



Talk to Your Teen About Drugs—And Keep Talking

“Are you listening to me?” Sometimes it seems as if half of what parents say to teenagers skips off their consciousness like rocks skimmed across the surface of a lake. When discussing the subject of drugs, however, you’re liable to have an unusually attentive audience. The Partnership for a Drug-Free America’s annual “Partnership Attitude Tracking Study,” the largest survey on drug-related attitudes in the United States, sampled the opinions of approximately nine thousand youngsters aged nine to eighteen. Three-quarters of the fourth-graders said that they wanted more information about drugs from their parents.

Your words carry weight, too. According to the 1998 survey, the stronger and more frequent the antidrug messages at home, the less likely a child is to become a user. Only 26 percent of adolescents who said their parents had taught them “a lot” about the dangers of drugs had smoked marijuana. But among youngsters who claimed to have learned “a little” or “nothing” from their families, the rates of pot use were progressively higher: 33 percent and 45 percent, respectively. That pattern remained consistent for other drugs, too.

Overall, boys and girls whose parents ignored the issue were about two times as likely to use drugs than kids who learned “a lot” at home. A mere one in four teens felt that they were receiving adequate parental guidance. Clearly, more of us have to broach the subject with our youngsters, and on a regular basis. Here are ideas on what to say:

Tips For Talking To Your Child About Substance Use

Leave No Doubt As To Where You Stand

“You are not to use any drug, including tobacco or alcohol, under any circumstances.”

Then explain why:

- Because we love you.
- Because drugs are dangerous, and we don’t want to see you harm yourself.
- Because it is against the law.

As When Setting Any Limit, Clearly Spell Out Consequences For Defying The Rules:

What the punishment will be and how it will be implemented? Later, we suggest plans of action for parents who discover that their child is smoking, drinking and/or using illicit drugs.

Don’t Hesitate To Aim For The Emotional Jugular

Remind your teen that you would be deeply disappointed in his behavior if he were to disobey you on this matter. Research shows that when a child is deciding whether or not to indulge, a key consideration is, What will my parents think?

When Discussing The Dangers of Drugs, Emphasize The Immediate Consequences

“Parents have to keep in mind where their children are at developmentally,” notes Dr. Richard Heyman, a pediatrician from Cincinnati and former chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics’s Committee on Substance Abuse.

“Younger teens tend to think mainly in terms of today, tomorrow and the next day,” he explains. “It’s not until much later in adolescence that kids begin to contemplate how their actions could impact on their lives down the line.” They’re also still at a stage of thinking that they are invincible. Therefore, warnings that cigarette smokers are more than ten times as likely to die of lung cancer than nonsmokers are probably going to elicit little more than a shrug from a thirteen-year-old. Or a twenty-year-old, for that matter.

Instead, stress how smoking tobacco causes bad breath, hoarseness and a hacking cough; stains teeth yellow; impairs athletic performance; and in general makes other people not want to be around the smoker. In an American Cancer Society survey, eight in ten boys and seven in ten girls aged twelve to seventeen said they wouldn’t date someone who smoked.

Remind Your Teenager That Smoking, Drinking and Drugging Aren’t Just Harmful, They’re Expensive

A youngster with a pack-a-day cigarette habit sees close to a thousand dollars a year go up in smoke. Surely your son or daughter could find better ways to spend all that money, whether it’s buying CDs and clothing or saving up for a car and college.

Appeal To An Adolescent’s Natural Independent Streak By Praising His Determination To Avoid Using Drugs

“I admire the way you’ve stuck to your principles and refused to use drugs. It takes courage to not always go along with the crowd, and I’m proud of you.”

Explain To Your Child That Once People Start Using Drugs, They May Not Be Able To Stop

Addiction is poorly understood, by both substance abusers themselves and those who care about them. The young person with an addiction tells himself and everyone around him that he can quit whenever he wants. But with prolonged use, the addictive substance triggers long-lasting changes in the chemical composition of the brain. At that point professional treatment is required to cure him of his compulsive behavior. Even then, many tobacco users, alcoholics and drug abusers will relapse and revert to their old ways.

For more information, visit the American Academy of Pediatrics Julius B. Richmond Center Web site at www.richmondcenter.org, or the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Substance Abuse Web site at <http://www.aap.org/visit/cmte35.htm>.