

Helping Deaf and Hard of Hearing Young People Deal with Alcohol and Other Drugs

Like other young people, Deaf and hard of hearing children and adolescents face many pressures to use alcohol and other drugs. Media, peers and sometimes even families exert pressure on young people to use alcohol and other drugs to socialize, to relax, to deal with problems or to fit in. Teachers, parents, dorm supervisors, counselors and other professionals who serve deaf and hard of hearing young people can help them deal with some of these pressures. Here are some suggestions!

Be aware of signs and symptoms of chemical use. People who abuse mood altering chemicals, including young deaf and hard of hearing people, eventually experience consequences in various areas of their lives. Adults who want to help should be aware of signs and symptoms and investigate further when these symptoms begin to emerge. It is especially important to notice changes in a young person's behavior or a combination of symptoms that causes concern. Many such lists of signs and symptoms are available. One such list is attached.

Hold students accountable for their behavior. Many Deaf and hard of hearing people who enter treatment have never been asked to be responsible for their own behaviors. Related to alcohol and drugs as well as other aspects of their lives, deaf and hard of hearing young people should know and experience the consequences of their behavior. Often, experience is the best teacher.

Share your concerns with and about students. When you have concerns about a student's behavior, share those concerns with the student and/or his/her parents. Use "I" statements to describe the behaviors that concern you and the feelings that you have. For example, "I notice that your eyes are often bloodshot and you have been missing a lot of school. I am concerned that something might be wrong. I care about you and I want to help." It is also appropriate to share any unresolved concerns with parents or resources, such as school counselors or student assistance groups, who can help uncover and treat the problem.

Be open to discussions and questions from students. Young people have many questions about life, and may include questions about alcohol and other drugs. Adults who are open to their questions and who can provide honest and sincere answers can be of immense help. Asking questions and discussing issues are healthy ways to make decisions. Even when young people seem to dwell on the excitement and pleasure of alcohol or other drug use, supportive adults should remain unreactive and share honest information and opinions.

Teach healthy life skills. The more skills we can teach young Deaf and hard of hearing people, the better we prepare them for the challenges of life including the pressures to use alcohol and other drugs. Decision making, refusal skills, cooperation, respect, assertiveness and other important skills can help young people to cope with the pressures of everyday life. Often, deaf and hard of hearing children and adolescents have fewer resources for learning these skills so your willingness to teach them is especially important.

Support healthy life choices. Encourage and support those people, young and old, who make choices that contribute to a healthy life style. This includes choices of healthy foods, sufficient exercise, appropriate expression of emotions as well as a choice to not use mood altering chemicals. Like the rest of us, young people quickly pick up on discrepancies between what we say and do. It is important that we "practice what we preach".

Encourage young people to set goals and work toward them. Often a good predictor of young people avoiding problems with alcohol and drugs is having established goals for themselves. Encourage young deaf and hard of hearing individuals to set short and long term goals and support their efforts to achieve these goals. The emphasis, however, should be more on the goal and the effort shown than on the results.

Have high expectations but acknowledge struggles. Having high expectations for our young people helps them to expect good things of themselves and to believe that they can achieve their goals. Often, sharing of your own personal struggles to achieve can help deaf and hard of hearing children and young adults to understand that they can overcome obstacles to their success.

Confront use of alcohol or other drugs when it happens. Many young people try alcohol and other drugs. Even though we may expect experimentation to occur, we must confront any and all use of mood altering chemicals by children and adolescents. However, avoid power struggles about proof of drug use. Again, use "I" messages. Tell what you have seen or heard and share your concern. Many times, we fail to trust our instincts when we should. That "gut feeling" about someone's behavior can be an important message.

The Minnesota Chemical Dependency Program for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Individuals provides chemical dependency treatment services to deaf and hard of hearing persons ages 16 years and above. The Program also believes strongly in prevention and offers training and education services to young people and the adults who serve them. Staff at the Program can be contacted at 1-800-282-3323 (V/TTY).

Sign and Symptoms. The following are some common signs and symptoms that can help identify a substance abuse problem. While the presence of one or two indicators should not be used to confirm a diagnosis of chemical dependency, a combination of symptoms or an emerging pattern can be very helpful in identifying substance abuse. Frequently, much of this information can be gathered in routine questioning done as a part of service provision.

Physical

frequently unexplained illness
sudden weight gain/loss
injuries (from fights, accidents)
generally unhealthy appearance

Work/School

unexplained absences
pattern of absences or lateness
declining performance/grades
inconsistent performance

frequently tired or bored
memory problems
hangovers

under the influence/high
problems with staff/peers
series of school problems

Social

isolation, lack of friend
schanging friends
socializing around use
blaming others for problems
loss of relationships

Legal

problems with the law
(fights, curfew, truancy, etc)
running away
DWI/DUI--stopped or charged
stealing

Financial

always broke
can't explain spending
borrowing/stealing money
owes money to others
gambling
selling possessions

Emotional/Spiritual

feelings of shame or guilt
feelings of embarrassment
loss of control
pattern of poor judgement
unresolved grief issues
attitude of giving up