When Younger Isn’t Better
What parents need to know about the risks of early alcohol and other drug use

While many parents fear that their son or daughter might experiment with alcohol and other drugs, the risks may be worse than they thought. Research tells us there are serious risks associated with use, and the younger a person is when he or she starts to drink or use other drugs, the more likely he or she is to not only engage in harmful behaviors but to also develop addiction later in life.

1. It starts with what’s available.

For the most part, adolescents who use drugs begin with substances that are easy to obtain. Readily available and inexpensive, alcohol tends to be the first drug kids try—and the age of first use is trending younger. In 2013, the Monitoring the Future survey reported that 28 percent of 8th graders and 68 percent of 12th graders tried alcohol. According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, first use of alcohol can start before age 12. There are other early-use trends:

- Tobacco use remains significant among adolescents ages 12–15 and carries added risk as a gateway into other drug use, most often alcohol or marijuana.
- The average age of first marijuana use is 14.
- Synthetic drugs marketed to young people as “natural” and “safe” alternatives to illicit drugs—and packaged innocuously as bath salts, incense, or potpourri—have gained popularity among adolescents in recent years.
- Inhalants, perhaps the most accessible substances available to teens in the form of cleaning supplies and other household chemicals, tend to ebb and flow in popularity among adolescents.
- Prescription and over-the-counter drugs are among the most commonly abused drugs because many households have unused supplies in their medicine cabinets.

2. The younger the person, the greater the risks.

Study after study shows that young people who use alcohol and other drugs are at greater risk of experiencing severe and lasting consequences—accidents, unintentional overdoses, violence, sexual trauma, and legal issues. And, according to the National Longitudinal Alcohol Epidemiologic Survey, as reported in the Journal of Substance Abuse, people who start drinking before the age of 15 are four times more likely to meet the criteria for alcohol dependence at some point in their lives. The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University provides yet another alarming statistic about the risks of early use: Nine out of ten Americans who meet the medical criteria for addiction started smoking, drinking, or using other drugs before the age of 18.
3. Resilience can be cultivated.

Adolescence is a time of pushing boundaries and taking risks, and when alcohol or other drugs are in the mix, risk taking brings increasingly dangerous consequences. Parents can help to foster resiliency in their adolescent children through simple and practical measures, such as communicating clear rules and consequences around alcohol or other drug use and setting clear expectations around academic achievement and household responsibilities. By providing such positive direction and guidance, parents encourage adolescents to problem solve and make decisions. Resilient adolescents will still make mistakes, explains Anderson, but they are better equipped to rebound and learn from their troubles rather than compound them.

4. Know that you’re not alone.

What keeps parents from reaching out for help when they fear their child might have a substance use problem? In a word, guilt. Agonizing over what they feel they did or didn’t do to contribute to the problem, parents become overwhelmed and paralyzed by needless guilt. In reaching out for help, parents quickly learn that addiction is a no-fault disease: It strikes regardless of gender, race, creed, or class. And most important, it’s a disease that can be treated and managed for life.

Addiction is a lifelong disease. Make the call of a lifetime.

Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, a national nonprofit organization founded in 1949, is a force of healing and hope for individuals, families, and communities affected by addiction to alcohol and other drugs.