

**PLEASE READ ME:  
I MAY BE THE FIRST STEP IN  
SAVING YOUR CHILD'S  
FUTURE OR LIFE**

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## ***INTRODUCTION***

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In today's world there are many potential risks awaiting parents as they raise their children: learning disabilities, bullying, depression, sexual activity, accidents, delinquency, and of course, substance use. Parenting is not easy, and few of us are fully prepared to handle all of the challenges that confront us. Certainly some are more daunting than others, but clearly substance use is among the more serious. It can ruin a kid's life gradually by decreasing his/her potential, or zap it in an instant as we have seen with the recent heroin epidemic.

Because our society has embraced alcohol and marijuana as a normal way of life, and for kids, somewhat of a rite of passage, the problems often sneak up on us before we know what is happening. Too many parents have become

complacent with what they consider minor teen drug use. They ignore early warning signs of abuse, consider treatment only for those 'hard core' addicts, and deny the possibility that their child could ever have a drug problem.

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So what is a parent to do? Why are so many kids using drugs today? How do we know which teens need treatment? What happens in treatment? These are just a few of the questions counselors get asked every day. The following will answer these questions surrounding adolescent substance use and hopefully give some perspective to this serious crisis in our Country. And, we say 'our Country', because while we represent only about 6% of the World's population, we consume about 60% of the World's drugs.

**Now, before we begin, please take note. If you know your child is in trouble with drugs right now, you don't need to read this before taking action. Call a counselor immediately. Forget about being embarrassed; don't worry you may be jumping to conclusions; and, don't fret that your kid may be mad at you. Remember, it's always better to be safe than sorry.**

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## *Why do they use?*

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Kids are kids. They are curious, rebellious and adventurous by nature. Interestingly, the part of their brain that controls judgment is not fully developed until around age 25, so we can expect even the most seemingly normal adolescent to try stupid stuff and do things that don't make sense to adults. Here you might have kids say they use drugs to have fun, make friends, fit in, or escape the hassles of their parents or school. Most are also basically followers who are easily influenced by peers and the music and movies of their time.

Even though their behavior may seem 'normal', it is nonetheless risky and potentially dangerous. Just using some substances one time can still get you arrested, injured or even killed. Although most of these kids may never become addicts, their use sets the stage for that possibility.

There are many kids, though while possessing the same characteristics of the 'normal' teens, have other underlying issues that increase their risk for addiction and serious life problems. The first of these is genetics. Some teens will inherit a predisposition to developing an addiction, which may not mean they will definitely abuse drugs, but does increase the chances dramatically. In this sense addiction is no different than other illnesses like diabetes or cancer. Of course with addiction one has to use drugs before the disease can be manifested, but in general, if the predisposition exists, the addiction process is much more rapid once the use begins and more difficult to stop once fully developed.

Another high risk category for drug problems and addiction is kids with underlying physical, mental or behavioral issues called co-occurring disorders.

For example, if a child has ADHD, depression, bipolar disorder, or is a victim of rape, incest or physical abuse, he is at much greater risk of using, abusing and becoming addicted to mood altering substances. In this case, the child often uses to feel 'normal', to escape, or to stop emotional pain, indicating a more serious pattern of use because it is essentially a form of self-medication. In essence, these young people are able to rationalize and justify their use because they are indeed dealing with real issues.

For all drug-using teens, the problems are sometimes inadvertently made worse by doctors who prescribe medications that may themselves be addictive or that

may react negatively with a child's use of alcohol or illicit drugs. In fact, prescription abuse is itself the fastest growing drug problem in this Country, and definitely at the heart of the opiate/heroin epidemic.

Here's something else to consider. Most adolescents lie or minimize things, but adolescents who use drugs or who are drug addicted lie and

minimize compulsively. Surviving as a drug user involves constant manipulation and deception. And the more they practice this lifestyle the better they get at it. The fact that kids are able to keep their parents in the dark should come as no surprise. So, when they finally do get caught and tell you it was an isolated incident that won't happen again, we believe them. At least we want to believe them because we love them and don't want to lose their trust. And by the way, counselors fall for this as

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well, not because they're naive, but because most of the time they don't have anything to go on but what the teen tells them, and again, drug users lie. So here's an idea. When your child gets caught red-handed but

says it won't happen again, tell your kid that he/she will obviously then not mind taking random drug tests. If the test comes up positive, maybe their use pattern is deeper than they let on. Remember, watching for negative behaviors can be the first warning signs of drug use, but backing that up with drug testing can provide further confirmation treatment is needed or not.

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## *Who needs treatment?*

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While knowing what kids use and why they are using is significant, the most important thing to know when doing an assessment for treatment is what happens to the youth when they use. Essentially, if the adolescent's drug use is causing problems in his life, then he most likely needs treatment. So, if one's use has him in trouble at home, school, or with police, especially if the problems are happening on a regular basis, then treatment should be considered.

All drugs cause impairment. Whether its heroin that can put you at risk for overdose and death, or marijuana that zaps your motivation and decreases memory, ignoring the drug use only makes the dangers worse. Regular users of drugs may appear to be functioning, but in all likelihood they are functioning abnormally and way below their potential. Parents, teachers and counselors are often aware that a young person is using, but because he/she has not overdosed or been put in jail, they think it will just get better on its own.

In truth, recognizing the early warning signs is often the most critical first step in breaking a child's drug abuse. These include things like a drop in grades, outbursts at home or school, stealing money from family or friends, lying, and hanging around with known drug users. You know something is wrong, so getting a professional opinion at this point would be a wise decision. Why is it that we need to wait until a teen is in a drug related automobile accident, arrested for selling, or even passed out with a needle in his arm to consider treatment?

Well, the answer to that varies from family to family, but the most common reason is stigma. No one wants their child or student to be labelled a "druggie". Unfortunately, drug abuse and certainly drug addiction can be progressive, and therefore rarely do things get better on their own without some kind of intervention. Again, we wouldn't hesitate if a child was thought to have heart disease or diabetes, so why is the prospect of addiction so much different? Especially when it's actually alcohol and drugs that are involved in most teen deaths, not the other diseases and health concerns.

Sure, most kids who experiment with drugs move on to healthy adult lives, but when it's your kid who goes to jail or dies, the odds don't make much difference. It's a little like playing Russian Roulette with a child's life. We optimistically spin the barrel knowing there is only a one out of six chance the child will die. These may not be the actual odds, but it's doubtful too many parents would consider this game even if there were fifty chambers in the gun. Yet many unknowingly take these kinds of chances every day with their child's drug use.

There are of course other reasons for not considering treatment than just stigma. For one, it may cost a lot of money. This may be true, but by calling a facility like Bridgeway, you would learn about all of your options, including the fact that most adolescents in the St. Louis area can access free or low cost services because of resources available through local children's services funds.

Another barrier might be the fear of your child getting behind in school. Let's be honest, if

your kid is a regular drug user, he is probably already falling behind in school. If he doesn't get treatment, falling behind will be the least of your worries. Furthermore, with treatment like Bridgeway's out-patient program, Bridges to Success (BTS), sessions are offered after school, lessening any school disruption. Bridgeway understands academic success is critical to a child's future. So, motivating teens to value education, and even helping them with tutoring is an integral part of most treatment plans. And, in most cases with BTS clients, a van is provided to take teens to and from the program, eliminating yet another barrier.

One more reservation, which is probably the weakest of them all, is that by putting a child in treatment you will just be exposing them to hard core drug users. First of all, most kids in treatment are there for marijuana, so it is unlikely a kid will learn any new bad habits. In truth, the likelihood of a child being influenced by hard core users and dealers is much greater on the outside than within treatment.

*Its like playing  
Russian Roulette  
with a child's life*

One of the best aspects of treatment is that it somewhat removes a teen from their daily contacts and routines. And, while in treatment, the kids are randomly drug tested, which provides additional incentive to stay away from old using environments. Treatment offers these kids a safe place to stay straight and get their heads together. Even if they do come across a hard core drug user in treatment, the chances are better they will learn more from the consequences than the benefits of that person's experiences.

There's one other very important point about who needs treatment. Everyone needs to know that many, certainly not all, of teens coming into treatment are experiencing one or more other disorders. These include trauma from such things as sexual, physical and emotional abuse; bi-polar disorder or depression; ADHD or other learning disorders. In some cases these teens come from families where the parents are using and may even be buying drugs for their children. And, some of the kids are coming from severe poverty and have experienced nothing but hopelessness in their lives. When these children come into treatment, a treatment plan is created to address all of the child's individual needs.

Finally, and this is where we will lose some parents, adults often have their own insecurities and fears that can keep them from seeking help for their child. What did I do wrong? What will the neighbors say? These are just a couple of examples where our own feelings can cloud our better judgment. One of the first things parents will hear once they get into the family support component of their child's treatment is that 'it's not your fault'. Sure, maybe you weren't as attentive as you could have been and maybe you even served as a poor role model now and then, but that is not why your kid used. It's much more complicated than that, and your feeling guilty or embarrassed should never be the reason your child doesn't get help.

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## *What is treatment?*

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Well first of all, the word treatment is highly stigmatized itself because it sounds like a kid is being sent to a laboratory with people in white coats who give them electroshock therapy or brainwashing like something from the movie, "A Clockwork Orange".

Of course nothing could be further from the truth. While the thought of treatment may be scary to both kids and parents, it doesn't take long for both to realize treatment is more of a supportive community where teens receive counseling, education, and motivation, as well as exposure to fun, alternative activities to drugs. Except in the case of individual counseling, kids experience all of these along with other teens who are going through the same things they are. This is not to say there are not any therapeutic or learning objectives kids may resist at first, but most end up accepting and appreciating the need for these components and structure.

There are of course several levels of treatment, with teens being placed in the least restrictive or intensive program needed for their particular extent of drug use. All treatment begins with a thorough assessment designed to get necessary background information and drug history. With adolescents, family input is critical at this stage, and their involvement is expected from that point on at whatever level of care is recommended.

***Family  
involvement  
is critical***

Input from juvenile officers or school counselors is also gathered when appropriate to insure an accurate assessment and development of the treatment plan.

Although there is no direct progression from one level of treatment to the next, individual (one-on-one) counseling is generally considered the least restrictive. There are typically two scenarios where this level is recommended. The first happens when the assessment counselor cannot make a definitive recommendation, and suggests a series of additional sessions to get more insight into a teen's particular needs. This is often the case when a teen's drug

use does not appear to warrant outpatient or residential care, but where he could still benefit from some short term counseling or education. The second example for

selecting individual counseling occurs when the teen needs treatment, but because of a co-occurring disorder, trauma, or aggressiveness, may not be appropriate in a group setting.

The most commonly recommended level is intensive outpatient(IOP) treatment.

With Bridgeway, this program generally last 6 weeks to 6 months, beginning four nights per week and gradually decreasing to one night as the adolescent progresses. Teens entering this level are usually regular users of mostly alcohol and/or marijuana, although some have used others drugs including opiates. Most are referred because they have experienced trouble at home, school or with the police. Some have co-occurring disorders like depression or have experienced trauma like sexual abuse. Intensive outpatient is very beneficial to these teens because: it is long term, removing the youth to some extent from their using environments; they are drug tested weekly; they receive one-on-one counseling, but mostly participate in group with other youth experiencing similar problems; and, their parents or guardians are expected to participate in family sessions. The program is highly motivational and educational, not only working to help the teens maintain sobriety, but by arming them with the resiliency skills needed for success in school, a job, or life in general. Many of the youth in outpatient are not necessarily chronically addicted, but nonetheless have been unable or unwilling to stop using.

As mentioned previously, what's most important at this level of care is not what or how much they are using, but what kind of problems use is causing in their lives.

The last level of treatment and the most restrictive is residential. Here the adolescent is likely to exhibit more severe signs of addiction, requiring a more structured and controlled environment. While many of these kids are using alcohol and/or marijuana, they may also be abusing heroin, prescription opiates, cocaine or meth. At this stage, the youth are best served when they can be completely removed from their using environment and all of the triggers that can stimulate use. At Bridgeway, we currently offer a residential program for boys at a facility in Winfield, Missouri called The Farm. This is a 60 - 90 day program where the boys receive traditional counseling, but are also exposed to outdoor adventure activities, sports, equine therapy, and carpentry. Additionally, the boys attend on-site tutoring to be able to keep up with their regular school assignments. Again, there is a strong family component to this program, as well as after-care services at an out-patient facility upon program completion.

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# SUMMARY

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If you have a child who is using drugs, even 'just' marijuana, and he/she is experiencing problems because of his/her use, then you cannot afford to ignore the situation and simply hope it will get better on its own. Too many kids are failing in school, dropping out, and getting in trouble with the law who may not yet be addicted, but are at high risk. Some are clearly addicted, and without intervention may very well be incarcerated, injured or die. Yes, maybe it's embarrassing to admit your child may have a drug problem, but the alternative is much worse. Treatment sounds scary, but once you see what really takes place in treatment you will most likely completely change your perception. We hope you will consider Bridgeway, but no matter what, talk to someone and get the help your child needs. Going to treatment will not ruin your kid's life like he/she may tell you, but it could very well save it.



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## *Bridges To Success Adolescent Outpatient*

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### **St. Charles Office**

1559 Old S. River Rd.  
St. Charles, MO 63303

### **Town & Country Office**

14426 S. Outer 40  
Town & Country, MO 63017

### **Olivette Office**

9445 Dielman Rock Island Industrial Dr.  
Olivette, MO 63132

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## *Adolescent Residential*

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### **The Farm**

2828 E. Highway 47  
Winfield, MO 63389

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*For free drug testing or to schedule an  
appointment call 844-224-2400*

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ABOUT OUR PROGRAMS OR TO  
SCHEDULE AN ASSESSMENT  
PLEASE CALL  
**844-224-2400**

[www.bridgewaybh.com](http://www.bridgewaybh.com)