

Dr. Kay

My son won't listen to me. I try talking with him but he just gets irritated and angry with me. In middle school, he always had great grades, but now he's failing some classes. He's skipping school to hang out with his friends. The only thing that motivates him is video games and being with his group. I don't care for his friends either, they seem like trouble makers. One of his buddies got in trouble with the law recently; I don't know the details, but it worries me. I don't know what to do.

- Samantha W.

If you suspect a problem, find out for certain. Don't ignore the situation and hope this is a phase or just "experimenting", or that it will go away on its own. Your son is probably in deeper trouble than you realize. You need to know what's going on. Even if your son has been truthful with you every day of his life, you can't take his word for it. It may be emotional issues, or it could be drugs or alcohol. You need to find out if he is using drugs or alcohol. Act now. Search his room, his car, pictures on his cell phone, the Internet sites he has visited. Copy down all of his contacts in his phone (If things get worse, you'll wish you had these numbers) and look through his text messages and social media sites. If you find something, confront him with it. This invasion of privacy will probably alienate your relationship, but it provides you with two benefits, you'll know the truth and he can now expect to get caught if he tries something in the future.

Make him take a drug test to determine a baseline reference point, to help you gauge future drug tests. Marijuana gradually leaves the body over 30-40 days. A surprise test tomorrow morning may uncover recent marijuana use. If you test him again in two weeks, the test will probably still indicate marijuana use, because THC is still in his system. It takes 4 - 6 weeks to completely leave his system. Choose a drug test that checks for multiple drugs. It is better to know exactly what you're dealing with, before you go further. Drug tests involve urine samples. Your child has lost the right to privacy at this point, but if you still want to give him the decency of a little privacy, have him use a toilet with no sink access (just a toilet). Use food coloring in the basin of the toilet and bowl so he can't scoop up toilet water in a cup for the test. Be sure each test is a surprise and first thing in the morning. There are ways to beat a drug test, and the kids know them. Find out what kids do to cheat and mix things up to prevent this.

Now that you know the truth about his drug use, if he is on drugs, be decisive, firm, and tough. Stay in control of your temper; don't blow the risks out of proportion. Before you begin discussions, learn the facts about the drugs he's taking. It's time to be his parent, not his friend. Offer help and be clear about your expectations. Write down realistic future consequences. Be sure that you can follow through in full with the consequences you promised. If you can't follow through, every threat becomes an open invitation to continue the misbehavior.

Be realistic about your expectations for the process of getting your child off drugs. This is not an easy time. You'll have to endure many lies, complaints, and hate-filled comments. The addiction will yell at you, make you feel like you're doing the wrong thing and that your actions will never be forgiven. This is the addiction screaming, not your child. With a rational and concerned tone, tell him, "I love you. I'll always love you and will always be here for you. Because I love you, I won't stand by and let this

addiction destroy you. My love for you won't let me stand by while you put your life and future at risk. I can't turn my back on this drug use. It's bringing you down, hurting your chances for a good future. I won't let the addiction hurt our relationship, and later wish that I had done something about it."

Even if he promises that he won't ever use drugs again, you still need to take proactive steps. Cut all access to money. If he has a job and you suspect that the people there may be providing him with the drugs, make him quit. If his source isn't at work, take up each paycheck and put the money in a savings account for him. Hide your wallet away and put away things that are easily sold for cash like jewelry, electronics, medicine, and prescriptions. Take away the car, the video games, and freedom. You can no longer trust him with his friends or give the opportunity to go back to the places that he was doing drugs. Even without money, his friends will give him narcotics. Perhaps the oddest advice is to continue to let him use his cell phone. This might be your only means to track his friends, texts, pictures, and with the right software – his exact location.

Now that you've confronted the problem, it's time to figure out the root cause. Most kids are using marijuana or alcohol to self-medicate their anxiety or depression issues. They want to take a cheap vacation from their reality. They want to stop thinking about their problems, relax. From a parent's view-point, kid's lives don't seem stressful, especially in comparison with adult issues; but the stress or depression is real. It's not helpful to down-play the type or amount of stress. If it is real to your child, take it seriously. Don't be surprised if YOU are the center of the problem and he blames you for all of these issues. The addicted mind will do whatever it takes. He will pull on any heart-strings he can find in you, just to continue use of the needed drug. Start the healing process with the least intrusive counseling and, if things don't get better, work your way up. Simply punishing the use of drugs won't give as much return as resolving the true underlying problems.

Some situations can be handled with a few people getting involved to talk with your child, like a school counselor, church counselor, a relative who you trust, or a local police friend. By no means get the law involved as a consequence. Find an activity or hobby that can begin to substitute for the drugs. Maybe it's as simple as movie night with his dad or an engaging, fun form of exercise. Often times these simple steps will be enough but when they are not, the next step would be a professional counselor for individual and family counseling. If the addiction has already set in, you'll have to move to more intrusive and yes costly interventions. If meeting with a counselor is not enough, you will want an assessment of chemical dependency and then outpatient therapy. Get a recommendation and then ask that doctor some questions: Do you have success treating adolescents? (Some doctors don't treat young addicts.) Will using drugs be at all negotiable? (Some doctors think that a bit of drug use is reasonable.) Three or four weeks after your son has been clean, insist upon a mental health evaluation. Even if you don't suspect a mental health problem, having an evaluation will give you base-line data for the future. If the problem is continuing as an outpatient, it's time to try inpatient therapy, a teen drug rehab center. No matter the final treatment, addicts need support networks. This is why Alcoholics Anonymous is so popular.

You and your child can get through this. At this point, put your child first. You may have to take time off of work to get him to his appointments and spend money to get him the right therapy. He is worth the trouble and, ultimately, will be thankful for your unconditional love. Your loving support, calm

demeanor, and strong determination for success through this situation will have the greatest influence over the likelihood he can kick this habit and you can get your son back.

For those parents who have children who are too young to be in this situation, start talking with them now. Let them know that there will be consequences, if they even try drugs one time. Elementary-aged students have been known to use inhalants like glue, gas, nail polish, and markers, with permanent brain damage as the consequence. I've heard of fourth graders smoking marijuana in the school bathroom. Personally, I tell my two young kids once a month that I am not only checking on them, keeping an eye on what they are doing, checking their pockets, bathrooms, and closets, but remind them of the consequences for using drugs – freedoms will be taken away and they will lose the door to their bedroom.

If you have a question about your child's attendance at school, feel that your child refuses to go to school, or have a question about your child's education, you can Email Dr. Kay at DrJimK@yahoo.com and your question with his answer may be published in this magazine.