



Common Mistakes Parents Make

Perhaps surprisingly, some parents actually enable their child's substance abuse, says Kurash. "Giving your child money, letting them skip school, covering for them, lying to police to protect them from prosecution – these are some of the ways that well-meaning parents enable the child's addiction. The stigma of heroin addiction and treatment is so great that I have even seen parents who permitted their teen to use at home or have driven them to get drugs, so that their child doesn't have to face the ordeal of withdrawal."

Kurash warns parents that, if their child is stealing from them, that child has an addiction which has progressed significantly. "At that point, you need help. That child is far gone, deeply involved in substance abuse. Parents are reluctant to press charges against their own child, but this is an opportunity to get the legal system involved and get help."

Victor Barbetti, Ph.D., a clinician who is Unit Manager for Mercy Behavioral Health's Intensive Outpatient Program for Adolescents, agrees that stealing is a major red flag. Parents are embarrassed, he says, when the legal system becomes involved, but it is imperative that parents abide by the law. He believes that the biggest mistake parents make is failing to confront the problem directly. Many parents see the warning signs but sweep it under the rug, he says, because they are trying to cope with a mix of emotions and honestly don't know what to do. It often takes a crisis for parents to act. "Parents call us at their wit's end," he states. "Their child is facing suspension or even arrest, or is stealing family heirlooms, and they know they need help."

When Your Child Is Using Heroin: Help for Parents

By Nancy Kennedy

It's hard to imagine – heroin, in your house. Your child, addicted to this powerful and dangerous drug. For numerous families across Western Pennsylvania, the problem is very real and the stakes are very high. Heroin is prevalent throughout our region, wreaking havoc with the lives of teens and young adults and bewildering their heartbroken parents. Heroin is easily available, relatively inexpensive and so highly addictive that what often begins as teenage experimentation quickly escalates to full-blown addiction. While the word heroin still conjures up images of strung out junkies loitering on street corners in urban neighborhoods, those stereotypes no longer apply, according to regional experts. The most common substances kids use are marijuana and alcohol, but the new heroin users are predominantly young, white and suburban.

For parents, learning that their son or daughter is using heroin is a life-changing moment. However they learn of it, the realization hits like an emotional tsunami – overwhelming and devastating. "When I found out that my 15-year old, a sophomore, was addicted to heroin, it felt like an out-of-body experience," says Carrie J., a Bethel Park resident. "I thought it couldn't possibly be true. But it was, and my husband and I are still reeling with it. We felt every emotion: shock, anger, guilt, confusion and disappointment, even a sense of betrayal. But mostly we feel sad and scared."

Carrie's reaction is a common one, according to Nicole Kurash, MSW, LSW, Youth Clinical Manager at Gateway Rehabilitation Center. "Parents are devastated and they react in a lot of different ways. The most important thing is not to panic but to take action. Whether parents suspect their child of heroin use, or know the child has a problem and are trying to deal with it, there are things they can do that will help their child, themselves and the entire family. It's never hopeless."

How is heroin taken?

Heroin is made from morphine. On the street, it comes in a powder form that is nearly always "cut" or diluted for sale. It may be cut with sugar, starch, talcum powder, flour, powdered milk or similar substances. The color varies, but it may range from white to dark brown; the taste is bitter. It is sold in plastic disposable bags.

Heroin can be taken in many ways – it may be snorted, smoked, injected or even eaten, although that is unlikely. For injection, heroin powder is mixed with water and then may be injected subcutaneously (under the skin) or intravenously (into a vein). To smoke heroin, it has to be heated to create vapors that can be inhaled; this is often done by heating it on a piece of foil.

Most heroin users begin by smoking it, but eventually progress to injection. Injection is actually less expensive, because it takes a smaller amount to get the same high. Injection also is said to provide a better "high."

Red Flags: Recognizing the Warning Signs

One of the first signs of substance abuse in young people is a deterioration in school performance, according to Barbetti. There may be a change in personality as well – a previously engaged and happy child becoming withdrawn, irritable or angry, for example. Changes in sleeping habits are common. Excess sleeping, drowsiness or a lot of napping are definitely red flags, even though many teens normally sleep a lot. "You have to know your own child and pay attention to changes," Barbetti says. "Be involved. You can be involved in your child's school and social life without being intrusive. Drive them to their friend's homes and pick them up; talk with their friend's parents. Know who your kid's friends are; a change in friends is a huge red flag."

Kurash counsels parents to watch for things like constantly leaving school early or not attending regularly. Kids with heroin addiction often get high before school and can't stand to be in class, she says. "Key points to watch for are such behaviors as nodding off, falling asleep often, having pinpoint pupils, dark eye circles and rapid weight loss. Heroin is an appetite suppressant and girls who use it commonly do so to avoid weight gain."

Control the Things You Can Control

Although they may feel overwhelmed and uncertain, parents are not helpless and their actions can go a long way in supporting their child's recovery.

Kurash recommends taking away their driving privileges. "If your child is getting high, he or she should not be driving. Many parents will still let them drive and this is dangerous. They WILL drive high. Plus, a car gives them the means to go to get drugs. If your child has a car or is still driving yours, pay attention to the car's mileage; kids will go far to get drugs, to the hubs where there is a lot of drug activity."

If there are prescription drugs in the home, lock them up. Substance abuse is a progression that commonly begins with prescription drugs and alcohol. Sedatives such as Xanax or painkillers like Vicodin and Percocet are popular and are present in many homes. "Kids

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*-Nicole Kurash, MSW, LSW,
Youth Clinical Manager at Gateway Rehabilitation Center*

know where to look and will use what's available; they like the relaxing effect of these drugs. Oxycontin leads right to heroin; the effect is the same and heroin is actually less expensive," Kurash says.

Taking away cell phones and cash are also helpful measures. "These actions may not completely prevent your child from using, but they place obstacles before them that make it more difficult for them. If your child has a job and has their own money, make them accountable for it. A heroin habit can become expensive."

Strengthen Your Relationship with Your Child

Dr. Barbetti emphasizes involvement in the child's life as the best strategy for parents whose kids are already using, as well as a preventive approach for parents who are concerned. Essentially, all kids are vulnerable, he believes; peer pressure combined with the challenges of adolescence and an environment offering easy availability of drugs make a perfect storm of risk. "Kids who take drugs may be dealing with emotional pain, or they may be bored and experimenting with risk-taking behavior. Many kids have too much unsupervised time; they need their parents to be involved and spend time with them. Know who they are, what they're doing, who they are with. Talk to them and be there so they can talk to you. Stay close to your kids, talk to them, and hug them. When you hug your kids, you not only connect emotionally

but you have an opportunity to assess them closely for physical signs of substance abuse, such as pinpoint pupils."

Part of being a good parent is monitoring your child. Keeping an eye on behavior is one aspect of this, but another is one that many parents find uncomfortable – going through their child's belongings. Barbetti says that this requires a judgment call, but because of the danger, the need for safety overrides the right to privacy. "Checking up on your child by going through their backpacks and pockets depends somewhat on the relationship, but when parents have concerns they need to trust their intuition and be bold. Your kids may be doing something dangerous and illegal in your house and you are responsible."

They can Recover

Perhaps the most critical point is that there is plenty of help available to parents and they should not delay seeking it. Heroin is a dangerous drug and an overdose can be fatal. Heroin use can also cause Hepatitis C, a liver disease that is largely asymptomatic but gradually does severe damage to the liver; injecting heroin places the user at very high risk for contracting HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. "Parents should act as soon as they are aware that there is a problem," Kurash says. "Kids can get clean. They can recover. The longer they are in treatment, the better the prognosis. They can still recover and lead full, healthy and happy lives."

How does it feel to take heroin?

Heroin produces a "rush" of euphoria and a warm, drowsy, contented feeling. Users may have constricted pupils and want to sleep a lot. Tolerance to heroin builds quickly and more and more is required to get the same effect. It is extremely addictive. Heroin withdrawal is characterized by nausea, aches, chills, sweats, tremors and muscle spasms.

2 years since I got involved.

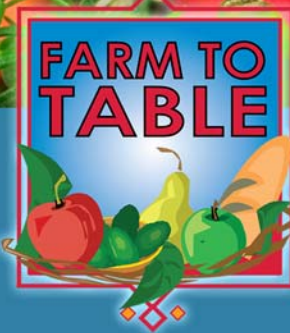
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