

Gauging parent knowledge about teens' substance use

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New research results from the University at Buffalo's Research Institute on Addictions (RIA) suggest that most parents are aware of and accurately evaluate the extent of their teenager's cigarette smoking, marijuana use, drinking and overall substance use.

Researchers also found that in cases where parents provided lower estimates of substance use, parents were nearly twice as likely to underestimate frequency of marijuana use and quantity of alcohol use. Parents also were less likely to be aware of extent of use by younger teens and of their children's use if they themselves had personal problems or were using alcohol more frequently.

What is novel about these findings is that for the first time, detailed statistics are available about parental knowledge of teen substance use for families in which the teen's substance use is causing the parent stress, but the teen is not necessarily in treatment. Previous studies have been restricted to families with a teen in substance-use treatment or families with no current substance use issues.

For a six-month reporting period, 82 percent of parents accurately evaluated the presence of teen cigarette smoking; the parents' reports corresponded with the teens' reports of their own smoking. Eighty-six percent of parents accurately evaluated the presence of teen alcohol use, and 86 percent accurately reported the presence of teen marijuana use. However, only 72 percent of the parents in the RIA study accurately reported the presence of illicit drug use (other than marijuana) by teens.

According to lead researcher Neil B. McGillicuddy, Ph.D., “This study begins to dispel the notion that parents don’t know the extent to which their teens are using cigarettes, alcohol and illicit drugs. It seems that, despite a few exceptions, many parents do know the extent of their teenager’s substance use. Parents can use this knowledge to help themselves cope with teenage substance use and the resulting stress on the family, as well as to begin conversations with their teen about making changes.”

McGillicuddy is a research scientist at RIA with extensive background in treatment interventions for parents of substance-abusing adolescents, interventions for partners of addicted persons and treatment for alcohol and drug-abusing adolescents.

This research was funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse and published in the most recent issue of the Journal of Child and Adolescent Substance Abuse.

For this study, 75 parents and their teenagers were interviewed separately about the teens’ recent use of cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana and other illicit drugs. Parent-participants were, on average, female (85 percent), 39 years of age with 13 years of education. Teen-participants were, on average, male (61 percent), 16 years of age and not receiving substance abuse treatment (76 percent).

When parents’ and teens’ reports were discrepant, parents provided lower estimates of substance use than teens. That is, teens tended to report greater frequency and amount of substance use. Although some of these discrepancies were small (for instance regarding how often teens drank alcohol), others were substantial (parents were nearly twice as likely to underestimate the frequency of marijuana use and the quantity of alcohol use).

In addition, McGillicuddy and colleagues set out to find factors that might explain the discrepancies in parent-teen reports of teen substance use. Parents were less aware of the extent of the teen's substance use if the teen was younger (about 14 or 15), and if the parents did less monitoring of what their teens were doing after school, during the evening and on weekends. Together, these findings suggest that parents need to consider increasing their monitoring of how teens spend their time and begin thinking about substance use at a significantly younger age.

Lastly, parents who are caught up in their own issues or problems, whether stressed, feeling depressed or using alcohol more frequently, also made less accurate reports.

“What we would hope that people come away with from this study, is that parents can be more aware of their teen's substance use,” McGillicuddy explained, “by reducing their own alcohol use, giving more attention to what their teen is doing 24/7, particularly if the teen is younger, and taking steps to reduce their own psychological distress. Participation in parenting programs, especially those geared toward coping with an adolescent's substance use, can give the parent important skills to deal with teen behavior and have been found to reduce the parent's distress.”

Source: University at Buffalo

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