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Note: This is part one in a multi-part series investigating issues that effect today's youth. In the upcoming weeks, we will examine teen pregnancy, mental illness and safety in schools, but first we will provide insight into alcohol and drug abuse in today's youth.

For years, teenagers have faced pressure to use drugs and alcohol, and studies reveal that those pressures have not subsided in recent years.

In fact, studies show that substance abuse among teenagers continues to be an epidemic in classrooms across the county. According to Brandeis University's 2001 report entitled *Substance Abuse: The Nation's Number One Health Problem*, by the eighth grade, 52 percent of teens have consumed alcohol, while 20 percent have smoked marijuana. In addition, according to the National Institute of Drug Abuse, 48.2 percent of seniors indicated that they had used illicit drugs in their lifetime. In recent years, incidents of binge drinking (defined as having five or more drinks at one sitting) and the abuse of prescription drugs have soared among teenagers, according to the American Medical Association.

"The pressures to use drugs and alcohol start early in elementary and middle school," explained Gina McDonald, the executive director of Project ADAM, a local substance abuse treatment facility. "These days parents almost accept cigarette use because they believe that at least their kids aren't doing drugs and alcohol, but statistics show that early use of cigarettes leads to alcohol and drug use.

"If we turn our heads to cigarette and alcohol use, what are we teaching our kids? Parents are almost saying that it's okay do use alcohol and drugs by allowing teens under the age of 18 to use cigarettes."

Adds Bob Davis, a substance abuse consultant for Project ADAM and the Department of Family and Children's Services, "Parents still have a do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do attitude. Today, kids have greater access to drugs. They have more free time, money and mobility."

Drugs and alcohol are easily accessible to teens. According to a 2001 National Survey of Substance Abuse Attitudes, more than 60 percent of adolescents reported that drugs were used and sold at their schools.

Locally, the Winder Police Department recently arrested 11 individuals for drug-related offenses at Winder-Barrow High School. Since 2004, 38 drug-related arrested occurred on the Winder-Barrow High School campus.

"Do our schools have a problem with drugs and alcohol? I would say yes, but so does our community. Those problems don't stop at the schoolhouse door," explained Barrow County Superintendent of Schools Ron Saunders. "I don't think that Winder-Barrow

High School is any different than any other high school; I think that we just went into it to see if it was as big of a problem as people thought. It's a difficult thing to face as a parent and as a school."

Symptoms of substance abuse include sudden personality changes, loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities, withdrawal from family, secretive behavior, loss of temper, memory and attention impairment and slurred speech, among others, according to the National Youth Network.

Teenagers use drugs and alcohol for a variety of reasons from filling a void to attempting to fit in with peers, says Ann Shannon, the executive director of the Highland House, a shelter for at-risk youth.

"There's not one blanket reason, but teens use drugs and alcohol to numb themselves and fill a void," she said. "If you don't get at the underlying issue, you won't be able to get them to stop."

Once a parent suspects or catches their children using illegal substances such as drugs or alcohol, they often ask what do we do now, said Saunders.

"Parents have a right to require their children be drug tested," McDonald said. "If you thought your child's arm was broken, you would take them to the hospital. It's no different with drugs and alcohol. If you suspect that your child has used an illegal substance, you should take them for testing, evaluation and treatment."

In addition to providing drug-testing services, Project ADAM offers comprehensive clinical evaluations to determine an appropriate treatment level and outpatient treatment groups for adolescents. Advantage Behavioral Health Systems also offers individual treatment and family therapy for adolescents in Barrow County. Teens in neighboring Clarke and Walton Counties can utilize Interlight, an Advantage Behavioral Health Systems' program that provides outpatient treatment groups, said Frances Torres, the director of Child and Adolescent Services at Advantage Behavioral Health Systems.

If more intensive inpatient treatment is needed, parents should consider residential treatment programs, therapeutic wilderness programs or therapeutic boarding schools.

"There are only a few inpatient options in the state," Torres said. "There's the Hartman Center in Atlanta. There's also a state-funded Boys Group Home at Fort Yargo and one in Gainesville."

According to Davis, parents should find a qualified professional to help their teen.

"Parents need to find a competent addiction professional well versed in adolescent needs. The teens need to have an assessment and provide quality information so that an accurate treatment recommendation can be made," he said.

Winder-Barrow High School junior Catherine Leach says that while teenagers face pressures to use illegal substances to a certain extent, these pressures can be overcome.

“Teens are more vulnerable to pressures to use drugs and alcohol,” she said. “But, once you reach a certain level of maturity, you have the strength to say no. If you’re comfortable with yourself, you know better than to travel down that road.”