

When One of a Parent's Worst Nightmares Becomes Reality

While most parents have many “worst nightmare scenarios,” finding out that their children are drug and/or alcohol-involved surely ranks high among them. If the current statistics for drug and alcohol use are to be trusted, then sadly many other Howard county families will have to deal with this difficult issue during the course of this coming school year. The following article - with its two different scenarios - is meant to provide guidance and suggestions for dealing with an issue that is always best confronted sooner rather than later.

Scenario One: Mrs. Jones (please note this is a fictional name) is doing her usual Sunday night laundry when a crinkled, small, plastic baggie falls from the pocket of her seventeen year-old son Tim's jeans onto the laundry room floor. She reaches down to throw it away when she notices tiny pieces of a greenish residue inside the baggie. Although she has never used any drugs before, Mrs. Jones feels relatively sure that this residue is the last of a bag of marijuana. She confronts Tim, but he denies this was marijuana and says it must have been trash that he had meant to throw away.

The above scenario reminds me of the old adage “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Some parents worry about falsely accusing their child. Even if the suspicion ends up being baseless, it is important to be able to rule out drug/alcohol use. It is crucial to take action. So then, what action does a parent take?

Parents have a couple of different avenues for handling this. The child may be taken directly to any of the state-certified alcohol and drug treatment programs. Also, there is the SAP program (see separate box), which was developed precisely for this kind of situation, as a means of early identification of suspected drug and/or alcohol use. Both the Howard County Health Department and Integrative Counseling have agreements with the Howard County schools to provide free screenings for students suspected to be drug or alcohol involved. This means that all Mrs. Jones has to do is **contact her son's school** (usually the Guidance Department) and request the SAP referral form, which the school staff person will then fill out and give back to the parent to bring at the time of the free screening. It really *is* that simple! Also, please remember: **the earlier the intervention, the better the outcome.**

Scenario Two: Mrs. Smith (again, names are fictional) learns that her son Tom was under the influence of alcohol at a school event, which resulted in his suspension. Per the HCPSS policy, Tom will not be allowed back to school until he has completed a **mandatory** drug/alcohol evaluation. This should be scheduled as soon as possible, as sometimes there can be a delay in obtaining an appointment for what can be a rather lengthy assessment. Often if there is such a delay, the schools may agree to allow the student back to school prior to the evaluation if proof of the upcoming scheduled appointment is provided. *Please note that this scenario is **not** appropriate for the SAP process since the student is already involved in disciplinary action through the school due to his drug/alcohol use.*

Demystifying the screening and assessment process:

The following attempts to explain exactly what occurs during the typical screening and evaluation for drug and/or alcohol abuse. The first thing to understand is that ***with a SAP referral (as in Scenario 1 where the use is suspected but not confirmed), usually a brief screening will be done first.*** This consists of about a half-hour interview designed to get to the heart of the issue rapidly. This screening relies heavily on the skill of the interviewer to build trust in order to elicit honest responses in such a short period of time. A urinalysis test is also taken at this time and sent out to an area lab which can provide results usually within 2-3 business days. Even if the teen is not honest but the interviewer feels there is a decent possibility that s/he is drug/alcohol involved, then that teen will then be referred for the longer, more comprehensive evaluation (details to follow). And, just to state the obvious, the teen of course is also referred for the full evaluation if the screening reveals that s/he is drug/alcohol involved. **Please remember to bring the SAP referral form to this screening, as it ensures it will be free of charge!**

When a teen is referred for a **full evaluation**, s/he will meet with an interviewer for usually 1-2 hours. During this time, a licensed addictions counselor will conduct an extensive interview with the teen. This interview will cover key aspects of the teen's life, such as social and family relationships, legal involvement, school and any work history, possible medical issues, and mental health issues. This information is confidential, so specific releases are drawn up (with the teen's consent), allowing this information to be shared with only the identified parties. In fact, it should be noted that ***due to federal law, the teen must sign the consent in order for any of the information to be shared with his or her parents, even if the parents had just walked in with them!*** While the teen is in the interview, parents are usually asked to complete some paperwork, often a "parent perspective" of the problem and possibly insurance information and financial information.

Finally, at the end of the evaluation, a urinalysis is taken and sent out to the lab. If it is unclear as to whether or not the teen was honest, sometimes the interviewer will wait to see the test results before making a recommendation. Usually, however, the recommendation is able to be made at the time of the evaluation. *Assuming the teen gave the interviewer consent to share the information with the parents*, then they will all meet together at the end of the evaluation and the teen is given an exact diagnosis of his/her particular substance abuse issue, and a recommendation for treatment is made (assuming there is in fact a problem). The family will be provided with a list of treatment providers in the area.

Once a specific provider has been chosen it is typically *that treatment provider* that will then make the specific recommendations as to the best course of treatment, i.e., groups, individual counseling, or some combination of both. (Families sometimes ask that scheduling issues, transportation issues, and financial concerns be taken into account when making the recommendations).

A final note regarding the full evaluation: both the Howard County Health Department and Integrative Counseling will conduct the evaluation *free-of-charge* as long as 1) the referral is not disciplinary in nature, and 2) the *SAP referral form* is provided.

This service is expensive, so it is reflective of both Howard County Health Department's and Integrative Counseling's commitment to early identification of drug and alcohol problems.

Also, for a complete review of the SAP process, please refer to the HC DrugFree newsletter from fall of 2004 listed on the website.

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