

Are Drugs at Your Doorstep?

By Jim Burns, Ph.D.

"I never thought it would happen to our family. Tanya was such a good girl. When she was younger, she never gave me any trouble. Even through the divorce, she was often my greatest strength."

Tanya and her mother came to my office, where I work in youth ministry, to talk about Tanya's attitude problem and lower grades. What came out was that this beautiful 15-year-old had become one of over 3 million teenage alcoholics in North America today.

Tanya's mother lived in a Midwest suburb with Tanya and 8-year-old Jake. The family had been active in church and pillars of the community. The kids were 9 and 2 when their father left them for a woman from work, whom he eventually married. For Tanya, "Daddy's little princess," the divorce hit hard. She appeared to adjust, but the facade eventually broke down. In high school, the stress became too much for Tanya, and she medicated her pain with beer and wine. Because she was still active in her Church youth group, her mom didn't see the symptoms of alcohol and, eventually, drug abuse.

Now that we were in my office talking about the problem, Tanya's mom sat stunned as her daughter poured out her story, and the pieces of the puzzle started to come together. Her mother kept saying, "I don't believe it, this could never happen to my little girl."

How did it happen? Would Tanya have become an alcoholic if there had not been a divorce? Who was to blame? Could it have been prevented? These questions came flying at me as her mom moved between blame, shame and a sense of personal failure. Could this story be yours? Too often parents either deny their children's involvement or are unaware of their vulnerability to this type of abuse. Whether we recognize it or not, drugs are at our doorsteps. When parents take a proactive approach and develop a plan for the prevention of alcohol and drug abuse, the possibility of future problems is greatly reduced.

We can drug-proof our kids by equipping them to resist the pressure to use drugs or by taking steps to stop the abuse of these substances. The idea is comparable to weatherproofing a home. You cannot do away with the weather. The storms and floods will come. But the wise person has prepared his or her home to withstand the forces of nature. Likewise, drugs are nearby, and alcohol is always available. But the drug-proofed child will not be destroyed by them.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told the following parable: *"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand, The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash"* (Matthew 7:24-27).

Rain, wind and storms will come to all of us, but the wise family builds its foundation on the Rock. The key to a drug-proof plan is for parents to take responsibility for helping their children gain control of their lives. This duty cannot be delegated to the school or church. No one else has a parent's power to motivate a child. Drug-proofed kids have hope, because their parents have gotten involved.

You can do several things to create a drug-proof plan. This plan is not based on quick fixes but on commonsense parenting principles, research on drug and alcohol abuse, and a biblical approach to raising children.

To start predicting a young person's potential for abuse, take a look at the parents' attitudes and their behavior toward alcohol and drugs. Children of alcoholics have a four times greater risk of becoming alcoholics themselves. Children are also more likely to use drugs and alcohol if their parents smoke cigarettes, drink, take illicit drugs, use any substance to overcome stress, or have an ambivalent or positive attitude toward drugs.

In light of the biblical command to "*avoid every kind of evil*" (1 Thessalonians 5:22), I don't want my three daughters to say, "Dad drinks, so why can't I?"

Here are six questions to ask as you examine your own habits:

1. Do I have mood-altering chemicals in my medicine cabinet?
2. Do I use prescription drugs casually when I feel distress or pain?
3. Do I keep prescription drugs rather than throw them out when the problem subsides?
4. Do I laugh or make light of drunken behavior on TV?
5. Do I wear T-shirts or caps that have drug- or alcohol-related images or allow my children to wear them?
6. Do the TV shows we watch and the music in our house glamorize drug or alcohol use?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you will need to make some changes if your drug-proof plan is to succeed.

EDUCATION

A good plan always relies on education. If you have not read a book on drug abuse lately, don't wait. You can also attend lectures, listen to tapes and get free information from community resources found in your phone book.

***High tolerance.** If Tanya and her mother had been informed, they might have avoided some real heartache. Tanya told me that she could consume more alcohol than her friends and still not be drunk. She saw this as a strength, but it was actually the greatest clue to her addiction. Alcoholics have a high tolerance for alcohol. This means that someone who can consume large amounts of alcohol and not get buzzed has a different physiological reaction than the person who drinks a beer or two and feels tipsy. Problems arise when a formerly stable tolerance level changes or drink is consumed above the tolerance level.

***Gateway drugs.** Tanya started drinking wine coolers and beer but moved on to hard liquor and marijuana because they could dull her pain more quickly and effectively. Experts call the former "gateway drugs." Young people don't usually start with crack cocaine or heroin. Typically, they move from lighter drugs to stronger ones. For millions of teenagers, the "gateway" to hardcore drug use is beer and wine coolers that are acceptable, cheap and easy to get.

Unfortunately, like most young drinkers, Tanya didn't stop with the entry-level drugs. The next step is nicotine. Although it is one of the leading causes of death in our world, more and more

young people are smoking. Because the effects of lung cancer are delayed, many say, "I'll quit before it kills me." Not only is nicotine one of the most addictive substances known, it often leads young people further into addiction. In fact, of the teens who smoke cigarettes, 81 percent will try marijuana compared with only 21 percent of nonsmokers.

As people feel more comfortable with marijuana use, their defenses come down and they may violate what was once their value system. They often move to the toughest level of drug abuse—cocaine, LSD and heroin. No one starts out wanting to be a heroin addict, but many didn't know about the power of gateway drugs or the nature of addiction. Fortunately, Tanya was stopped before she got to this point.

PREVENTION

For Tanya's mom, prevention was too late; for many other parents, this is the next step in their drugproof plan. One mother wrote to me, "If I had it to do over, I would have looked for help earlier. We would have put together a plan to help prevent the headaches we've experienced from my daughter's drug addiction. We just kept wishing it away, but it kept getting worse."

***Include God.** Most secular treatment centers in the world allude only to a "higher power" in helping to deal with addictions. Few actually refer to God in the prevention of alcoholism and drug usage. Church attendance does not assure that a child will be free from these types of problems. Studies do tell us, however, that if young people practice a regular quiet time with God and live out their faith in other tangible ways, they will have less difficulty resisting drugs and alcohol. Studies also reveal that if parents have a visible and vital faith, their kids will be less prone to abuse.

Christians can rely on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as a key to prevention. Our "higher power" is the Creator and Savior of the universe. Personal faith in Jesus Christ is one of the reasons Christian young people avoid drugs. You won't find this answer in many books on Alcohol abuse, but when abstinent kids are asked why they stay drug-free, they often respond that they do not want to dishonor God. This personal relationship with Him gives kids a reason for making good decisions.

***Discipline with consistency.** Another key to prevention is parental discipline. Children who grow up in a home without clearly defined expectations, discipline and consequences will find it more difficult to resist the pressure to use drugs and alcohol. Our family makes contracts with each other. While we don't use them for every issue, they do help prevent drug and alcohol abuse. Here's an example:

FAMILY CONTRACT

In an effort to work well as a family and offer ourselves as an example for other families, I agree to the following:

1. I will not experiment with drugs.
2. I will not drink alcohol.
3. I will attend school unless I am sick or with the family.

If the contract is broken:

- First time- Weekend restriction.
- Second time- Must stay away from participating friends for two weeks.
- Third time- Family counseling.

IDENTIFICATION

Unless you have experience identifying drug and alcohol abuse, it can be difficult to detect. Addicts are great manipulators. Almost all parents of abusers can identify with Tanya's mom when she said, "Now it seems so clean; but before she told me, I had absolutely no idea she was involved with chemical abuse."

INTERVENTION, TREATMENT AND SUPPORTIVE FOLLOW-UP

I hope you never get to this part of your drug-proof plan. This is for those who know the pain of living with an abuser. Far too many single parents struggle with strong and hold intervention because they still want their child to like them. They simply can't take one more rejection.

If you suspect even the possibility of a problem, however, do not hesitate to intervene. Form a logical plan and follow it. Have in mind a treatment plan and be prepared to make whatever decisions are necessary to help your child. During intervention and treatment, be sure you have the necessary professional support to assist you. Churches should be able to help you in this area.

Helping a person through chemical addiction is a lifelong battle, but a one-day-at-a-time decision. There will be some scrapes and bruises along the way. That is why supportive follow-up is a necessity for any healthy drug-proof plan. With the positive factors of developing a drug-proof plan, now is the time to start. If you have any questions about whether this plan is worthwhile, just ask Tanya's mom or any of the parents of the 3 million teenage alcoholics. We know what their answers would be.