettes and spit tobacco, is highly addictive. Even though most youth in Alberta do not smoke, and the number of youth experimenting with tobacco is declining, tobacco use among youth remains a significant health concern. Teens are more likely to use tobacco if significant role models in their lives use tobacco. Tobacco may be a natural substance, but it is anything but harmless. When used exactly as intended by manufacturers, tobacco kills.

# Alcohol

We don't always think of alcohol as a drug, but it is. Alcohol is a depressant drug that is present in beer, wine, spirits and liqueurs. It is legal for adults aged 18 and older in Alberta to drink; however, it is illegal for anyone under the age of 18. How alcohol affects you depends on things like how much and how fast you drink, your body size, whether you are male or a female, how much you have eaten, and how you are feeling. Teens are more vulnerable to harm from alcohol consumption because their brains are still developing and they typically have less experience with the drug.

# Cannabis: Marijuana, hash

Cannabis (commonly known as pot, weed or hash) is the most widely used illegal drug in Canada. It is a mood-altering drug that is used in three forms: as marijuana (the dried flowering buds and leaves of the plant), and as hashish and hash oil (both from the plant resin). Cannabis is typically smoked but can also be ingested. The cannabis "high" comes from the chemical THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol). People who use cannabis report feeling relaxed, free and open. Cannabis can make the user clumsy and slow to react, can interfere with learning and concentration, and can cause anxiety and panic attacks. Long-term effects may include lung damage and problems with short-term memory.

# Gambling

Many believe that adolescents do not gamble, but about two out of three teenagers gamble. Teenagers wager, dare and bet on card games, pool games, sporting events or personal skill competitions. For many adolescents, winning and losing these activities is secondary; they play for the enjoyment, the social interaction and the challenge. For some adolescents, gambling can be a lot like an addictive drug, which may become a problem.

More detailed information on tobacco, alcohol, other drugs and gambling is available from many reputable Canadian organizations. Here are a few you can visit:

- Alberta Health Services
- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
- Health Canada

## What can you do?

Communication is the key. You don't need to be an expert on substances and gambling to start a conversation with your teen. With the information in this document, plus the material available from the organizations listed above, you are well equipped to start communicating.

To scare or not to scare?

There is a difference between scary, "worst-case scenario" information and accurate and relevant information. By teaching your teen about making thoughtful decisions and providing accurate, relevant information about the harm associated with substance use and gambling, you will be preparing them to make healthy choices.

### Having a conversation about consequences

The following questions could be a good starting point for some communication with your teen. They will help you to have an open and honest discussion with your teen about important life areas that can be affected by substance use or gambling problems. You will have your own way of saying things, but the goal is to have your teen consider what the potential consequences of substance use or gambling could be in each area. During the discussion, try to avoid

telling your teen what you think the consequences would be; give them time to think and let them come to their own conclusions.

1. Family: How could choosing to use substances or gamble affect your relationships with family members?
2. Legal: If you choose to use substances or gamble, what might the legal consequences be?
3. Financial: How could choosing to use substances or gamble affect you financially?
4. Peers: How could choosing to use substances or gamble affect your relationships with your peers?
5. School: If you choose to use substances or gamble, what could happen at school?
6. Leisure: How could choosing to use substances or gamble affect the things you like to do for fun?
7. Health: How could choosing to use substances or gamble affect your
  - physical health?
  - emotional health?
  - mental health?
  - spiritual health?

Another way to have this conversation is to brainstorm with your teen different important life areas, and write them down on separate slips of paper. Then, ask your teen to put these life areas in order from most important to least important. Once this is done, give your teen another slip of paper with the words “tobacco, alcohol, other drugs and gambling” on it. Ask them where they would put this slip of paper in order of importance. You can then ask your teen what might happen in each life area if the substance use or gambling became more important.