



## A Real Mom: Be vigilant for subtle clues of drug use

R.M.  
MinnMoms columnist

My mother used to say that all mothers have eyes in the backs of their heads. When I became a mother, I learned what she meant. If I was in the next room, I knew the exact moment to return to find a little one climbing up on a counter, getting ready to put something in his mouth or about to pull a cord from an outlet.

In addition to knowing what we were about to do even without actually seeing us, my mother was good at warning my siblings and me of eminent dangers. "Don't stick your finger in the outlet - you'll electrocute yourself." The way she'd say it was all loving - it didn't tempt me to try it any way and, if anything, it gave me nightmares just thinking about the possibility. (What an influence! To this day I am still careful with outlets.)



## Check the car

Parents are inundated with information on keeping kids safe as youngsters and as young adults. We become good at the obvious, but not so alert to the subtle. So, let's get practical regarding awareness of drug use and abuse.

It's not that we didn't wonder if drugs might be part of what we were observing in our son's behavior, it's just that we didn't find any of the so-called evidence that popular web sites and pamphlets warned of. Instead, we found things that didn't make sense or didn't immediately give pause. We had to connect the somewhat invisible dots.

Our son always had fidgety fingers, so finding unbent paperclips didn't seem out of the ordinary. He also chewed on pens and pencils,

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so finding broken and empty pen tubes didn't raise eyebrows either. And, he was messy leaving fast-food bags on the floor of his car - just lazy, right?

Turns out the paperclips often had black resin on the tips, the pen tubes had stains, and the receipts from fast-food places revealed that he'd made a food purchase at 3 a.m. some 60 miles from our home on a Friday night when he was supposedly spending the night a friend's house the next street

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A high school student's car is a data mine for determining drug use. The odometer, ash tray, gas and food receipts, zip-top bags and rolls of aluminum foil all yield meaning. A winter glove is a hiding place for a lighter, the other has a one-hitter pipe and a bag of weed. A bottle of Motrin in an athletic bag seems benign but is a cache for drugs. Thanks to Google, You Tube and the Urban Dictionary, I learned all kinds of things about how these items had drug uses.

## Hindsight

In high school, our son was like Leonardo DiCaprio in the movie *Catch Me If You Can*. He could skip class and not get caught or charm his way out of it. He'd park one place in the morning and within a couple of hours the car was somewhere else, and moved yet again before sports practice. His routine and patterns wove a story we didn't expect. And why not? Because at the time, his sports performance and standardized test scores were stellar. Drugs were his five-a-day routine, but the effects were not so apparent.

Several years later his peers would tell me he'd be taking hits in his car before practice. Why didn't they tell anyone? The code of honor among teens is strong, but if we'd known we might have addressed our concerns earlier and more aggressively. We might have coupled the evidence with his behavior to insist on deeper professional evaluation, to come a quicker conclusion. We might have had more influence, although we now know we still wouldn't have had any control over his predisposition for dependence.

Addiction experts once told us the fact we didn't immediately recognize our son's signs had very little to do with his craftiness or our inconclusive suspicions, but indicated how rapidly his chemical dependence had manifested. A casual partier or experimenter is often sloppy leaving unmistakable evidence, whereas a dependent user doesn't exhibit much because the drug-induced state is their normal behavior, and for a long time they can function quite well that way.

## Just because you did it isn't a valid excuse

For this generation of parents, it's more and more common to be lenient about experimenting with drugs especially if your own use was just that: experimentation, a phase. In high school I did try pot a couple of times, and likely I'm among the minority, but I did not like it in the least. Maybe I could imagine my mother's words of warning. Whatever it was, within a matter of weeks I left it at that and never tried again.

Today's drugs, including marijuana, are stronger, more addictive and far more dangerous, so do not let your own prior use cloud your judgment in dealing with your teen's potential use. For about \$30 at any pharmacy, you can get a simple, at-home urine-analysis (UA) test that screens for all kinds of drugs, and for about \$20, you can get the marijuana-only test.

## See the truth with honesty

Even if you don't suspect a problem, what's an inexpensive screen just to be sure? And just to get the dialog going? It sends an important message that drug use is not healthy or acceptable. I wish we'd done this even if it didn't change the facts or the outcomes.

We'll never know, and as I approach this journey spiritually, it's altogether possible that things are turning out as they are meant. That's not to say our words and actions would have made a difference; after all, parents are influencers.

In the long run, do more than talk with your teen about drugs and do more than search for evidence. Random drug testing is a loving, two-way barometer that puts suspicions to rest or brings the inconspicuous findings to light. UAs build honesty rather than diminish it, because whether your teen interprets a random drug test as caring concern or as invasion, it reminds them that you have eyes in the back of your head - eyes that see the possibilities. Every kid needs to know that, and every kid will understand it one day.

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