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The following questions are from Howard County parents. Answers were provided by: Mark Donovan, LCPC, LCADC, finn67@gmail.com, 410-740-8066, www.congruentcounseling.com

PARENT QUESTION: Where does a parent with a teen who has an alcohol or pot problem turn?

DONOVAN ANSWER: The "easy" answer is to call your insurance company if you have insurance, but that is not always so easy. Many programs are not covered by insurance or are hard to find on the list of providers that is often out of date. Luckily in Howard County, there are several certified programs that specialize in working with teens. Our Howard County Health Department has an entire office with staff dedicated to assessment and treatment. They can be reached at 410-313-6202. Of course, I am not unbiased as I started two programs in Columbia: Integrative Counseling and Congruent Counseling. You can also view the Maryland Alcohol and Drug Abuse administration Program Locator at: <http://adaa.dhmf.maryland.gov/SitePages/Program%20Locators.aspx>. Each program has different times, different costs, and a different focus. When working with teens, it is essential that family counseling is available and that the program recognizes and addresses social and other mental health concerns. Luckily in Howard County the question is not how to find one, it is how to choose one.

PARENT QUESTION: Where do I go to find a counselor?

DONOVAN ANSWER: Like the question above: The "easy" answer is to call your insurance company if you have insurance, but that is not always so easy. Many therapists are not covered by insurance or are hard to find on the list of providers that is often out of date. Luckily in Howard County, there are hundreds of licensed therapists. Of course, I am not unbiased. Congruent Counseling has 24 therapists on staff, all of whom take commercial insurance and have a wide variety of specialties. I encourage you to seek out only licensed counselors or therapists as Maryland has set standard requirements to protect consumers and to ensure counselors have appropriate training to help. You can check on the license of therapists and counselors at the Maryland Board of Professional Counselors at: <https://mdbnc.dhmf.md.gov/pctVerification/default.aspx> or the Maryland Board of Social Work at: <https://mdbnc.dhmf.md.gov/BSWEVerification/Default.aspx> or the Board of Examiners of Psychologists at: <https://mdbnc.dhmf.md.gov/PSYCHVerification/Default.aspx>.

PARENT QUESTION: My daughter claims "everyone" in her school is drinking or doing drugs. Does the county have a handle on how prevalent drinking and drugs are in the schools?

DONOVAN ANSWER: Clearly, not everyone who attends Howard County schools is drinking or doing drugs. The last study I know of was done in 2011 and reported less than 60% of students using any substance in the 30 days prior to the study. Keep in mind, this 60% would have included any child having even 1 drink of alcohol - with family or not. While I do not feel that any alcohol use by kids or teens is acceptable, this number indicates that not everyone in high school is doing drugs or drinking alcohol. We also know that kids are under a great deal of peer pressure (hidden or passive) to look cool by saying they might have done something they have not. Unfortunately, it is clear in our society that drinking is cool - just look at the "coolest man in the world" advertising. It works for a reason. Remember the schools only have our kids for 6-7 hours a day. How many hours a day do our high school kids raise themselves every day? Many spend 3-4 hours a day by themselves after school before parents get home. We cannot expect the schools to do more than they do now.

This being said, I have good evidence that Howard County Schools are doing a great job of recognizing and addressing any substance use they find. I believe they also do a great job at prevention and limit setting. Thankfully, in Howard County Maryland, not only do the schools address what is put before them, they have teams of teachers and counselors trained to search out and address concerns before a child gets into trouble. There are Student Assistance Teams, part of the SAP program, in most Howard County high schools and many middle schools. These teams are trained to identify issues and bring any issues to parents. Despite these teams being cut in other counties, Howard County has made these teams a priority and found funding to keep them when other systems did not. Clearly, we are lucky in Howard County to have a school system that treats substance use as a priority.