

# Intervention eBook

What to do if your child is  
drinking or using drugs



**Find answers to the following questions:**

- What is a drug or alcohol Intervention?
- How do I know for sure if my teen is using?
- How should I prepare for a talk with my child?
- How do I make sure the talk is productive?
- What if my child needs outside help?



**Partnership<sup>™</sup>**  
for Drug-Free Kids

Where families find answers

# What to do if your child is drinking or using drugs

If you're concerned about your teen's drug or alcohol use, then it is time to take action. **You can never be too safe or intervene too early – even if you believe your teen is just “experimenting.”**

Read on to find answers to parents' most pressing questions about interventions.

## What exactly is an intervention, and why should I have one with my child?

You don't need to be scared off by the word “intervention.” **An intervention can be as simple as a conversation in which you express your concern to someone about his or her drug use – it is not an attack on that person, and it doesn't always need to be followed by rehab.** The point of having an intervention with your teen is to address his drug or alcohol problem and lead him to help if he needs it. A simple intervention can take place between you and your child in your own home – and it can be very successful, even if it only tackles small goals at first. Just making it clear to your teen that you don't want him drinking or using drugs is an accomplishment.

Confronting your child about his drug use will probably be uncomfortable for both of you, and you may even think it's unnecessary. **But you can never be too safe or intervene too early.** Casual or experimental drug use can quickly turn into drug abuse, dependence or addiction and can lead to accidents, legal trouble, and serious health issues. **That's why it's imperative that you have an intervention as soon as your instinct tells you that something is wrong.** If you are at all concerned about your child's drug or alcohol use – or even just have a bad feeling – you can and should start the conversation.

What kind of intervention should you have? There are two types: **formal** and **informal**.

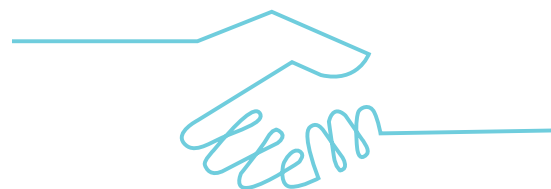
A **formal intervention** is a planned and structured conversation with the drug abuser. This may be the best option for you if you believe your teen is suffering from dependence or addiction, or has refused help or treatment on previous occasions. A formal intervention will involve you and your child's other loved ones explaining to your teen how her drug habits and resulting behaviors are affecting their lives. You may want to hire a trained professional such as an interventionist or qualified counselor, to conduct and mediate this type of intervention.

“What I would tell a parent who suspects or has discovered that their child is using is to accept it. The worst thing that you can do is to go into this place of denial and start saying, ‘Oh, well, a friend left it here. Oh, well, that must have been there. Oh, well, that's not my child's.’ That is the worst thing you can possibly do. Accept it. Confront your child. Have a discussion.”

—Lorraine McNeill-Popper, adoptive mother of 1, stepmother of 2

“The first time I found out my son was using drugs, I was shocked because he and I were really close. I was worried and looked at it as a chance to start a conversation. Or maybe to keep going with the conversation ‘cause we had talked about it before.”

—David Sheff, author, father of 3



# What to do if your child is drinking or using drugs

An **informal intervention** is a personal discussion with the drug or alcohol user. This is probably your best option if you've never discussed your child's use with her before. In an informal intervention, you will make some observations, ask your teen some questions – and listen to her answers. Your informal intervention will hopefully lead you and your teen to figure out the next steps toward a healthier lifestyle you both agree upon.

While you should talk to your teen as early as possible, there are some times when you *shouldn't* attempt the conversation. Reconsider if:

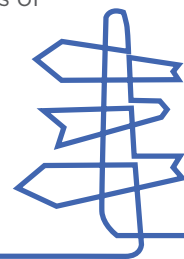
- **Your child is drunk or high.** Your intervention won't be productive – or remembered – if your child is under the influence. Wait until he or she is sober, then talk.
- **You're angry.** Yelling isn't going to get you anywhere. Have the conversation when you're feeling calm and level-headed.
- **You aren't prepared.** This tough conversation will be even harder if you can't answer your teen's questions or back up your claims. Before you initiate the intervention, read the rest of this guide, talk with someone you trust, and breathe.

**Bottom line:** An intervention is simply a conversation, but it's an important conversation that you can never have too early. The sooner you intervene, the more pain and danger you will save your child, yourself, and your family in the future. But remember, the time has to be right. The conversation will be much more productive if both you and your teen are calm and sober.

## My gut tells me that my child is using drugs, but I don't want to have an intervention without concrete evidence. What should I do?

Remember, your intuition is your best parenting tool. You know your child better than anyone else in the world, so if you think she's changed in some way, she probably has. And it never hurts to just come out and ask your child about her experience with or opinion about drugs or alcohol. You can begin the conversation with a line like, "I've noticed that since you've started high school, you've been going to many more parties. Is there a lot of drinking going on?"

If you're almost positive that your teen is drinking or using drugs, looking for signs and symptoms of use before the intervention will make the conversation much easier for you – and much harder for your child to talk her way out of. You don't need hard evidence (like a joint or empty beer bottles), but specific observations and details ("Last Friday night, you smelled like smoke and your eyes were red") will be hard for your teen to refute.



# What to do if your child is drinking or using drugs

To prepare for your intervention, try the following in the days or weeks leading up to your conversation:

- **Make observations.** Note changes in your teen's usual behavior, appearance, personal habits, health, and school work. The teenage years are a physical and emotional roller coaster, so no one change is a definite indication of drug or alcohol use. But if your child has ditched her friends for a new crowd, let her good grades slip, or stopped caring about her looks, there may be cause for concern. For a full list of warning signs, visit [www.drugfree.org/think-child-using/look-for-signs-and-symptoms](http://www.drugfree.org/think-child-using/look-for-signs-and-symptoms).
- **Keep track.** Note (in your head or in a journal) when and how often your teen breaks the rules or does something suspicious. For example, if your teen comes home way past curfew, jot down the date so you can reference it later. You may also want to keep track of the alcohol and legal drugs in your home. If you know you have exactly 20 prescription pills in your medicine cabinet, it will be easy to tell if some have gone missing. If you suspect your child is taking Rx drugs from your home, lock your medicine cabinet, dispose of pills you are no longer taking and visit [www.medicineabuseproject.org](http://www.medicineabuseproject.org) to learn more about Rx abuse.
- **Search for drugs and drug paraphernalia.** Some parents are against "snooping," while others believe they have the right to look through their children's things. There is no correct answer, but if you want to collect concrete evidence of your child's drug use before your intervention, here are some good places to look: dresser drawers, desk drawers, backpacks, the glove compartment of the car, the back of closets, corners of bed sheets, under the mattress or bed, small boxes, books/bookcases, makeup cases, over-the-counter medicine bottles, and empty candy wrappers.

**Remember:** *If you do find drugs in your child's room or car, you will be accused of invading your teen's privacy. Be prepared to defend your actions (see page 5).*

**Bottom line:** You don't need hard evidence to begin the conversation – your intuition telling you something is wrong is enough. But having past incidents or observations to reference in your conversation will help you encourage your teen to tell the truth about her drug or alcohol use.

“Parents should absolutely snoop on their kids. There is absolutely no reason not to. Do not lie about it! Let your kids know you're doing it. Hey, if they have nothing to hide, what's the big deal? Why are they even concerned about it? If they've got something to hide, you need to know about it. You're talking about their health and well-being here. You are responsible for that. You need to go to any lengths for it.”

—Dr. Drew Pinsky, addiction medicine specialist and father of 3

“For my family, the signs were vividly present yet camouflaged with aspects of what appeared to be just teenage behaviors. Looking back I realized, with great anguish, how my stepdaughter's disease of addiction manifested right before our very eyes as early as high school.”

—Linda Quirk, mother of 2, stepmother of 1

# What to do if your child is drinking or using drugs

## Is there anything I should do to prepare for the conversation?

Yes! In order to have a successful intervention, you will need to prepare beforehand. Hold off on beginning the conversation until you:

- **Talk with your spouse/partner.** If your teen's other parent or caregiver does not share the same beliefs and values that you do when it comes to drugs, you will certainly hear about it from your kid. So get on the same page as your spouse or partner *before* you intervene with your child. "Getting on the same page" doesn't necessarily mean agreeing - it means committing to present a united front, even if the two of you disagree on the issue. "As it hard as it may be to go along with something your husband or wife is saying, especially if you totally think they don't know what they're talking about, you really want to give your child the message that there's teamwork," advises family therapist Dr. Jane Greer.

**Remember:** *This is a stressful situation for both you and your spouse, and you will need one another's support. Do not blame your partner for your teen's drug or alcohol use, or allow him/her to blame you. Your teen's problem is no one's fault, but you and partner do need to work together to deal with it.*

- **Recognize the significance of addiction in your family.** For some, trying drugs or alcohol once or twice is just part of the teen experience. But if there is a history of addiction in your family, your child is much more likely than other kids to become addicted. Understand this serious risk and think about how you are going to explain this to your child in a way that will make him listen.

**Remember:** *Don't deny addiction in your family. There's no reason to be embarrassed, and you can actually use your family's history of addiction as a tool to keep your own child away from drugs. You can say, "As you know, Aunt Sue is an alcoholic. You've seen how much she hurts herself and the people around her when she drinks. Since alcoholism runs in the family, you need to be especially careful to avoid drinking so that you don't develop the same problems."*

### Separated, Divorced and Single Parents

If you and your teen's other parent aren't together, it can be especially hard for you to get clear messages about drugs across to your teen. Family therapist Dr. Jane Greer weighs in on what you can do if you're:

**Separated or divorced:** When you are divorced, you and your ex may no longer be attempting to work with cooperative spirit. Your ex-husband or wife may not enforce the rules you've set, so the best thing you can do is teach your child to see the importance of your rules, even when he's with his other parent.

You can say, *"I know your dad lets you drink when you're with him, but you also know that I'm really not okay with that. The teenage brain isn't equipped to handle alcohol, which is why I don't let you drink when you're at my house. I can't control what happens at your dad's, but I hope that you will value your health and safety enough not to drink when you're there."*

**A single parent:** If you're a single parent, the most important thing that you must do is build a support network and have your team of helpers who are there for you. If your child has a drug problem, it will be very hard for you to handle on your own - so enlist the help of others. Even if you want to be the only adult involved in the actual conversation, you can get support from friends and family before and after. Remember, you're still a good parent even if you can't do everything on your own!

# What to do if your child is drinking or using drugs

- **Set a desired outcome for your intervention.** The “drug talk” is actually not one talk – it’s a series of conversations. Chances are, your first intervention will not resolve all problems – and that’s okay. But if you set a goal (even a small one) before you start talking, you will know where you want your conversation to ultimately lead. Would you like your teen to see a therapist? Stop binge drinking at parties? Obey curfew? Come up with a specific purpose for your intervention, and then work toward achieving it.

**Remember:** *Don't set your expectations too high. Your teen may not even admit to drug use the first time you intervene, let alone pledge to stop using or get help. Set reasonable goals, and realize that just expressing to your teen that you don't want him using drugs or drinking is a small triumph.*

- **Prepare yourself for your teen’s reaction.** Your teen will not be happy that you’re approaching him about his drug or alcohol use. That’s to be expected. What you might *not* expect is to be called a liar, hypocrite or snoop. Think about how you will handle these accusations if they come up. This chart may help.

**If your child says:**

*“You went through my stuff?! You’re a snoop!”*

**You can:**

Defend your choice to look through your teen’s things by expressing your concern for his health and safety

Say, “I’m sorry you feel that I broke your trust. But as a parent, my job is to keep you safe and healthy, and therefore I have to intrude when I believe you’re doing something unsafe.”

**If your child says:**

*“You smoke/drink! You’re such a hypocrite!”*

**You can:**

Focus on the issue at hand—you don’t want YOUR TEEN using drugs or drinking

Say you wish you had never started smoking because it’s so hard to stop

Explain that it is legal for adults to drink, and that it is illegal for people under 21 to drink because their brains aren’t equipped to handle alcohol yet

If you are in recovery, say, “I love you too much to let you make the same mistakes that I did.”

**If your child says:**

*“I’ve never done drugs! You’re lying!”*

**You can:**

Remain calm

Do whatever you can to keep the conversation going

Say, “I love you way too much to let anything happen to you. I need you to tell me the truth so I can figure out how to help you. I have no intention of getting mad or punishing you.”

# What to do if your child is drinking or using drugs

**Bottom line:** Your intervention will go much more smoothly if you (and your spouse/partner) go into it with a plan. As with most other things, you should hope for the best, but expect the worst – that way, you'll be ready for any curveballs your teen throws your way.

## What are some ways to ensure that our conversation is productive? And what happens if it turns into plain yelling or crying?

The best way to ensure that your conversation gets you to your desired outcome (see page 4) is to make sure that you actually have **a conversation, not a confrontation**. In a conversation, two people have a dialogue, and each side listens to the other. Remember, your intervention should not be an attack on your child (nor should it be an opportunity for your child to attack you). Furthermore, intervening is not about catching your teen in a lie or getting her to admit something she doesn't want to. It's about keeping your child safe.

Here are some tips for talking and listening to your teen:

### **DO:**

- **Remember that this is about your child's health and well being** – it's not about bad behavior and punishments.
- **Come from a place of love and concern**, not anger.
- **Keep a cool head** and speak calmly instead of yelling.
- **Be direct**, because teens have a hard time grasping the abstract. Saying, "You smelled like alcohol when you came back from Ashley's party" is better than saying, "I know something fishy went on at Ashley's party."
- **Withhold judgment** so that your teen feels she can tell you the truth.
- **Talk about your own memories and mistakes** so that you and your teen can relate to each other better.

### **DON'T:**

- **Get defensive** when your teen makes a remark that feels like a personal attack – use it as a discussion point instead.
- **Just take what your child says at face value** – listen to your child's tone of voice, and pay attention to her facial expressions, body language and difficulty finding the right words.
- **Answer the phone or door** – give your teen your undivided attention.

“ I think it's important that we remember our job as parents is to share our wisdom – not necessarily all of our experiences. I learned that some of the things that I did growing up are not healthy for my kids. And I wouldn't want them to repeat my mistakes. So in part I share my wisdom about what I know is healthy and safe for them. How I know that is not necessarily theirs to find out. ”

—Marybeth Hicks, mother of 4

“ When I knew I had to confront my child about his drug use, the first thing I did was, I role played in my mind. I went through the exercise and I prepared myself for several answers. The one answer I prepared myself for was for the answer I did not want to hear, which was 'Yes.' When I heard 'Yes,' after going through that exercise, I was able to handle it. I was able to be cool, I was able to be calm. ”

—Lorraine McNeill-Popper, adoptive mother of 1, stepmother of 2

# What to do if your child is drinking or using drugs

Unfortunately, even if you're more than willing to listen, it doesn't mean that your child will be willing to talk – or tell the truth. If you're having trouble getting your teen to open up, try to:

- **Remain calm.** If you start yelling, you'll give your child a reason to storm out of the room, cutting the conversation short.
- **Emphasize the importance of honesty.** Explain to your child that it takes much more courage to tell the truth than to lie. Also remind her that liars usually get caught.
- **Grant your child "immunity."** Promise your child that if she tells you the truth, there will be no immediate consequences, such as grounding.
- **Verify her claims.** If your teen is sticking to her story, say, "That's fine, but I'm going to call [insert appropriate name] just to make sure that's what really happened." Remember, you're not trying to catch your teen in a lie, but you do need to know the whole picture of your teen's world so that you can keep her healthy and safe. Contacting your child's friends or their parents to ask about your own kid's behavior isn't overstepping your boundaries – it's responsible parenting.
- **Not let your teen stump you with her remarks or questions.** Don't end the conversation because you don't have a "comeback" for something your child has just said or asked. Try responding with, "Good question – I will think about it and get back to you. But let's keep talking about the situation at hand right now."
- **Focus on the behavior, not the person.** Your child may honestly fear disappointing you or looking imperfect in your eyes. Emphasize again and again that drug use is dangerous, but that your teen is not a bad *person* if she's using drugs.

Following these tips should guide you and your teenager through a very productive discussion, but there's no guarantee that yelling or crying won't occur. If things get too heated or emotional, there is nothing wrong with stopping the conversation. If you think both parties just need to regroup, you can say, "We're not going to get anywhere if we both keep yelling. Let's take a five-minute break and then try again."

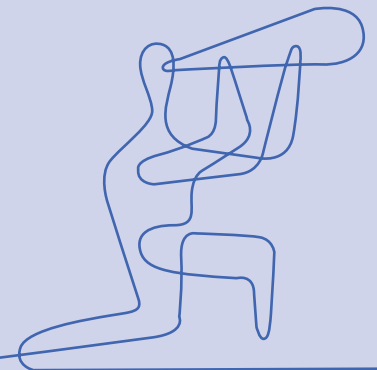
If you and your teen are so emotional that you just want to call it quits for the day, that's okay, too. End the discussion, reschedule for the next day or week, and then try a different approach the next time.

**Bottom line:** Your intervention will be best if you don't view it as a confrontation or contest. You want to make sure your child

## Children with Behavioral Disorders

Your conversation probably won't go as planned if your teen exhibits behavioral problems. Of course, all teens can be volatile, but if your child lashes out constantly, has a very short temper and is frequently hostile or threatening toward authority figures, she may have a behavioral disorder such as oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) which will make it that much harder to talk to her about her drug use.

If you know or think your child has a behavioral disorder, you are encouraged to get a counselor involved in your intervention. A trained professional will most likely be able to get through to your teen in a way that you cannot. If you need more help, look up parent support groups in your area. You may even be able to find some classes that teach new ways to parent teens with behavioral problems.





# What to do if your child is drinking or using drugs

listens to what you have to say, but you also need to listen to what your teen says – and doesn't say. Make sure that you create a safe environment for your child to express herself truthfully in, and if that environment becomes hostile, don't be afraid to take a break or end the conversation entirely.

## How do I make sure that after the intervention, my child actually changes his behavior?

Teenagers don't do well with gray areas, so if you say something during the intervention but don't follow up on it afterward, your teen won't know what you really mean. That's why you need to lay down rules in your intervention, and also set firm consequences so your child knows you're serious about him *not* using drugs or drinking.

If you're a parent who feels bad about setting limits, remember that deep down, teens actually *want* them. Rules mean that you care about your child and his safety. And consequences actually help your child – not hurt him. A firm consequence, such as getting grounded or having to give up a fun privilege, will remind him what not to do in the future.

When you lay out rules and consequences, make sure you are clear – and that your child understands the limits you've set before he does something wrong. One good way to do this is to create a contract with your teen. You and your teen each write down the things you expect from the other (being home before curfew, getting a ride home from a party if things get out of hand), and then you both sign the document. To create a contract visit [www.drugfree.org/resources](http://www.drugfree.org/resources).

How will you know that your teen is following your new rules? By monitoring – keeping a close eye on your teen and communicating with him regularly about his whereabouts, friends, activities, and more. Monitoring is a lot of work, but it pays big rewards. Here are some ways to stay connected with your teen:

- **Be around him.** Spend time with your child and find subtle ways to “drop in” when his friends are at your house.
- **Ask questions before he leaves.** Be sure to find out where he's going, who will be there and what he'll be doing.

“Don't preach, don't be accusatory, don't get angry. You really want to find the facts.”

—Lorraine McNeill-Popper, adoptive mother of 1, stepmother of 2



“I think the most important thing is not to focus on the emotion as much as the behavior. So in the case of someone who's using, you know, they'll say, 'I'm not using' – or, even if they say they are using, but it's not affecting their life – you need to point out, well, look, your grades are slipping. Or you're not following through with the rules of the house, or you've been in trouble with the police, or whatever it is. So it's more a situation of pointing out the behavior, as opposed to indulging in the denial or the anger.”

—Pat Aussem, mother of 2

# What to do if your child is drinking or using drugs

- **Check in.** Call him while he's out to say hello and remind him that you expect him to follow the rules you've established.
- **Ask questions when he gets home.** Be sure to look him in the eye, smell his hair and ask him about his night to see if he is sober and telling the truth.
- **Oversee your teen's activities.** It's important to know his whereabouts and who he's spending time with.
- **Reach out to other parents in your community.** This way you can all keep an eye on one another's kids.

**Bottom line:** Just because your teen agrees to something during your intervention, it doesn't mean that he'll actually stop his bad behavior, which is why you need to set limits and firm consequences. No one wants to be a mean mom or dad, but the rules you set will keep your kid safe *and* show him that you're not kidding around when it comes to drugs or alcohol.

## What if the intervention makes me realize that my child needs outside help?

If your child's drug or alcohol use progresses, you may decide she needs more help and guidance than you personally can give her. This may be scary, but what many parents don't realize is that "outside help" doesn't necessarily come in the form of rehab. There are many people in your community who can serve as great resources for you and your teen – you just need to know who you can ask for support.

The following people can help your teen:

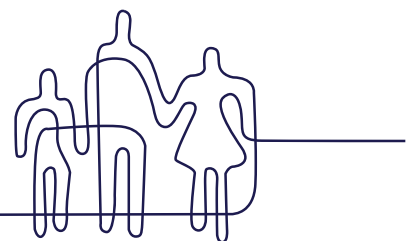
- **School Counselor, Professional Therapist, Addiction Counselor** – can help your child pinpoint and discuss the underlying issues behind her drug or alcohol use.
- **Pediatrician/Family Doctor** – can talk authoritatively about the risks of drugs and alcohol and their effects on the body (be sure to request this when you schedule the appointment so the doctor is prepared); can persuade your kid to quit using casually or to get help if the problem is more serious.
- **Sports Coach** – can speak to your child about how her drug use negatively affects her body, her health, her performance, and her team as a whole.

“You might want to remind your teenager that they might be watched a little bit more closely, or monitored a little bit more closely, because things haven't gone as you had hoped.”

—Dr. Ken Winters, Professor, Department of Psychiatry, University of Minnesota Medical School, and Senior Scientist, Treatment Research Institute in Philadelphia and father of 2

“My kids will joke that the smaller the problem, the louder I yell. So if there are shoes by the back door, that's when I'm going to go bonkers, right? But if there's a serious problem, I'm going to respond always quietly because I know that the more serious our issues are the more it needs my thoughtful, considered, mature response.”

—Marybeth Hicks, mother of 4



# What to do if your child is drinking or using drugs

- **Caring Adult (like a teacher, family friend, aunt, uncle or clergy member)** – may be able to lend the listening ear and shoulder to cry on that your child needs.

If your child's drug and/or alcohol use has started causing serious and recurring problems, it's probably time to start looking into intensive treatment programs. Both inpatient and outpatient programs provide the stability, education, discipline, and counseling adolescents need to get better. Finding the right treatment center for your teen takes a lot of work and research, but a good place to start is SAMHSA's Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator at <http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>, a government-sponsored treatment locator. Your pediatrician should also be able to recommend treatment in your area.

The most important thing to remember when looking for outside help – whether it's a treatment center or a close friend – is that drug or alcohol use in the family is nothing to be ashamed of. You may feel that there is a stigma surrounding substance abuse and addiction, but as a parent, you are responsible for keeping your child healthy and safe, no matter what others think or say. You are your child's biggest advocate, so never let embarrassment stand in the way of getting your teen the help she needs and deserves.

**Bottom line:** If your child needs outside help, there are plenty of people you can turn to who already have an established relationship with your child. If your child's drug use is out of control, you will need to start looking into getting treatment, and your family doctor and other people in your community can help you figure out where to start.



For a step-by-step guide for parents who suspect or know their teens are drinking or using drug, visit [www.drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org).

“ I didn't have the insight, at that point in time, to ask our therapist, who was excellent at treating teens with depression, whether he had any drug and alcohol counseling background. And he didn't. And so, if I were to do it over again, I probably would have changed therapists. ”

—Pat Aussem, mother of 2

“ With addiction, the first thing we want to do is we want to hide it. We don't want anybody to know, we want to keep it a secret because it's shameful. To me it was shameful; I didn't want anybody to think badly about my son. I thought, 'Oh my God, what would they think of me if my son had become a drug addict?' So I postponed and I denied and I didn't see what was going on. And then, everything changes when a child becomes 18. If I had known what I know now, I would have put my son into rehab at the first signs that he was getting in trouble. ”

—David Sheff, author and father of 3

# What to do if your child is drinking or using drugs

*The Partnership at Drugfree.org would like to thank the following people who shared their expertise, experience and wisdom with us to help create this eBook:*

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**DR. JANE GREER** author and marriage and family therapist.

**MARYBETH HICKS** Mother, Author, Speaker.

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**DR. DREW PINSKY** Author, Clinician, and Television and Radio Personality.

**LINDA QUIRK** is a mother and grandmother who ran seven marathons on seven continents to raise awareness about young adult drug and alcohol treatment.

**DAVID SHEFF** is a journalist and author, including the book "Beautiful Boy" about his son's addiction. His articles have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *Wired*, and *Fortune*. He is the father of three children.

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