



## **supporting your teen: how can you help your teen make good decisions?**

The teenage years are challenging for teens and parents alike. As teenagers go through tremendous physical, emotional and social changes, they often feel frustrated, scared, angry and confused—and so do their parents!

Although teens may not always change their behaviour based on what you say, it's important to remember that they do hear you, so don't give up! As a parent, or as someone who is important in the life of a teen, your opinion and guidance can be a strong influence.

This brochure will provide you with concrete ways to help teens deal with life's stresses, avoid problems and become strong, responsible individuals. By supporting a teen's belief in their own worth and abilities, you can help them to learn from their mistakes and deal with life's challenges, all the while building "resiliency"—a quality that will help them to make better decisions both today and well into the future.

## **resiliency: why do some teens cope with challenges more easily than others?**

Why do some teens get locked into poor choices while others always seem to land on their feet? It all comes down to resiliency—the ability to 'bounce-back' from difficult situations and to make healthier choices when coping with life's struggles.

Research shows that resilient youth are less likely to experience problems related to substance use, gang participation, gambling, gaming or other potentially harmful or unhealthy behaviours.

By addressing the personal, family, school and community factors that influence resiliency, you can play a significant role in helping your teen increase their ability to cope in positive ways.

## personal factors: how can you increase your teen's self confidence and independence?

Youth differ in their needs—for security, excitement, social belonging and adult approval. These needs, and each teen's personality, shape their decisions and sometimes lead to choices that can be risky for their health and well-being. Self confidence and independence are two characteristics that support resiliency.

You can help by:

- Giving praise to your teen—often and in meaningful ways.
- Recognizing the positive things your teen does.
- Taking the time to find out what your teen is good at.
- Allowing them to take on challenges, to learn and to grow.
- Respecting their expressions of individuality and their need for privacy.
- Supporting them in making their own decisions and discussing the results with them.
- Encouraging them to try new things in order to gain skills and confidence and experience success.

*“I feel much better about my day if my mom gives me a smile when I leave the house.”*

*– 15-year-old boy*

## family factors: what role does family play in building resiliency?

Family life can be complicated for youth. Moving to a new neighbourhood or country, divorce, the loss of a family member or any other family change can be difficult. Even without these major challenges, teens can struggle to separate themselves from their families as they explore their individuality. Continuing to maintain a positive relationship with your teen is very important.

You can help by:

- Spending fun time together—playing video or board games, cooking, participating in sports or watching movies.
- Encouraging them to have positive relationships with extended family members such as aunts, uncles and grandparents.
- Giving teens reasonable family responsibilities and showing appreciation for their contributions.
- Recognizing their unique position in the family.

*“Maybe I should have outgrown this by now, but I still like spending time with my family, playing games and watching TV together.”*

*– 14-year-old girl*

## peer factors: how can you encourage positive peer relationships?

Friends and peers are so important in the teenage years, but research shows that if a teen's close friends are involved in substance use, or other potentially harmful behaviours, they are more likely to engage in these behaviours themselves. Some teens, however, are able to withstand the pressures from their friends and make their own decisions, especially if they have learned how to build positive peer relationships.

You can help by:

- Getting to know your teen's friends and appreciating their good qualities.
- Checking with your teen about where they are going, and negotiating rules about curfew and activities.
- Helping them to understand what healthy relationships are.
- Supporting your teen's ability to make choices and to take part in activities that may be different from those their friends choose.

***“When I made the decision to stop using weed, I had to find a new group of friends. I didn't talk to my mom about it a whole lot, but she knew I was going through a rough time and I felt her support.”***

***– 16-year-old girl***

## school factors: what role does school play in building resiliency?

Teens spend most of their waking hours at school and, depending on a variety of factors, the educational setting can either be a challenge or a positive partner in building resiliency. Studies show that teens who participate in sports, clubs and group activities are less likely to misuse substances or participate in potentially harmful behaviours.

You can help by:

- Knowing your teen's school and timetable.
- Encouraging participation in events and activities at school.
- Supporting good study habits and encouraging them to meet deadlines.
- Working with teachers and discussing any concerns.
- Supporting your teen's individual abilities.
- Finding supportive programs if your teen finds school challenging.

***“My parents expected me to sit down for hours at a time to do homework because I was having so much trouble with school. I just couldn't hack it. When we finally made a plan with my teachers to break up my homework schedule, I was able to start doing my work, and got to play ball with my friends too.”***

***- 13-year-old boy***

## community factors: how can community involvement help?

While some communities might provide a safer and more caring environment than others, all communities present opportunities for teens to get involved. If you help your teen to seek out positive opportunities in their community, you're likely to see their sense of self-worth increase as they realize that they really can have an impact.

You can help by:

- Seeking out and supporting organized events in the community that your teen can participate in.
- Helping your teen build healthy friendships beyond the school environment.
- Teaching youth to give back to others in the community through volunteer experiences.
- Being a role model by having a positive influence in the community yourself.

***“My community has drugs and gangs everywhere, but it also has a terrific rec centre and that’s given me the opportunity to be a junior coach and leader. I wouldn’t trade it for anywhere else.”***

***– 16-year-old girl***

## when problems occur: when should a parent be concerned?

Despite the best efforts of parents and other adults to offer support, some teens will experience problems when it comes to substance use, gambling, gaming and gang involvement. When does a behaviour become a problem? When a teen seems unable to control their behaviour and, as a result, is at risk for physical or psychological harm, it's always a cause for concern.

Problems related to substance use, gambling/gaming and gang involvement can seem scary and difficult at first, but helping teens to overcome them can make youth stronger, more resilient and, ultimately, more responsible people. The first step in helping a teen is to recognize the warning signs.

Some signs are:

- Changes in friends and/or being secretive about friends.
- Changes in behaviour and attitude—becoming withdrawn, secretive, unfocused.
- A drop in school attendance and grades, or increased problems at school.
- A change in finances—having more or less money than usual.

# common problems for teens

## internet, social networking and gaming

Using social networking sites, such as Facebook or Twitter, and calling or texting friends on cell phones have become important parts of teen life. Internet games and video games are also very popular and compelling pastimes for many youth. Most teens are able to avoid situations such as Internet harassment, bullying or aggression; however, too much screen time can lead to other problems like social isolation as kids stop seeing their peers face-to-face and spend less and less time with their families. Research shows that both being subjected to online harassment or spending excessive amounts of time playing online or video games can lead to family, social or psychological problems for youth.

## gambling

Gambling means making bets on games of chance, such as lottery tickets, sports pools or internet poker. Most youth begin gambling informally, (for example playing cards with friends or family or receiving a lottery ticket as a gift). They may gamble infrequently or bet small amounts of money without causing problems for themselves or others. However, studies show that youth are two to four times more likely to develop a problem with gambling than adults. Trouble arises when teens bet large amounts of money, play to win back money they have lost, or become so caught up in poker or other games that they stop paying attention to family, friends and school.

## mental health

Mental health problems in the teen years are more common than you might think. Problems can be related to anxiety about a social or personal situation, or may involve a concern about a learning disability or a serious mental health disorder such as depression. If not addressed, these problems can all have an impact on a teen's development and activities. It's also not uncommon for mental health problems to overlap with other problems teens might be experiencing. For example, a young person who is experiencing a mental health problem might get caught up in Internet or video gaming, or turn to drugs as a way to 'escape.' The good news, however, is that research shows that most childhood mental health disorders can be solved through early intervention.

## substance use

Substance use refers to the use of drugs—both legal and illegal—that change the way people think or feel. These include over-the-counter and prescription medicines, alcoholic beverages, coffee, tea, colas and energy drinks, as well as drugs such as cocaine and heroin. Studies show that many teens experiment with alcohol and marijuana, particularly in senior high school. Although most youth do not use these substances, or use them only occasionally, some teens run into problems with their use. These problems are often linked to physical or emotional effects and can occur from one-time use, or can build up as a result of long-time use.

## gangs

Being involved in peer groups can sometimes lead youth to engage in behaviours such as vandalism, skipping classes or bullying. Membership in a gang, however, involves a more powerful and organized set of expectations to go along with the group's activities— however harmful and illegal they may be—as well as an expectation to “cover up” for each other if someone is caught. Gangs show their identities in a variety of ways, including a dress code or wearing specific colours or symbols. Youth may be attracted to gangs for a sense of belonging, protection, power and excitement, or because someone they know and look up to is in the gang. Research shows that mostly males are involved in gangs; however, girl gangs are becoming an increasing concern. Leaving a gang is difficult for a teen, but can be done with support from parents and other caring adults.

## avoiding & addressing problems: how can you help your teen stay on track?

If you suspect your teen is having problems, you need to talk to them. First and foremost, let them know that you are on their side and that you want to support them and keep them safe. There are also a number of things you can do to help your teen avoid problems before they start:

- Educate yourself by getting information and materials from credible sources.
- Talk with your teen about situations where they could encounter alcohol and other drugs.
- Talk with your teen about their use of the Internet.
- Talk with your teen about pressures to join a gang and how they can handle these situations.
- Be clear about your expectations when it comes to your teen's use of alcohol, marijuana and other drugs and negotiate limits on the use of video games and the Internet.
- Be a role model for your teen in the responsible use of alcohol and prescription medication and your own involvement with gambling and the Internet.
- Describe what you see, hear or are concerned about when it comes to your teen's behaviour rather than confronting them with your suspicions.
- Talk to other parents to learn from their experiences.
- Seek help from professionals for yourself and for your teen, if necessary.

***"I don't make little mistakes – I make big ones. And when I do, I need my parents to help me learn from my mistake - not judge me or punish me."***  
– 17-year-old girl

## keeping the lines of communication open: how can you talk so teens will listen, and listen so teens will talk?

It's never too early or too late to talk to your child about substance use, gambling, gangs and other challenging topics—and it's not as difficult as it sounds. Sometimes it's a matter of finding the right moment (such as in the car or late at night when both of you are relaxed). Parents need to state their expectations and set out consequences for teens when it comes to behaviour, but they also need to be willing to listen, to negotiate and to provide a safety net.

The use of alcohol or other drugs, gambling, or hanging out with a gang may start small, with teens feeling in control, but behaviours can quickly get out of hand. The challenge for parents is to recognize when this is happening so they can step in to provide the help teens need. It might not always be easy, but by overcoming both the small and big hurdles of life together, parents and teens can build stronger, more resilient families that foster stronger, more resilient youth.

***"My dad says I should just know that he appreciates me - but I really need to hear it from him."***  
– 18-year-old-boy

## 10 tried-and-true ways to build resilient youth

- 1.** Praise your teen often and sincerely for their efforts and the things they do well. Recognize their contributions to the household, to their school, and to the community.
- 2.** Discuss things with your teen and invite their opinions—even if they are different from your own.
- 3.** Find out, in a friendly way, where your teen is and who they are with.
- 4.** Let your teen know, in advance, what behaviour you expect from them.
- 5.** When your teen breaks family rules, make sure the consequences are consistent and fair.
- 6.** Be open to negotiating with your teen about family rules and consequences.
- 7.** Encourage your teen's school work and connect with the school to build a positive relationship and solve problems.
- 8.** Respect your teen's privacy and their need to express their uniqueness.
- 9.** Set an example by being responsible about your own use of alcohol and other drugs, the Internet, gambling and gaming, and model healthy personal relationships for your teen.
- 10.** Recognize that mistakes—your teen's and your own—can be valuable opportunities to learn!

## resources and links

Visit the websites of these organizations for more information:

**The Canadian Centre for Substance Abuse:** [www.ccsa.ca](http://www.ccsa.ca)

Offers current news, research and publications about drugs and addictions. There is also a drug use prevention site for youth: [www.Xperiment.ca](http://www.Xperiment.ca)

**The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health:** [www.camh.net](http://www.camh.net)

Provides extensive information on alcohol and other drugs, addictions and mental health. Two publications of special interest are: "What Parents Need to Know about Teens" and "Growing Up Resilient: Ways to Build Resilience in Children and Youth."

**Children's Mental Health Ontario:** [www.kidsmentalhealth.ca](http://www.kidsmentalhealth.ca)

Extensive information about the signs of mental health disorders in children and youth and useful tips on getting help.

**The Community Solution to Gang Violence:** [www.csgv.ca](http://www.csgv.ca)

Provides a resource section with good information on prevention for parents and other community members.

**The Government of Canada's National Anti-Drug Strategy:** [www.drugprevention.gc.ca](http://www.drugprevention.gc.ca)

Provides drug prevention information for parents, including sections on observing your kids and taking action. A free copy of "Talking with Your Teen about Drugs" is available here.

**The Media Awareness Network:** [www.media-awareness.ca](http://www.media-awareness.ca)

Provides practical tips for helping parents manage media in the home, including staying safe on the internet and using videogames constructively.

**National Institute on Drug Abuse:** [www.drugabuse.gov](http://www.drugabuse.gov)

Focuses on the science of drug abuse and addiction and has a section specifically for parents and teachers. (U.S. site)

**Parent Action on Drugs:** [www.parentactionondrugs.org](http://www.parentactionondrugs.org)

Offers extensive information on alcohol and other drugs, including strategies for parents to use when they have concerns about their child's involvement with substance use. A Parent Action Pack and Parent and Community Handbook are also available for free.

**People for Education:** [www.peopleforeducation.com](http://www.peopleforeducation.com)

Provides multi-lingual tip sheets for parents on relating to schools, including one on solving problems at school.

**Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration:** [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

Includes useful resources to help parents, including one on talking to teens about alcohol. (U.S. site)

**Teen Net (University of Toronto and Department of Public Health):** [www.parentbet.net](http://www.parentbet.net)

A good source of information about youth gambling for parents, including how to talk about the issue with your child. A companion site, [www.YouthBet.net](http://www.YouthBet.net) is available for teens.

