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Season 04. Episode 10

Podcast Title: Is My Teen Becoming an Addict?

I'm Bruno J.

I have learned from many parents of then-teenagers who went on to become full-blown addicts that they, the parents, wished they had recognized the signs of early addiction in their teenager so that they might have been able to arrest the development of the disease and save themselves the heartache that followed.

One or two signs does not a pattern make and can be often explained away as innocuous, but if you are watchful, you might be able to draw a picture of what your teen is actually up to behind the scenes. The sooner you can shine a light on it, the better are the chances of making a course-correction that might actually save your child's life.

Is he or she and are *you* reluctant to talk about alcohol and drugs? If you are reluctant to talk about alcohol and drugs, it could be that you need to learn more about addiction and about how to approach your teenager on a very sensitive topic.

One great resource on the topic is to be found at www.drugfree.org but there are many other resources to be found online. The important thing is to

educate yourself on the signs and on how to conduct a conversation, *not a confrontation* that will get you nowhere guaranteed.

You can readily see the gap between a confrontation, which suggests frustration and anger, and a conversation, which is about seeking understanding, which is where you want to go.

Before we get there, you might want to see if you can check any of the following boxes:

Has your child's personality changed noticeably? Does he or she have sudden mood swings and unpredictable behaviour that cannot be explained?

Does your child seem to be losing old friends and spending time with a new group of friends about whom you know little or who are known as a party bunch?

Is our child unable to account for large sums of money or have you had objects or money disappear from your home?

Does your child defend his or her right to drink?

Have you seen physical evidence of drug or alcohol use and has your child lied about using drugs, or explained it away, such as: "That wasn't me, it was Billy's dope"?

This is for the parents: do you conceal information about signs of drug abuse from each other? Why? This is where the family dynamic comes in.

If yours is an otherwise healthy family, then both spouses need to talk about your feelings and prepare for "the conversation" together. If the family dynamic is dysfunctional, then there's always a chance of the teen playing one spouse off against the other.

Worst case scenario is if one spouse is also using and the family as a whole is in the grip of the family disease. Then the points I make are moot.

If you are both using, it's highly unlikely that you would even tune into what we are trying to convey now. That is the real tragedy.

The audience for my kind of podcast is not the active addict or alcoholic because with them, it's in one ear and out the other. My message is intended for those who love an addict or alcoholic and are looking for insight on how to make their lives better.

What surprises and irritates them, and makes them somewhat resentful toward a messenger like me is this: the reality is that you are, bottom line, 100% powerless over addiction, even though the cunning disease might have you thinking "Aha, I gotcha!".

So, when I say, "Make your life better", I mean this: getting to an emotionally peaceful place, attaining a healthy, loving detachment from your addict, and taking much better care of yourself.

Breaking the grip of the enmeshment and co-dependency with your addict or alcoholic so that you can begin to live a joyful and inspired life. On your terms. That is our long-term goal.

So, even though you suspect that your teen might be approaching drug addiction, of which you might know something by now, you go to your Al Anon meeting and share your worry or call your sponsor or speak to a AODA therapist. The last thing you need now is to start the cycle of co-dependency which has you trying to control his or her behaviour in a battle which you are sure to lose, I guarantee.

So, see how you've answered these questions about your teen as you become more aware of the potential need for a guided conversation, not an angry confrontation.

If your child is indeed starting to use or experimenting with drugs, then his or grades will not fall from A's to D's; rather you will likely see a drift from his usual B's to C's and if you have chance to observe, see if he's putting in the time for his homework. These days it's a real challenge to know what he or she is doing with "free" time.

Even in families with teens who consistently get "A"s, research has shown there is little similarity as to how homework is done. Most is done in an environment that seems distracting...earphones, TV's, laptops, phones in use and so on. The one sitting quietly at her desk reading is the rarity.

Research has also shown that 50% of high school students spend about an hour a night doing their homework; so, let's call that an average.

Here's the problem: the amount of time doing homework does not necessarily correlate to getting good grades. Many parents and educators believe there is simply too much of it. The national PTA recommends 10 minutes of homework per night per subject.

Given that some school administrations insist on a ton of homework, I am not surprised that students and even their parents are expressing their frustration. If you add the economic pressures families are facing today, that is yet another layer of stress that can fuel unhealthy behaviour.

There's a couple of other symptoms to watch for before we net this discussion to its conclusion.

Watch for the onset of these physical symptoms: excessive fatigue, disturbed sleep patterns, chronic cough, vomiting, loss of appetite, red eyes, dilated pupils.

Emotional symptoms include depression, loneliness (isolation), paranoia and withdrawal.

If you answered "yes" to three or more questions, chemical use is probably causing big problems already, and if you answered yes to two, there is a good chance of making a course-correction.

Allow me to share a story that illustrates my point about a course-correction. A personal friend, a colleague in the ad business, suspected his son was into marijuana but the kid always gave him the slip. The family lived in big historic farmhouse which my friend grew up in. They lived on what was once the family farm that became part of a wealthy rural neighbourhood. So, there were plenty of places to hide and play and smoke dope.

I can relate, as I grew up on a 150-acre tobacco farm in Ontario.

The kid had his own car, and at 18 life was a breeze, but he wasn't spoiled. His dad had him working the chores, including caring for the horses and so on.

One night, he gets thrown in jail for doing 120 and for driving under the influence, having blown .12% in a state where .08% is the legal limit for alcohol.

So, he gets to call his dad at midnight. Then the police tell dad that he can bail his son out, and dad says: "No, I'll pick him tomorrow when I'm good and ready. Let him stew".

The conversation that followed was guided by love. The son was so unprepared for his dad's expression of love for his boy, the son broke down and cried like a baby, admitting everything that had been going on, and why.

What followed was a course-correction that included the son paying back his dad for the fines involved, a commitment to improving his grades, leaving some bad company behind, and communicating more openly with this mom and dad.

A happy conclusion like this isn't guaranteed, but it is possible, and at least you can be guided to do the right thing for your own well-being.

So, as you try to figure out what you should do, my advice is two-fold:

1. Get help for yourself first so that you are not drawn (further) into the whirlpool of co-dependency. As I mentioned earlier, check out Al Anon and/or contact a qualified AODA therapist *for yourself*.

2. Avail yourself of the many resources that are available to help families and addicts, recovering or not. These include:

- National Association for Children of Alcoholics www.nacoa.org

- www.lovefirst.net , a web site for families interested in intervention

- Parents, The Anti-Drug www.theantidrug.com Educates parents on teen drug use

- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism www.niaa.nih.gov The official federal government website offers the latest that science has to offer on the topic of alcoholism.

- National Institute on Drug Abuse www.nida.gov supports and conducts research on drug abuse and addiction. Free materials are available for parents and teachers.

What have we learned today? When it comes to your teen and potential drug abuse:

1. Look for a pattern that suggests secrecy and behaviour that is off the norm along the lines I've outlined.
2. Gaining a better understanding of the academic and social challenges facing your teen can only help you have a loving conversation with your teen.
3. Look to have a loving conversation, not a confrontation, ideally with both parents present.

4. First, look to get your own state of mind in a good place; after all, this is as much about your own peace of mind as it is about the health of your son or daughter.

5. Avail yourself of the many sources that can help you gain the insight and support you need in order to successfully navigate troubled waters.