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Drug-test your kids? It's not out of the question

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GUEST COLUMNISTS

He was a "good kid."

The kind with straight A's who played sports and mostly stayed out of trouble. His parents trusted him without any discussion – and that was their biggest mistake.



SHUTTERSTOCK

Before becoming a patient, the teen started experimenting with the opiate Vicodin in the 11th grade. By his freshman year at college, he was addicted to OxyContin. He began skipping classes, locking himself in his dorm room, and free-basing pills. He ignored his parents' phone calls and had trouble with the police. His parents had to pick him up from school and check him into a rehab facility.

In our practices, it is not unusual to hear intelligent, attentive parents express shock in discovering that their good kid is abusing prescription drugs.

Kids are under tremendous pressure to do well in school, fit in socially, juggle numerous extra-curricular activities, and to excel. Anxious and taxed, they are vulnerable to the alluring mix of "fun" and calm, or hoping for improved concentration that these pills promise.

Some believe that drugs might help them with their grades. If they snort such drugs at a party, ground up like cocaine, they'll increase their social stock at the same time.

Besides, how dangerous can it be? Many teens reason that because these pills are prescribed by a physician and prepared by a licensed pharmacist, there is less risk involved.

Unfortunately, what starts as a curiosity

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Warning signs of drug abuse

- A drop in grades
- A lack of interest in former past-times
- A decline in hygiene
- An inability to focus

Most frequently abused prescription drugs among 12th graders

- Vicodin
- Cough medicine
- Adderal
- Tranquilizers

- OxyContin
 - Sedatives
 - Ritalin
- Source: University of Michigan

too often ends with jail time and even death. Teenagers are becoming addicted to prescription medications in alarming numbers. In 2012, 14.8 percent of all high school seniors were using prescription drugs for nonmedical reasons, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Half of high school students and 16 percent of parents reported thinking that prescription drugs are less dangerous than "street drugs." However, deaths due to overdose on prescription narcotics outnumbered deaths from heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine combined.

Unlike illegal drugs, we see OxyContin, Xanax and Vicodin infiltrating our local schools from the least likely of illicit drug sources: Our own medicine cabinets.

How do you know if your teen is abusing pills? Some signs include a drop in grades, a lack of interest in former past-times and a decline in hygiene. They may also start to lack focus.

If you suspect your child is using drugs, we encourage adopting a stance of zero tolerance. Prescription pills should be kept in a lock box or at the very least they should be counted, and random, in-home drug testing should take place.

This may sound like a stressful approach to take at a time when parent-child relations can already be strained. However, when carried out with good communication, it can actually alleviate household stress.

First you tell your kids that you will give them random urine tests. These tests can be purchased at any drug store. As they pass each test, your trust in them will grow. They will be rewarded with more freedom and subjected to fewer probing questions and purse searches. Knowing they may be tested at home also provides teens with a sound excuse to say "no" when offered drugs by friends.

Most importantly, don't wait. At the first sign, take your son or daughter to be evaluated at a facility that can help. At a center like Hoag's Neurosciences Institute, adolescents can be tested and get the help they need by a comprehensive team of psychologists, psychiatrists and neurologists.

We understand that kids today are under intense pressure and exposed to continual temptations. To keep them safe, give your love freely, but make them earn your trust.

- Dr. Valeh Karimkhani is chief of Psychiatry Consult Liaison Services at Hoag Neurosciences Institute. She is an adolescent and adult psychiatrist, board certified in psychiatry and addiction medicine. Dr. Jerry Weichman is a board certified clinical psychologist, adolescent specialist and parenting expert. His practice at Hoag Neurosciences Institute is exclusively focused on the treatment of adolescents, pre-adolescents, and young adults.

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