



WHY Is My Child Using Substances?

Teens and young adults use substances for a variety of reasons including curiosity, peer pressure to fit in, a way to alleviate boredom, address anxiety and other needs. Maybe you've already had many discussions with them about not using drugs/alcohol, but they are doing it anyway. Or perhaps you have previously asked him repeatedly to stop, but they continue to use substances.

Right now, you might be feeling betrayed by your child or afraid you won't handle the situation in the right way. As you consider this situation, a first step is to understand WHY they are using drugs/alcohol. When you understand this, you can start taking steps to do something about it. You can address the concern and start considering some solutions. In seeking to understand WHY your child is using drugs/alcohol – e.g. WHAT it's doing for them and WHAT need they are trying to address – you will understand it in a new way. This new perspective will make sense as compared to remaining baffled about it and frustrated or upset with them. You will feel more in control of what to do next once you understand WHY.

Behaviors Make Sense

Suppose you go to a restaurant and are looking at the dessert menu where you spy a double dark chocolate fudge cake or key lime pie. How do you choose? Most people have a preference because they've found eating one or the other was pleasant based upon past experiences. If you really like chocolate, you'll find ordering the cake rewarding or reinforcing and order it. If you like citrus, you'll likely order the key lime pie because the thought of it is rewarding to you.

Behaviors that are rewarding get reinforced and get repeated. We do something because we benefit from it – or else we wouldn't do it. An important point to remember is that the **benefit is in the eye of the beholder**. You may think chocolate cake is fabulous while your partner could care less. Sometimes the benefit is from something we get out of doing the behavior, like the pleasant taste of chocolate or citrus, while at other times the benefit comes from having something taken away. For example, if you have a headache, take Advil and the headache goes away, you're more likely to try Advil again the next time your head is throbbing.

Substances can be rewarding and reinforcing too. What if I told you they could help you to ...

- Chill out
- Satisfy your curiosity
- Feel less depressed
- Take away boredom
- Feel like a rebel
- Take away your physical or emotional pain
- Make you feel you're a part of something special
- Help you focus and concentrate
- Help you lose weight
- Make you feel less anxious
- Help you get a good night's sleep

Substances can be reinforcing in all these ways. But just like in the example of chocolate cake and key lime pie, the rewards or benefits of substance use are in the eye of the beholder. Some people really like marijuana because it helps them mellow out, laugh, feel part of a group, etc., while other people don't like the experience at all, often feeling unsettled, more anxious and paranoid.

Material adapted from: The Workshop for Parents & Caregivers Facilitator Training Guide. Partnership for Drug-Free Kids & CMC: Foundation for Change, September 2018, v1.3