



# YOU, YOUR CHILD AND DRUGS





In Northern Ireland almost one in six (16%) of young people aged 11-16 have been offered drugs at least once and 4% of them have used or tried drugs at some time. This means that, as a parent, the subject of your child and drugs may well come up.

You may think that you have little influence on your child but the truth is that parents often underestimate how much influence they have on their children. Parents and carers can play a key role in educating young people about drugs and in supporting them to make healthy choices.

Research shows that children may be protected from developing problems with drug use if they have strong bonds with their family and if their parents:

- recognise and praise positive behaviour;
- set healthy examples;
- have accurate knowledge about drugs and drug use.



# Why do young people try drugs?

## The first time

Young people may experiment with drugs for some of the following reasons:

- just to try it;
- to look and feel grown-up;
- to take a risk;
- because friends use it;
- because it's offered by friends;
- after a few drinks;
- to show off.

Many parents will remember the reasons why they first tried a cigarette or a drink when they were a teenager. These reasons are as true today as they were then. However, they now apply to illegal drugs as well.

## Why do some young people carry on taking drugs?

There are many reasons why some young people carry on taking drugs but some of the common ones are: enjoyment, escapism, inability to cope with everyday life, lack of success and negative feelings about themselves.

Only some young people in Northern Ireland take illegal drugs on a regular basis and a few of these will become dependent on them.



## What can I do as a parent?

Parents can play a vital role in preventing harm to young people caused by drugs or solvents. You have a special relationship with your child.

All young people are at risk of taking drugs - being tempted to try is easy and resisting the temptations can be difficult. As a parent/guardian you can influence your children whether they try drugs or not. As a parent/guardian you can also help them if you find they are taking drugs.

Research in Northern Ireland has shown that young people believe their parents have a role in drug education, and that they want to know what their parents think about drugs.

As a parent/guardian you can:

- Increase your knowledge about drugs and their effects. The 'Talk to Frank' website is a good source of information about drugs [www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com) You can also phone their 24 hour helpline on 0300 123 6600.

The local organisations listed on [www.drugsandalcoholni.info](http://www.drugsandalcoholni.info) can provide specialist help.

- Talk to your child about drugs. It is important to present accurate information. You should make clear what your views are on taking drugs. Try to be consistent about how you present them.
- Keep up-to-date with your child's interests and friends - especially any new friends.

# The risks to your child

One of the biggest risks involved in taking drugs is that your child can never be sure exactly what they're taking. Substances sold as one drug may contain another, or may be combined with potentially toxic substances to bulk them out.

The risks are much greater for anyone who takes more than one drug at a time, including mixing illegal drugs with alcohol or prescription medication. The leaflet *Mixing: reduce your risk of harm* has more information about this and can be downloaded from the PHA website.

## Physical risks

These depend on the type and strength of the drug, the amount taken, where and how it's taken and the person taking it. There can be a range of effects including changes in heart rate and blood pressure, exhaustion, collapse, and in a few cases, death. Physical dependence occurs when the body actually wants the drug. If the drug is not provided, withdrawal symptoms will occur, such as stomach cramps, sweating, sleeplessness or anxiety.

## Psychological risks

Effects include a reduction in self-confidence, feelings of inability to cope,

anxiety and panic. These feelings can be quite mild or extremely frightening and can continue for several days after use. In some cases lasting psychological damage takes place, especially if there are any underlying mental health problems. Psychological dependence occurs when a person has a strong need to keep taking the drug in order to cope with life.

## Legal risks

These include being convicted of a drugs offence. Young people may also be convicted of being involved in petty crime to fund their drug taking. The resulting criminal record can affect a young person's life in many ways, including future job prospects and travel to certain countries.



## *Misuse of Drugs Act (1971)*

The possession and supplying of a drug (including giving to friends), which is described as illegal by the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971), is against the law and carries with it the definite risk of fines and/or imprisonment.

Nobody below the age of 10 in Northern Ireland can be convicted of a criminal offence. Above this age, it depends on the drugs the young person is taking or supplying. Under the Drugs Act 2005, increased sentences are available to the Courts if dealers are arrested selling drugs close to school premises.

In Northern Ireland, young people under 17 years of age are usually dealt with by a Juvenile Court. This court has powers to fine a parent or child,

or to send the offender to a variety of institutions as an alternative to being sent to prison.

## **Social risks**

Using drugs can lead to difficulties in your child's relationships with family and friends. It may also result in problems at school, college or work, such as poor performance or unexplained absence. Young people who take drugs are also more vulnerable to:

- injuries from accidents, for example falls and road accidents;
- involvement in other anti-social activities;
- making unwise decisions concerning sexual behaviour which can lead to sexually transmitted infections or unplanned pregnancy.



LAW COURTS

# Talking to your child about drugs

The tips below can help you talk with your child about drugs and establish boundaries. Remember, it is best not to wait until there is a problem before you talk to your child about drugs.

## Talking with your child about drugs

### Do:

- Make the first move and bring up the topic of drugs. Don't wait until there's a problem to talk.
- Make time to listen to what they have to say.
- Respect their views if you want the same in return.
- Discuss the risks associated with using drugs.
- Discuss the possible consequences of their actions and support them to make the right choices.

### Don't:

- Assume your child doesn't want to talk. Not talking to your child about drugs could be interpreted as you not considering the subject important.
- Assume they already know everything.
- Interrupt or be judgmental, even if you don't agree with their opinion.





## Agreeing rules and boundaries

### Do:

- Set realistic rules and boundaries and stick to them.
- Agree rules together with your child. Rules are more likely to be kept if they are negotiated, understood and agreed.
- Discuss why you need the rules. This can help your child see that you care about their wellbeing.
- Reach an agreement on consequences for breaking rules. Make sure it's something fair and appropriate and something you are prepared to follow through on.
- Reward your child when they keep to the set boundaries.

### Don't:

- Impose rules that you haven't discussed with your child.

## If your child comes home under the influence of drugs

### Do:

- Stay calm.
- Wait until the next day to discuss things.
- Choose a good time to talk.
- Keep a close eye on your child and if you're worried, always seek medical advice. For information on what to do in an emergency, see page 14.

### Don't:

- Talk things through when your child is under the influence of drugs.
- Get drawn into arguments.

## Supervising your child

### Do:

- Know who your child is with and what they're doing.
- Show an interest in what your child's interests are, who their friends are, and where they like to hang out. Make sure your child knows it's because you care about them, not because you distrust them.
- Get to know your child's friends – if your child's friends use drugs, your child is more likely to use them too.
- Talk to the parents of your child's friends and agree boundaries together.
- If you have prescription drugs at home, be aware of how accessible they are.

### Don't:

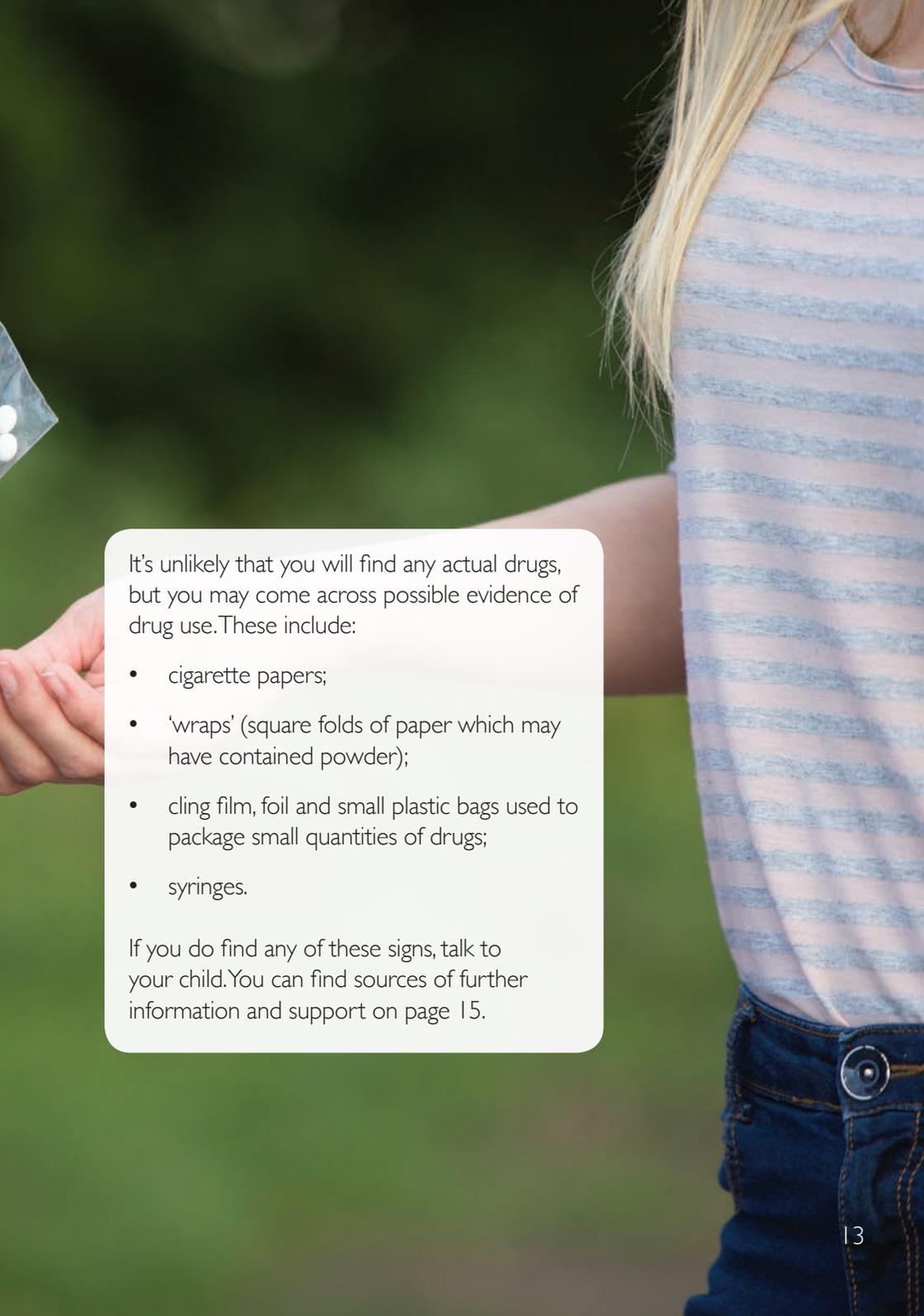
- Assume other parents have the same ideas as you regarding drugs – find out their views.

# What are the signs of drug taking?

It is very difficult to tell when a young person first tries drugs or only takes them occasionally. Many of the 'signs' are just like the normal signs of growing up, such as being moody or distant. It's important that you don't jump to the wrong conclusions but look for some of the indicators below.

## Possible indicators:

- sudden and regular changes of mood;
- loss of appetite;
- gradual loss of interest in school, hobbies, sport, friends;
- increased evidence of lying or other secretive behaviour;
- money or other objects around the house 'going missing' (including the young person's formerly 'treasured possessions');
- unusually tired;
- unable to sleep at night;
- sudden appearance of new 'friends';
- bouts of talkative, excitable and overactive behaviour.



It's unlikely that you will find any actual drugs, but you may come across possible evidence of drug use. These include:

- cigarette papers;
- 'wraps' (square folds of paper which may have contained powder);
- cling film, foil and small plastic bags used to package small quantities of drugs;
- syringes.

If you do find any of these signs, talk to your child. You can find sources of further information and support on page 15.

# What should I do in an emergency?

If you find a young person drowsy or unconscious it's important that you know what to do. It could save their life.

You should:

1. Make sure they've got fresh air.
2. Turn them on their side and try not to leave them alone (this is important because if they are sick they may inhale their own vomit).
3. Dial 999 and ask for an ambulance.
4. If you find any powders, tablets or anything else that may suggest drug taking - give them to the ambulance personnel.

# For more information

- For information on specialist drug services in your area go to [www.drugsandalcoholni.info](http://www.drugsandalcoholni.info)
- For support and advice for parents, contact the Parents' Advice Centre confidential and free helpline on 0808 8010 722 or go to [www.parentingni.org](http://www.parentingni.org)
- For accurate information about a range of drugs go to [www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com) or phone the 'Talk to Frank' helpline on 0300 123 6600.
- If you are worried about poor mental health, either your own or that of your child, or interested in maintaining good mental health, go to [www.mindingyourhead.info](http://www.mindingyourhead.info)
- If you are in distress or despair, contact Lifeline, a free and confidential 24 hour helpline on 0808 808 8000.



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