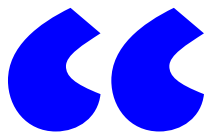


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A PARENT'S GUIDE TO
ADDICTION



The priority of any addict is to anaesthetize the pain of living—to ease the passage of the day with some purchased relief.

—Russell Brand, comedian

A Parent's Guide to
ADDICTION

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A Parent's Guide to
ADDICTION

This guide will help you discuss these questions...

- How does addiction affect the developing mind?
- How do I balance parenting and befriending my teen?
- How do I combat fear and guilt surrounding addiction?
- How do I discuss addiction with my teen, especially if they are already struggling with it?
- Is there hope for teens fighting addiction?
- How can I protect my teen without shutting down the relationship?
- How has addiction affected me?
- Why is addiction so harmful?
- How do I best support my teen?
- What's the difference between exposure and addiction?
- Does exposure always lead to addiction?
- How do I discuss exposure with my teen and encourage

them to think carefully about how they deal with it?

- What is my role in helping my teen work through addiction?

Introduction

We are in Heaven. We see an angel and a man; the man has a red lizard on his shoulder, whispering into his ear.

The angel approaches the man and asks him, “May I kill it?” The man clutches the lizard to his shoulder, first protesting that he doesn’t want to be a bother, then that he would rather do it gradually, that he simply doesn’t feel well, and finally his real fear: “How can I tell you to kill it? You’d kill me if you did.” The angel assures him that it will hurt, dreadfully, but it will not kill him. Finally the man understands. “It would be better to be dead than to live with this creature...God help me, God help me.”

The Great Divorce by C.S. Lewis is one of the most beautiful and timeless depictions of Heaven ever written, but the story of the man and his lizard—which represents lust and addiction—sticks out as one of the most significant moments of redemption in the book. Addiction, substance use disorder, whatever name best fits your situation, wears a person down like nothing else. Yet we hold on to our addictions simply because they are that: ours. We feel as though their loss would leave us with nothing, might even kill us. Yet by the grace of God and through his power, we can be free of all, yes all, ties that bind us to sin. But first, we must be willing to let them go.

What is Addiction?

Addiction, as defined by the American Psychological Association, is

“A chronic disorder with biological, psychological, social and environmental factors influencing its development and maintenance. About half the risk for addiction is genetic. Genes affect the degree of reward that individuals experience when initially using a substance (e.g., drugs) or engaging in certain behaviors (e.g., gambling), as well as the way the body processes alcohol or other drugs. Heightened desire to re-experience use of the substance or behavior, potentially influenced by psychological (e.g., stress, history of trauma), social (e.g., family or friends' use of a substance), and environmental factors (e.g., accessibility of a substance, low cost) can lead to regular use/exposure, with chronic use/exposure leading to brain changes.”

Addiction can be caused by any number of factors, and usually involves substances and behaviors that end up causing lasting effects on the individual emotionally, psychologically, and socially.

When you think of addiction, maybe you think of substances like cigarettes or alcohol. Maybe you think of substances like meth or heroin. Or maybe you think of friends and family who have fallen prey to gambling or pornography. Whatever you think of, you probably also think of the ways that addictions can destroy lives and relationships, for the individual experiencing the addiction and those who love them.

However, addiction is not necessarily a straight path to destruction. Recovery groups like Alcoholics Anonymous and Celebrate Recovery urge people struggling with substances to form community, and therapy practices have been specifically designed to help people overcome their addictions. More significant than anything, however, is the hope believers have despite their addictions. While God rarely saves us from our addictive practices in one fell swoop, he promises to be present and to sanctify us, however slowly and with whatever difficulty, as we fight against negative habits.

The word addiction covers many habits, from drugs and alcohol to phone addiction. The hope of this Parent Guide is to equip you to talk to your teens about whatever substance or behavior they are fighting, or that you think they could be susceptible to. By the end of this article, you will be able to identify the sources of different addictions, and have practical tools to support the teens you love as they struggle through some of the most difficult experiences a person can endure.

Reflection Questions: Have you experienced addiction? How has addiction, whether yours or someone else's, impacted your life?

Alcohol

One of the most common and yet socially acceptable addictions is alcoholism. Often alcoholism goes unseen

and unnoticed, as drinking to excess is common in our culture, especially among young people. Alcoholism can be difficult to diagnose, even by the alcoholics themselves, because it doesn't just mean getting blackout drunk all the time. Any reliance on alcohol to perform tasks or provoke certain emotions is a symptom of alcoholism. And even though drinking away our worries, our social anxiety, or our inability to sleep is touted as normal, funny, or even necessary, statistics show that our global dependence on alcohol is harming us in ways we can only imagine. In British author Catherine Gray's book *The Unexpected Joy of Being Sober*, she shares her findings on the real relationship between alcohol and the public at large, and why drinking to excess is so common.

“Why do 43 per cent of British women and 84 percent of British men want to drink less, if it's so brilliant? If alcohol is so wonderful, why did five million people sign up to dry January in 2017?... The reason the stats don't reflect the 'drinking-is-amazing-let's-do-more-of-it' story, is because it's not amazing. As a society, we have a blind spot when it comes to booze. We've been brainwashed into believing it's ace, into following each other like lemmings to the pub, when deep down, we know it's not. We know it's bad for us. It causes soul-crushing hangovers and skin-crawling anxiety. It kills five times more people in Britain than traffic accidents. And yet, we bully each other into it, we drink-push... Why do we do this? Because sobriety has such a bad rep.”

According to DoSomething.org, “The average age teen

boys first try alcohol is age 11, for teen girls it's 13. Nearly 10 million young people, ages 12 to 20, reported that they've consumed alcohol in the past 30 days." Our children are the collateral damage of our society's insistence that drinking alcohol is synonymous with being fun, laid-back, and interesting.

How to Help

If your teen struggles with alcohol abuse (including underage consumption), the answer is not to simply lock the booze cabinet and tell them off. Alcoholism has many roots, and many effects beyond inebriation and the unpleasantness of a hangover.

First, if there is a history of alcoholism in your family, those addictive genes may have been passed to your teen, hampering any desire to be sober. In that case, encourage your teen to think carefully about whether they want to drink at all. Express your desire for them to live healthy, happy lives, and to succeed and grow, even if alcohol is part of the life they choose as adults. This is a special opportunity for you to develop that elusive bond that parents and children are often looking for—friendship. Approaching your teen as a friend who fears for their safety rather than an authoritarian trying to steal their fun will tell them that you value them on a level beyond the responsibility you have for them as a parent.

Of course, there are factors other than genetics that play a role in alcohol addiction. For many teens, social pressures are to blame for early underage drinking. Unfortunately, if your teen is determined to drink, they can usually find a

way. It's also often the case that addictions are pursued and nurtured out of a desire to avoid dealing with something, which could be more productively addressed head-on. However, often undereducation and fearmongering creates curiosity about drinking in the first place. As one student said, "the stricter the parent, the sneakier the child".

A proper understanding of alcohol's effects and the long-term impacts of alcoholism from a young age can help quell the idea that alcohol is "magical fun juice." In many states, teens may drink alcohol if a parent or guardian is present, and some parents have found that allowing young people to drink (in very small amounts, of course) may help in dispelling the mystery of it all. Obviously you know your child, yourself, and your family best and we suggest this only at your own discretion.

Above all, be honest with your teen about how alcohol has impacted you and those you love, even if that impact has been small. Ensuring your teen understands that you are speaking to them in love and honesty rather than with a desire to keep them from enjoying themselves is the best defense against underage drinking and eventual alcoholism.

Reflection Questions: What are your experiences with alcohol? Does your family have a history of alcoholism? Why do you think our culture encourages drinking to excess?

Drugs/Nicotine

This is a very difficult subject to discuss and even to understand, because the term “drugs” covers such a broad category of addictive substances. Everything from Advil to cannabis to heroin falls under the word. However, there is in most cases a gradual build-up to the consumption of hard drugs—few, if any, teenagers jump right in with meth. However, there may still be a fascination with the potential effects of substances, whether it be the mystical allure of hallucinogens like psilocybin or the potential productivity associated with “uppers” like Adderall. However, it is important to remember that few teens, even the ones who use marijuana, will experience hard drug addiction in their lifetime. To quote David Sheff in his memoir about his meth-addicted son, *Beautiful Boy*, “it’s an incontrovertible fact that many — more than half of all children — will try [drugs]. For some of those, drugs will have no major negative impact on their lives. For others, however, the outcome will be catastrophic.” As with everything, education and prevention are the key to protecting young people from potentially life-changing choices.

The reason we specifically mention nicotine in this section is because of its extremely addictive properties and the rise in teen use of vapes and electronic cigarettes. According to the American Addiction Center, nicotine is on the list of the top five most addictive substances, above methamphetamines, so it is essential that we discuss it alongside other drugs.

How to Help

As with alcohol, removing the mystery from drugs is essential to helping teens understand why participation in even socially acceptable drug use has serious consequences. Now, of course, Axis does not recommend giving your teen drugs to help them understand their dangers. However, total honesty regarding your own experiences with drugs, whether they be personal or proximal, will help your teen understand why you hope that they won't get involved with drugs to begin with. If your teen does begin to use drugs, especially marijuana, don't immediately jump to the idea that they are addicted. Many teens experiment with cannabis, and though it can have serious adverse effects such as memory loss or even psychosis, smoking weed once or twice is not likely to set your teen directly on a path to black tar heroin. Be sure not to overreact if your teen shares that they or their friends have tried drugs, even drugs that have more serious effects, like psilocybin, cocaine, or opiates. Instead, share with your teen your gratitude that they opened up to you, and engage with them in a discussion about the seriousness of addictive chemicals. If it is appropriate, ask them to consider therapy or even rehabilitation if their habit is serious. Sometimes, you may need to take action and make recovery choices on behalf of your teen. Do so thoughtfully, and with great consideration for the long-term health of your teen and your relationship with them. Don't feel guilty for making these choices, though it may be tempting to assume your parenting is at fault for your teen's decisions. Remember that at the end of the day

their actions are their own, and your only responsibility is to love and care for them through it.

As far as nicotine goes, it is important to take immediate action if you discover your teen has taken up smoking. Even one time using a vape can be enough to begin developing a chemical addiction to the substance. However, once again, vaping is not a hopeless habit. It only takes three days for chemical addiction to nicotine to leave the body—after seven days without vaping the body has healed itself of all damage caused by vaping. After ten days, cotinine, the other addictive chemical in vapes, leaves the bloodstream (Healthline.com). Encourage your teen to understand the significance and health effects of vaping (see our Parent's Guide to Vaping for more on this). Share with them your desire for them to live a long and healthy life. At the same time, it is important to remind your teen that after ten days, the only need they have for nicotine is psychological, and while that is extremely difficult to overcome, it is not impossible. Many organizations, such as truthinitiative.org and teen.smokefree.gov have developed resources specifically to help teens through psychological addiction to nicotine.

Above all, whether your teen is struggling with drugs or nicotine, remember that no one is ever so far gone that they cannot come back.

Reflection Questions: Why do you think vapes are inordinately marketed towards young people? How can you use kindness and compassion when discussing drug use with your teen?

Pornography

Porn is one of the most deeply pernicious and insidious addictions a teen can face, partly because of the nearly ubiquitous access teens have to the unfiltered internet, and partly because of how young teens often are when they first encounter it. According to [theconversation.com](#), the average age children first encounter porn is eleven. According to Pornhub, the most popular adult site on the internet, viewing of pornography increased by 24% in 2020 alone. The Coronavirus kept young people at home, and online schooling gave them access to the internet for more consecutive time than ever before. Unfortunately, your student has probably already been exposed to pornography, either at home, at school, by friends, or even by family.

This all sounds very alarming, but don't fear. Pornography may be one of the most painful addictions, but its roots grow in shame; shame that, once truly challenged, can be overcome permanently.

How to Help

Once again, education is a large part both of helping your child prevent the development of a porn addiction and supporting your student who has already become addicted. As [theconversation.com](#) puts it, the first step should be comprehensive and early sex education. Teach young children to use the proper names for their genitalia, and help them understand both the logistics and significance of sex and procreation. This does not have

to be explicit or visceral, but it should be thorough. Since children are first exposed to porn at around eleven, this conversation should begin before that and be open and ongoing. Don't deter your children from asking questions about their own bodies and the bodies of their peers—instead encourage them to be open with you and to be unafraid of discussions on the topic of sexuality. This will prevent the curiosity that often leads young people to search for explanations of sex on the internet, which often leads to the discovery of porn.

Secondly, take preventative action by installing safety software on the computers in your home. While this doesn't protect your student from being exposed to pornography by friends or at school, it creates a safe space in the home that your teen can count on. The best software for porn exposure prevention is Covenant Eyes, which relies on both internet filtering and accountability to help protect young people both before and after watching porn (see Axis' Parent Guide and Conversation Kit on Porn, which were done in association with Covenant Eyes, for more information on internet filtering and accountability).

Thirdly, help your teen understand the significance of porn addiction and the effect it has on their brain. According to canopy.us,

“There is an area in your brain known as the “reward center” that helps form habits. It releases chemicals, including dopamine, which establish connections between actions and the perceived desirability of that action. Dopamine is known as

a “pleasure” chemical; it creates a link between certain habits and a “reward.” Activities like exercise, eating, and sex all trigger reactions in this part of the brain. With pornography, however, the brain responds differently than it does with run of the mill stimulation, like a sugary snack or a simple game. For most daily behaviors, the brain has an “off” switch that stops the release of dopamine once a craving has been satisfied. In contrast, pornography impacts the brain much like an addictive drug by triggering ever-increasing amounts of dopamine. Over time, the brain builds up a tolerance to the excess dopamine and requires either more access or more extreme content (or sometimes both) to achieve that same level of perceived pleasure.”

Porn changes the way our brains work, and compels us to consume more and more of it to reach the same level of reward. Help your teen understand that even if they have been viewing porn for some time, it is important to stop where they are before the porn they are currently watching is no longer enough.

Finally, and most crucially, get to the root of why your student feels they must watch porn. In some cases, the reason may not be actual interest in the content or even enjoyment of it—instead, continued engagement with porn can be caused by shame. What began as curiosity, peer pressure, or lust turns inward, and becomes shame—shame that they cannot break the habit and keep engaging in it. Because shame is a tool of Satan, it’s essential to realize that porn addiction is a spiritual battle. All addictions are to an extent, but porn’s tendency to propagate secrecy

and fear makes it an especially significant one.

As painful as it may be, encourage your teen to talk openly about their experiences with porn. What's brought into the light can be dealt with, and allows you and your student to develop accountability skills. Above all else, help your teen understand that though porn addiction is serious and can have lasting effects, it is also not the end of the world. A friend of Axis is quoted as saying, "Satan likes to minimize our sin before we commit it and maximize it afterwards." In other words, students develop shame around porn in many cases because of the narrative that people who watch porn are "dirty".

Your teen is not dirty, broken, or beyond redemption. Porn addiction is not the worst of sins, and your teen is not especially sinful because they struggle with the extremely common temptations of the internet. Remind your teen of your love for them, and more importantly God's love for them, no matter what they do. Grace abounds when sin is brought into the light.

Reflection Questions: How can you communicate redemption to your teen who struggles with porn? In what areas of your own life have you dealt with lust or shame? Do you have accountability for the areas of struggle in your life?

Conclusion

Addiction is a difficult topic to discuss, but an important

one. Everyone struggles with addiction in one form or another, whether it be one of the substances discussed in this Parent Guide or something else with similar effects, like social media, shopping, or food issues. It can be scary when you find out that your teen has become addicted to a substance or behavior. But no one is beyond the reach of love. Being open and honest with your teen will help them understand that they are never alone, and loving them through their most difficult seasons will create an impact that lasts a lifetime.

If you or someone you love is fighting an addiction, consider sharing the National Addiction Help Hotline with them as a first step. There is always hope: 1-800-662-4357.

A Parent's Guide to **ADDICTION**

Summary

- Addiction can be caused by any number of factors, and usually involves substances and behaviors that end up causing lasting effects on the individual emotionally, psychologically, and socially.
- Any reliance on alcohol to perform tasks or provoke certain emotions is a symptom of alcoholism.
- Ensuring your teen understands that you are speaking to them in love and honesty rather than with a desire to keep them from enjoying themselves is the best defense against underage drinking and eventual alcoholism.
- "It's an incontrovertible fact that many — more than half of all children — will try [drugs]. For some of those, drugs will have no major negative impact on their lives. For others, however, the outcome will be catastrophic."
- Many teens experiment with cannabis, and though it can have serious adverse effects such as memory loss or even psychosis, smoking weed once or twice is not likely to set

your teen directly on a path to black tar heroin.

- Remember that at the end of the day their actions are their own, and your only responsibility is to love and care for them through it.
- According to theconversation.com, the average age children first encounter porn is eleven. According to Pornhub, the most popular adult site on the internet, viewing of pornography increased by 24% in 2020 alone.
- Teach young children to use the proper names for their genitalia, and help them understand both the logistics and significance of sex and procreation. This does not have to be explicit or visceral, but it should be thorough.
- As painful as it may be, encourage your teen to talk openly about their experiences with porn. What's brought into the light can be dealt with, and allows you and your student to develop accountability skills.



Additional Resources

- Axis' [Parent Guide](#) and [Conversation Kit](#) on Porn
- Axis' [Conversation Kit](#) on Drugs
- Axis' [10-Day Teen Talk](#) on Drugs
- Axis' Parent Guide on [Smartphone Addiction](#)
- Axis' Parent Guide on [Vaping/Juuling](#)
- Axis' Parent Guide on [Prescription Stimulants](#)
- Axis' Parent Guide on [Teens and Alcohol](#)

