

Parents often correct about teens' substance use

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By Amy Norton

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Despite the popular notion that parents are usually in the dark about their teenagers' behavior, a new study suggests that many parents are aware of whether their kids are smoking, drinking or using drugs.

In a study of 75 parents and their teenage children, researchers at the State University of New York at Buffalo found that parents were often aware of their children's substance use, but were less likely to realize how often and how much.

Separate questionnaires were given to parents and teens, who returned responses that were generally in good agreement about the teens' drinking, smoking and drug use over the previous 6 months, the researchers report in the *Journal of Child & Adolescent Substance Abuse*.

"Parents are apparently not aware of the depth, and potential severity of the alcohol or drug use," Dr. Neil B. McGillicuddy, a researcher at the State University of Buffalo's Research Institute on Addictions, told Reuters Health.

Still, he said, the findings show that "it is possible for parents to have a good idea of what teens are doing around issues of alcohol and drug use." This, he noted, is in contrast to the notion that many parents don't know what their teenagers are up to.

Not all parents, of course, are aware of their children's substance use. McGillicuddy's team found that parents were less likely to be in the know if their child was relatively young or if they were lax in monitoring their child's comings and goings.

Parents who were under psychological stress, or were themselves drinking heavily, were also less likely to be aware of their children's substance use, the study found.

These findings, McGillicuddy said, suggest that parents should be prepared for the possibility that younger kids -- even younger than 12 -- may be drinking or using drugs. They may also need to get more involved in their children's lives, making sure they always know where their children are and whom they are with, he noted.

Parents can look for some clear signs of a problem -- such as when a child comes home smelling of alcohol, McGillicuddy said. Other, more subtle signs include a child's withdrawal from the family in favor of friends or a tendency to be "secretive." Although, he pointed out, these things are also typical teenage behavior.

Once parents do become aware of a substance use problem, they should first talk their children about it, according to McGillicuddy. They should lay out the "house rules" on drinking and drug use, and explain why those are the rules, he said.

Knowing that their substance use will have consequences might be enough to discourage many teens. But in some cases, McGillicuddy said, they may need help from a substance

abuse treatment program.

SOURCE: Journal of Child & Adolescent Substance Abuse, October 2007.

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