

# Beginning the Conversation

## Helpful Tips for Educators Who Suspect Student Substance Use/Abuse

Teachers sometimes express concern about how to initiate a discussion with a young person about possible drug use. When adults talk to young people about drug incidents or drug use, the discussion may be dominated by the adult, who lectures and questions a resentful and uncommunicative adolescent.

*The following guidelines are offered as a way to obtain a clearer understanding of the situation and encouraging effective two way communication.*

### Before Approaching Students

- ★ Consider carefully who is the best person to approach the student. There may be another staff member, such as the school counsellor, who has good rapport with the student or who is more experienced in working with student problem behaviors.
- ★ Make sure that the young person is *not intoxicated* when you approach him or her, as he or she will not be able to respond appropriately or remember accurately what is discussed.
- ★ Choose an appropriate time and place so that the student is not embarrassed in front of other students or teachers. Allow enough time for a full discussion, out of hearing range of others, and with minimal interruptions.
- ★ It may be advisable to check if other staff members are concerned about the student, while taking care not to divulge any confidential information.



### Discussing Concerns with Students

- ★ Stay calm and take a reasoned approach. This will help to prevent the young person becoming defensive or angry.
- ★ Express only concerns that can be supported with facts, and do not act on assumptions. State your concerns and ask calmly whether they are justified. Describe or comment on the behavior without drawing unsubstantiated conclusions.

#### For Example:

*I've noticed you have difficulty concentrating in class and you're not making any effort with your school work lately (or other relevant observations). What do you make of this? OR Other people are concerned about your... (describe behavior). In what ways are you concerned about it?*

- ★ Encourage the student to talk and listen carefully to what he or she has to say. Doing all the talking, threatening, or carrying out an interrogation is not a good way to express concern or help young people. Avoid concentrating on disciplinary consequences and trying to change their behavior.

## Discussing Concerns with Students

- ★ Avoid being judgmental or demoralizing. Convey a caring attitude and an interest in the reason/s for the young person's behavior. You may need to take into account that the young person has decided the drug is doing something good that outweighs, for them, the possible consequences. Explore possible consequences of drug use but focus discussion on the student, not the drug.
- ★ Generalize the student's behavior without condoning or passing judgment on it.

### For Example:

*Other students worry about their drug use too (worry that their drug use is affecting their lives etc.). It's good that you want to talk about it.*

- ★ Don't give inaccurate information or exaggerate the risks involved. Studies have shown "scare tactics" do not work. Using such tactics reduces the credibility of the person trying to help and may lead the student to continue using.

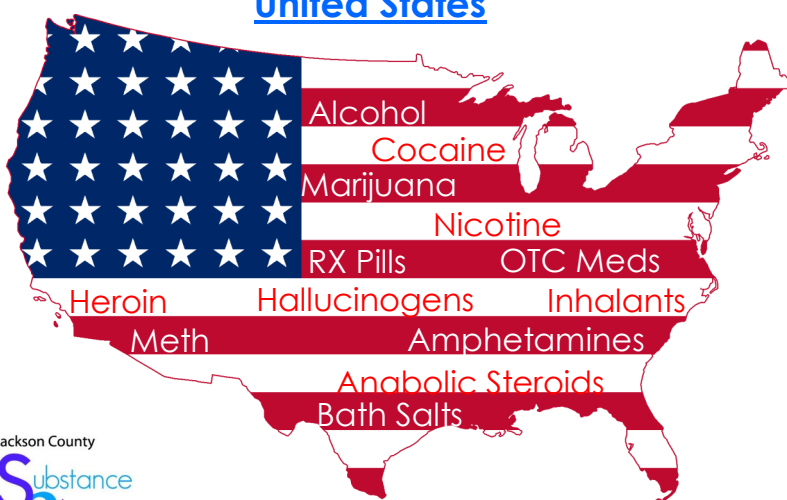
## Concluding the Conversation

- ★ Suggest the student seek further advice and/or help from the school counselor, another teacher, or parent where appropriate.
- ★ Advise the student if the circumstances warrant a referral to the school counselor or seek further advice from your administrator.
- ★ Offer information, such as pamphlets with drug facts, and the telephone numbers of appropriate information and support services.
- ★ If the discussion reveals the student has a problem that is unrelated to drug use, offer appropriate advice and school assistance to the student.

## Commonly Abused Drugs in Jackson County



## Commonly Abused Drugs in the United States



## If A Student is Reluctant

- ★ If the young person does not respond to discussing concerns about possible drug use, respect their right to privacy and *do not try to force the issue as this may cut off future lines of communication.*
- ★ Remain friendly and non-confrontational. Pressuring the student may increase defensiveness and delay change.
- ★ Offer information, such as pamphlets about drug facts, and support services.
- ★ Monitor the student's progress and offer appropriate support in other relevant areas.