

WHEN SUBSTANCE USE BECOMES ABUSE

When considering if, when and how to intervene, we need to consider what we are intervening on and why. As we have seen, experimentation, challenging norms and testing boundaries are part of the tasks of youth navigating through their teen years. The real question becomes: when is that an expected process and when is it harmful?

We know a lot about substance use in youth from adults who have been addicted since their own adolescence or late childhood and have shared the course of their journey into addiction and back. It is important to remember that this is not an inevitable journey. Many youth experiment once or twice, or even for a short period of time, and then find their own way back to abstinence, or stay at a severely limited level of use. Remembering that use does not necessarily equal abuse, it is important to respond appropriately to what is actually occurring. Staging a full intervention for a youth who tried marijuana for the first time, got sick and hated it is as inappropriate as ignoring the youth who is using daily.

Characteristics of Substance Use

- Curiosity and other “seeking” motivations.
- Controlled use in safer locations and quantities around safer people.
- Doesn’t interfere in the tasks of daily living.
- Doesn’t create harm in other parts of the youth’s life: family, school, social, work, community, etc.

Characteristics of Substance Abuse

- Coping and other “running” motivations.
- Increasing preoccupation with using or acquiring the substance.
- Changes to social circle that supports the continued use of the substance.
- Presence of shame: secrecy or hiding use from family, friends, school, community.
- Changing values or life choices as a result of, or to support continued use of the substance.
- Withdrawing from activities, friends because of the use.