

A P A R E N T ' S
T O
G U I D E

Prescription Stimulants

axis

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You see parents who talk about underperformance as if it's a disorder, which really goes to the heart of the issue: Are we still treating disorders here? Or are we offering performance enhancement?

— [“Pop. Snort. Parachute.”](#) *New York Magazine*

Prescription stimulants— necessary or “necessary”?

One night, despite being in the middle of a challenging college term, a young man decided to build a deck at 1 a.m.

Why? Because he was taking the illegal stimulant known as Speed (methamphetamine) on a regular basis so that he could handle his class load. He would push hard studying for an upcoming test and stay awake for days, then crash hard and disappear for a while, presumably to catch up on sleep.

Even though this Guide is only about legal drugs, the mindset and values that drove this man to use an illegal drug are the same as those that drive the abuse of prescription ones like Adderall (amphetamine) and Ritalin. Of course, Adderall and Ritalin are legal and less addictive than street stimulants and are helpful for treating various conditions, most notably Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder or [ADHD](#). But they, too, are widely abused and misused.

We've created this guide because there is confusion, danger, and often shame surrounding the use of prescription stimulants. How should parents of kids with ADHD approach their treatment? How does the cultural mindset that says stimulants are necessary for succeeding at life, regardless of whether one has ADHD, impact all of us and drive the market for stimulants? And how do we combat the mentality that success is worth going to any length to achieve?

— What exactly are stimulants?

Stimulants act on the central nervous system to speed up the normal activities of the brain, effectively making people feel more energetic and alert (as opposed to depressants, like alcohol, which [slow down the normal activities of the brain](#)). Cocaine and methamphetamine (meth) are street drugs that fall within this stimulant category.

The two most well-known prescribed [Schedule II](#) stimulants (typically prescribed for the [treatment of ADHD](#) and narcolepsy) are Adderall and Ritalin, which are actually two different types of stimulants. Adderall is amphetamine ([other brand names](#): Dexedrine, Vyvanse), whereas Ritalin is methylphenidate ([other brand names](#): Concerta, Methylin, Daytrana).

— How are they different from meth?

Good question. Meth, molly, and ecstasy are all [Schedule I](#) illicit drugs with amphetamine as part of their chemical composition. (In fact, because meth is chemically related to less-potent amphetamines, people often refer to meth as an “amphetamine.”) Methamphetamine and amphetamine are actually similar; both [do the following](#):

- increase blood pressure and heart rate;
- speed up metabolism;
- raise body temperature;
- increase energy;

- cause feelings of euphoria;
- increase focus; and
- create a desire to be active and productive.

The main difference between them is that meth is more powerful and more addictive.

— So abusing non-opioid prescription medications is really a thing?

Unfortunately, yes. And though the problem may not have reached epidemic levels like the opioid crisis has, there are many people who willingly expose themselves to the risks of consuming stimulants. The [National Institute on Drug Abuse \(NIDA\) reports](#):

Although most people take prescription medications responsibly, an estimated 54 million people (more than 20 percent of those aged 12 and older) have used such medications for nonmedical reasons at least once in their lifetime.

[American Addiction Centers says](#):

About 4.8 million people in the US abused prescription amphetamine medications [in 2015], equivalent to about 1.8 percent of the population that is 12 and older.

The [NIDA also reports](#) that in 2017, 6% of high school seniors said they used Adderall for “non-medical” purposes.

— Ok, why would someone want to risk taking stimulants without the oversight of a doctor?

Despite the risks, stimulants seem to offer a lot of benefits. A very common “non-medical” reason people offer as to why they use stimulants like Adderall is that of the aforementioned young man who used Speed: to stay awake and focus longer in order to accomplish more. College campuses are rife with stimulant users hoping to get good grades. But it’s not just students who find stimulants attractive; adults are also relying on them to accomplish more at their jobs because of pressure to perform and get ahead.

We should note as well that because [stimulants diminish the appetite](#), they can also appeal to people who want to lose weight and/or have eating disorders.

— What are the risks of taking prescription stimulants recreationally?

Obviously, any drug is dangerous because it has the potential to be abused, and prescription stimulants are no different. They’re dangerous if people take them [other than how they were prescribed](#) for many reasons, including but not limited to:

- the risk of addiction due to the associated euphoria;

- the increased risk of side-effects (they increase heart rate and blood pressure);
- the lack of knowledge about side-effects;
- unwittingly taking too large of a dose;
- and not being monitored by a medical professional who can mitigate the drug's negative effects on the body.

Something that's encouraging is that research *hasn't* found a link between children with ADHD who take medication and [substance abuse later in life](#). However, there does seem to be a link between people [who abuse stimulants and other types of substance abuse](#).

According to Netflix's documentary [Take Your Pills](#), it's common for people to abuse alcohol if they already abuse stimulants. Because stimulants are uppers and keep people awake, abusers sometimes drink alcohol (a "downer") or take another prescription like Xanax (a sedative) to help them sleep. This is extremely dangerous because it's easy to take too much of either, not to mention the fact that people who do this often say they are caught in a bad cycle of needing the stimulant to function and needing the sedative/depressant to calm down and sleep.

Abusing a stimulant like Adderall for a long period of time [carries the risk of addiction and psychosis](#), as well as other negative side effects. While [the research is still tentative](#), there could be a tie between prescription stimulants and Parkinson's Disease.

But perhaps the greatest concern to have about prescription stimulants is the fact that many people see them as necessary to function and to handle the normal demands on their lives.

— Why do teens feel like they need to take them?

There are a number of reasons why teens might feel pressured to take prescription stimulants, whether for medical or non-medical reasons.

Pressure from parents and doctors

As we already mentioned, one of the values that drives prescription stimulant abuse is the pressure to achieve. In [an article about New York teens](#) [warning: strong language], a coordinator at an outpatient rehab facility says she's met many parents who are quick to prescribe medication for their kids. These parents are often reliant on substances themselves.

Another problem is that some doctors are too quick to prescribe medication. Kleeman says, "One thing I've noticed in recent years is that when I go into classrooms to talk about drugs, students will often bring up their concerns that doctors are overprescribing medicines."

[This article from The New York Times](#) describes a doctor who sees it as his duty to prescribe Adderall to children from low-income families. He does this, not because they have ADHD, but because the families can't afford to get their kids any other kind of help to succeed academically.

One mom in the article makes her kids take Concerta even though they don't want to because the kids get better grades than when they don't take it. Another couple

mentioned in the article gives their children Adderall, again, not because they have ADHD, but just to help with their grades. In the case of their 12-year-old daughter, they also wanted to help her be more peppy.

This way of thinking is a huge concern because children are still developing, the drugs are addictive, and the parents are teaching their kids to rely on medication instead of learning emotional maturity, healthy coping mechanisms, and how/when to set boundaries (i.e. say no). People also tend to believe that if a doctor prescribes a medication, then it's "safe," which might not be true at all. Plenty of highly addictive, dangerous drugs (morphine, for example) are used legally for medical reasons.

Peer and academic pressure

We talked to a college student who recently transferred universities and overheard some students talking about how they were interested in trying Adderall so they could study more effectively. Another man described the highly competitive, even cutthroat environment he encountered in law school. Every year, the school cut the students who were in the bottom 10% of the class. For fear of that, he took Adderall every day and studied for about 12 hours straight to remain in the top 1% of class. He eventually burned out and dropped out without finishing his degree.

We mentioned earlier that many adults use prescription stimulants to increase their output at work. There is a real danger that students who abuse stimulants to make it through college or grad school will [carry that habit into their careers](#).

Culture

Unfortunately, prescription drugs of all sorts have come into the limelight via Hollywood and celebrities in the last decade or so. The 2011 film [Limitless](#) was based on the idea that a drug could unlock the entire human mind and make one, well, limitless. In addition, though some athletes take stimulants as prescribed in treatment of real medical conditions (Olympic gold medalist Simone Biles [being one](#)), some, like [former NFL player Eben Britton](#), have been clear that they started down the road of Adderall use in order to keep up with the physical and mental demands of their sport.

In addition, some of today's most popular songs and artists normalize the use of "[addys](#)" (*warning: this link and most others in this section have strong language*). Simply searching "addy" on lyrics.com [yields 81 lyrics](#) (most songs after 2010 are talking about Adderall, though a few use it as an abbreviation for "address"). Many of the songs are from well-known hip hop artists like Nicki Minaj ("[Miami](#)"), Future ("[Patek Water](#)," "[Neva Missa Lost](#)," "[Sorry](#)"), Travis Scott ("[90210](#)"), 21 Savage ("[Mad Stalkers](#)"), and Lil Wayne & Big Sean ("[Beware](#)").

However, the biggest influence on the culture surrounding Adderall abuse may be "[emo](#)" rap. This subgenre gets its nickname because the artists, like the emo punks before them, feel bad. But unlike their predecessors, who analyzed their feelings with painstaking detail, these rappers don't really care to analyze themselves; they feel bad, they don't know why, so they'll take drugs to fix it.

Some of the well-known artists at the forefront of this subgenre are: recently deceased rapper XXXTentacion (who unabashedly [rapped about Adderall](#) and Xanax or "xannys" in many of his songs); Lil Peep (who died of a reported overdose at the age of 21 and [was open about](#) his prescription drug use); Lil Xan (short for Xanax); Lil Uzi Vert; Yung

Lean; and \$uicide Boy\$.

But it's not just rap culture. Justin Bieber [has been open about](#) his (legal) Adderall use (it was prescribed for his ADHD), and Jessica Simpson was [reportedly abusing it](#) to lose weight at one point. Obviously, it's impossible to list every celebrity who uses prescription drugs (or sings about them), but it offers some insight as to why their use is on the rise. All of these people are experiencing immense pressure to "be the best" in their sphere, to the point that they're willing to do whatever it takes...including drugs. It speaks a lot about what our society values. And if the ones who actually *are* the best are feeling that pressure, then we can be sure that those who are just getting started (playing high school sports, being in high school band, singing at open mics, putting their first vlogs on YouTube, posting their photography on Instagram...) are feeling that pressure too. Are we teaching them that becoming the best is worth doing *anything* to get there?

—— Do stimulants actually help people work better?

This is really the crux of the situation. If these drugs do everything we believe they do, then maybe it's worth the risks? So are they the "wonder" study drug they've been made out to be?

Technically, no. There's no evidence showing that stimulants improve someone's ability to accomplish tasks. [The NIDA reports](#), "Other than promoting wakefulness, it is unclear that such medications actually provide much or any cognitive benefit, however, beyond the benefits they provide when taken as prescribed to those with ADHD."

What they do is help people to focus and to stay awake longer than they could otherwise. They also help people to feel better about themselves and their abilities. It's this increased focus and confidence that *indirectly* helps people to be more productive, but there are no direct cognitive improvements.

—— How do teens get them without a prescription?

[Over half of teens and young adults](#) say they get prescription stimulants from friends or family members. The other main way students acquire stimulants is by [getting their own prescriptions](#)—doing so is fairly easy. The students interviewed in *Take Your Pills* said that basically everyone who has an Adderall prescription also sells the pills on the side, sometimes through public groups on social media sites.

—— Anything else I should know about them?

We've referenced *Take Your Pills* a few times and do think it is helpful. However, [this YouTuber](#) has some problems with the documentary, and we think she makes some valid points. The film's overall depiction of prescription stimulants is pretty negative. This portrayal clouds the issue because some people really do need the medication to treat their [ADHD](#), and they will likely face pressure to sell their meds to those who don't have a medical condition. People with ADHD also might be reluctant to take their

meds because they feel embarrassed that they need them.

In fact, a lot of kids who have ADHD wish they didn't have to take medication because they don't like how it makes them feel. It's also common for them to feel like the reasons why they're taking medicine has more to do with *those around them* than it does with *them* (i.e., to help them be less of a burden on their parents and teachers).

So while it's important to resist the culture that surrounds prescription stimulant abuse, it's also crucial to understand the purpose stimulants serve for treating ADHD, as well as the stigma that surrounds that treatment.

— If my kids are on meds for ADHD, how can I help them?

Do make sure your kids have gotten a comprehensive evaluation of their condition and that their treatment doesn't rely on meds for a "quick fix." More holistically, even if your child has been diagnosed with ADHD, it might not be a bad idea to seek a second opinion or research for yourself if the original diagnosis is still accurate. You might also want to consider non-medication based solutions to their medical issues. On the other hand, **don't** take such a reactionary stance against prescription stimulants that you refuse to consider that your kids might actually need medication.

If your kids are on prescription stimulants, they will probably deal with shame over needing them, whether that comes from themselves or from people who think they shouldn't be on them. They might also feel that because they need the medicine to get their work done, the medicine is doing the work for them and that their accomplishments are not truly theirs.

If your kids are using their meds appropriately, there is no reason for them to feel this way. In the same way that a prosthetic limb helps people who otherwise would not be able to walk, stimulants help kids who would not otherwise be able to focus. But in either case, the people doing the activity are the ones responsible for it.

Let your kids know there is no shame in needing medication for any condition (see our [Parent's Guide to Shame-Free Parenting](#)). If they encounter people who think they shouldn't be on medication at all, teach them to politely explain (if appropriate) that meds are one way you as a family have decided to deal with your kids' ADHD. Because of the widespread abuse of prescription stimulants, it's understandable that some people think no one should ever take medicine for ADHD—but this is an overreaction. Encourage your children to be polite, but not to get discouraged or caught up in an argument.

Regardless, your child will probably face the pressure or temptation to sell their meds to other kids once their friends find out they have this type of medication. How your teens deal with this issue really has to do with how you advise them to handle peer pressure. Different reasons why kids [might give in to peer pressure include](#):

- Not having a group of good friends
- Fear of rejection, criticism, or being embarrassed
- Wanting to be popular or cool

- Curiosity or wanting to experiment

As with just about anything we talk about in our Parent Guides, one of the most important ways you can equip your kids to handle these pressures is by having strong relationships with them. Create open lines of communication. They need to know you love and support them and that you'll be calm no matter what they tell you. Have ongoing conversations with your kids about their ADHD. When applicable, share your own stories about how you've dealt with similar pressures, and remember that they are changing and developing at a rapid pace, so what worked for them last year may not work this year. Commit to being on the journey with them.

— How can I help my non-ADHD kids not feel like they need drugs to succeed?

First and foremost, your children need to know that you love them and are for them, no matter happens. Nothing else you say will matter if they don't know this. Secondly, they need to understand that their intrinsic worth is not based on performance, but is given to them by God. Our culture has bought the lie that some people are more valuable than others based on job title, salary, achievement, or success.

Your kids can avoid developing bad habits of dependency by practicing the good habits of [a healthy, balanced life](#). Do they have [good time management](#)? Do they know how to rest well and to work well? Good rest includes not only physical rest but also mental rest. Do your kids give themselves space for reflection? This is a lost art in our society, but it's extremely important for combating the mentality that says enough is never enough and that we have to always be striving to achieve more and more.

If people's commitments are so intense that they can't even meet their deadlines without taking a drug, it's fair to question whether their work/life balance...is way out of balance. They might need to cut some commitments out of their schedules, take a semester off or reduce their class load, or change their jobs. Resting well is not just ok—it's biblical! See our [Parent's Guide to Sabbath & Rest](#) for more thoughts on this.

Are you modeling any dependent behaviors, even if it's on food or sugar or caffeine or Facebook? Try to be aware if you are so you don't encourage that way of thinking in your kids. Instead, you want to teach and model healthy coping mechanisms.

You can help your kids enormously by not encouraging perfectionism. Two books we recommend pertaining to this topic are [Mindset: The New Psychology of Success](#) by Carol S. Dweck and [Unshamed: Healing Our Brokenness and Finding Freedom from Shame](#) by Heather Davis Nelson. (Bonus: For Enneagram fans, certain personality types will be more prone to perfectionism than others. Type Ones—aka “The Perfectionist”—will probably struggle the most, though Type Threes and Eights may also succumb due to their drives to achieve and succeed.)

[Educate them about the risks](#) of abusing prescription stimulants, including the fact that taking someone else's medication is illegal, dangerous, and could lead to a dependency on those drugs. Keep track of any stimulants you have in the house.

At Axis, we're all about helping people manage their screen time well. While not

conclusive, there is [some research indicating](#) that increased screen time could be linked to ADHD. If this connection is valid, it's just one more reason for us to put down our devices more often.

— What if I catch my kids abusing prescription stimulants?

If you've caught your kids abusing prescription stimulants, **it's essential that you remain calm and that the first thing you communicate is how much you love them.** Recognize that addictions, at their core, are heart issues. Yes, your kids might require other kinds of help, but there is something motivating them to feel like they need the drug to cope. As you talk with them about what happened, try to get to the heart of what need the drugs are meeting for them. If your kids have actually become addicted, seek professional help right away.

— Discussion Questions

If your kids have ADHD and are on prescription stimulants:

- Do you feel any shame or embarrassment about having ADHD and needing medication? Do you wish you could be off your medication?
- Has anyone ever said anything to you that made you feel bad about your ADHD? How did you handle that?
- Do you feel like the main reason you're on your medication is so that you won't be a burden to us or your teachers?
- Do you feel prepared to deal with anyone who wants to buy your meds from you or who thinks that you shouldn't be taking them? What would you do or say in those situations?
- Is there anything we can do to encourage or help you more?

If your kids don't have ADHD and don't have a prescription:

- Do you feel like we put a lot of pressure on you to perform highly in school, work, sports, etc.?
- Do you think it matters whether or not someone takes another person's prescription medication? Explain.
- Have you ever taken or thought about taking someone else's Adderall or other prescription stimulant?
- Do you know anyone who relies on prescription stimulants to cope with their lives? What do you think motivates them to use their meds that way?
- Do you feel equipped to deal with the pressures of school and work without taking any drugs to help you? How can we help you in this area?

— Conclusion

Helping your kids be wise about prescription stimulants involves understanding the nature of ADHD, as well as the values that drive people to abuse stimulants. But we all make decisions based on where our hearts are.

It's essential that you encourage your kids in their relationship with God and that your love for them is the driving force behind any strategy you take to help them. And never forget the importance of consistently bringing your children before God in prayer.

Related Axis Resources

To read before talking to your kids:

- [Parent's Guide to Teens & Opioids](#)
- [Parent's Guide to Marijuana](#)
- [Parent's Guide to Teens & Alcohol](#)
- [Parent's Guide to Tough Conversations](#)
- [Parent's Guide to Shame-Free Parenting](#)

To watch with your kids:

- [Drugs Conversation Kit](#)

Additional Resources

- [“9 things everyone should know about the drug Molly,”](#) CNN
- [“New Study Links Hyperfocus and ADHD,”](#) ADDitude
- [“How a child's breathing problem can be misdiagnosed as ADHD,”](#) The Laurinburg Exchange
- [“What is ice?”](#) Alcohol and Drug Foundation
- [“What is methamphetamine?”](#) National Institute on Drug Abuse
- [“Are you confused about ADD/ADHD?”](#) Loma Linda University Health News
- [“These Are the Drugs Influencing Pop Culture Now,”](#) Vulture
- [“Drowned in a Stream of Prescriptions,”](#) *The New York Times*

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