

Unfortunately, many parents have had this experience. Here are some thoughts. (For the purpose of this discussion, “you” refers to “you as a parent”)

1) What exactly are the signs that you might have seen? Numerous excellent websites such as nida.org, csap.org and samhsa.org document the signs of teen alcohol and other drug use. Also, there are many excellent books on parenting teens that outline the signs as well. Books may present viewpoints similar to your own and provide a rationale for actions that leaves you more confident; or books may challenge you to think differently about expectations and consequences for your teen. I have often found that when parents review a “signs and symptoms” list, they tend to discount many of the items because they are searching for that one clear reason why their teen would seemingly disregard “logic” and engage in this type of risk-taking behavior. So rather than just list signs and symptoms, I am going to weave a few into this discussion.

2) Actually, there may not be too many signs, such as grades going down or change of friends, if your teen has just started using or used for a short period of time. Behavior changes that accompany frequent or chronic substance use are usually not present the first few times a teen uses, if indeed your teen is in the very early stage of use.

3) There may have been some signs but if your teen’s accountability is more loosely rather than tightly monitored, your teen may be able to use substances without a rule violation that might signal parents. For instance your teen’s grades may start slipping but perhaps you accept one of these explanations: “*This is an especially tough semester...everyone is doing worse*” or “*I got stuck with the teacher who can’t explain math.*” Either of the latter could be true but that’s why emails to teachers and parent/teacher conferences are extremely important at both the junior and senior high school level.

Another sign as stated in the literature is that your teen frequently breaks curfew but if indeed there IS no curfew, and/or if your teen is allowed frequent sleepovers at friends’ homes, then your teen could easily increase the amounts and frequency with which they drink/use without your knowledge. Some parents maintain that they HAVE accountability checkpoints but upon examination they usually see that what they have

instead might be “attitudes” about what keeps a teen safe or inoculates them against alcohol/other drug use: “As long as his graders are fine, we don’t worry about what he does”; “How could he be in Student Council and be doing drugs?”; “He’s an athlete—I hardly think he would risk getting kicked off the team OR endangering his health”; “He’s the leader of his church youth group and kids look up to him...I don’t think he would risk losing that”; “There’s no way he would use because we have told him that we have alcoholics in our family history”, etc.

4) There may be signs but you are hesitant/afraid to act for fear of your teen’s anger or threats (“You ground me and I’ll runaway!”) You are wise to challenge your own motives for action or inaction with your teen, such as:

*Do I fear the anger itself...maybe I grew up in an angry home and I vowed to have a more peaceful one even if that means I therefore must overlook my teen’s behavior...along the line of “if I don’t see a problem, then we don’t HAVE a problem” so there’s nothing I need to confront...I will just hope it gets better all on its own...*

*Do I fear I will make a bad situation worse? As I said above, maybe it will get better on its own, what if I make a big deal out of nothing?...*

Our teens know where our buttons are and how to push them...one teen I knew was able to paralyze his mother into inaction with a simple phrase... “Send me to drug treatment and you will never *EVER* see your grandchildren!” Hey, it might not work on all parents but he knew it would work on her because she always talked about how awesome it would be to have grandchildren someday, and she was terrified of losing him AND them! Another, a girl would tell her mom “Sure, make it so bad here that I have to leave and then guess whose fault it will be if I end up a hooker on the street!”

*Do I fear that I may lose control if I confront my teen?* You may know that you keep a tight rein on your anger and that it is hard for you to have tough conversation with your teen because once your teen loses control, you may follow suit and then a screaming and yelling match ensues.

5) *Do I fear what other parents will think/say if they learn from my teen’s friends that he is seeing a counselor for alcohol/drug use?* You may see signs but choose not to follow up on your suspicions because further digging

might prove it true. The thought of having to respond to the issue may bring up the fear stated above. Subsequent postings will speak to the importance of personal boundaries for protecting personal space and respecting the space of others. For example, confident parents make decisions independent of others' opinions that are based on shame rather than knowledge and expertise. They choose their own thoughts and actions about parenting without allowing the expressed or perceived opinions of others to dictate their course of action or inaction about their teen's health and welfare.

If you play the "what will people say or do if they knew" game back and forth in your head, it can go something like this:

*People will think I have failed as a parent, that I am a bad mother/father...*

*I will ruin my kid's life because other parents won't let their kids hang out with mine...I know I wouldn't...*

*I don't want teachers at school to know this because they will think less of her if they know she is in counseling for drug use...it's just a little pot...most kids do it anyway...*

*His grandparents would absolutely die if they knew about this...*

*All I need is for my ex-husband to find out and he'll probably take me to court and use her drug use as a reason to demand more visitation rights or custody....*

None, some or all of the above could happen. It doesn't matter. Parents must find the strength through support from school officials, community counselors, family members, and attorneys, if necessary, etc to stay the course and focus on the issue at hand, and that is "my student has a health and safety problem and I as a parent am obligated to address it, preferably with professional guidance.

6) You may see signs but worry that "my kids know more about alcohol/drugs than I do and I will look stupid if I challenge him/her on it".

Although few if any parents feel completely confident much less comfortable discussing a substance issue with their teen, you can increase your knowledge and confidence through online education from a variety of sources including the websites previously cited. Just remember, you do not need to become a drug expert! A few facts go a long way!

Listen to this parent: *“Jeff,, it does sound like you have read a lot about marijuana. The bottom line for us is, marijuana is a smokable drug and no smoke of any kind is healthy for lung tissue. We value health in this family so we cannot support smoking of any kind.. We also value the law, and we cannot support your breaking the law to drink, smoke cigarettes or smoke marijuana.”*

Four sentences....not a semester course on substance abuse...that’s all this parent needed to state his/her expectations. But you do need to consider how you will respond to teen retorts before actually placing yourself in such a conversation. The teen’s comments will be fairly predictable...

*“What? Mom, it’s no big deal! (Your health and safety are a big deal to us)*

*It’s not like I’m a pothead or dropping out of school or anything!*  
(I am happy to hear you are not too far into it...shouldn’t be a problem to give it up!)

*Dad, as long as I am responsible and don’t drink and drive, what’s the problem?*

I am pleased that you would not combine drinking with driving. Drinking alcohol also increases the chances of poor decision making in other areas besides driving.

*Hey, some of the kids drink and smoke a lot...I just drink ONE!*

I don’t know why your friends make the choices they do. Let’s talk instead about why, if you only have one, you choose to have one at all?

There are indeed many reasons why you might miss signs that a teen is using alcohol or other drugs. What’s most important is not to blame yourself for missing signs but to pat yourself on the back for taking action once you DO recognize there is a problem!