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NEWSLETTER

Issue 41

Your kids and drugs

Talking to your child or teenager about drugs can be challenging. How do you bring up the topic? Will talking about drugs make your child want to experiment? What if your child asks you about your own experiences? Does your teen know more about drugs than you do?

Kids today are exposed to many conflicting messages about drugs. Movies and TV shows depict (and sometimes glamourize) drug use, while advertisements and school lectures warn of their negative effects. Your kids need to know how you feel about drugs and how you expect them to act if confronted with peer pressure to try them.

By talking to your children about drugs, you can guarantee the decisions they make are based on good, accurate information, and make sure they know they can come to you whenever they need help or advice.

Where do I start?

According to the Canadian Addiction Survey, the use of alcohol and cannabis (marijuana, hash and hash oil) in Canada has increased over the past 10 years. The most common users are youth between the ages of 15 and 24.

As a parent, these scary statistics may leave you wondering if you really can make a difference. But according to the experts, you can. Most teenagers who do not use alcohol, tobacco or drugs say their parents were a major factor in that decision. In fact, children who learn about the risks of taking drugs from their parents are less likely to try them.

Because most kids try tobacco, alcohol and cannabis before age 13, it is important to begin talking to your kids about these drugs by age 10. Experts agree an important key to preventing drug use is talking openly and honestly with your child, before they or their friends begin to experiment.

Sending a strong message that you disapprove of drugs and setting clear rules and consequences is also important—even for teenagers who may not seem to be listening to anything you say! Teenagers also need to know you are there to provide advice and help—such as a safe ride home—whenever they may need it.

Get the facts

Children, and especially teenagers, are exposed to information about drugs and alcohol everyday. It may seem like your child knows more than you. But do they really have the facts? Do you?

Before talking to your child or teenager about drugs, it is important that you have accurate and up-to-date information.

Trying to scare kids away from drugs by exaggerating the risks or by presenting one-sided information that contradicts what movies, TV, or even their friends, may be telling them will only make them skeptical and unlikely to listen.

Presenting unbiased information about the “good” and “bad” effects of drugs and alcohol—as well as the benefits of not using drugs—will help your children make good, informed decisions later on.

When discussing drugs and alcohol with a teenager, it is important to talk about short-term consequences—such as getting lower grades or being less attractive. Young people tend to be unimpressed by long-term dangers. Talking about how drugs can affect their lives right now will help you get their attention.

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Your kids and drugs (continued)

Talk to your kids

Young people use drugs for many reasons. For some it is a way to experiment and rebel. For others it is a way to fit into a certain group of friends. Still others use drugs to cope with stress and escape from problems at school or home.

By taking time each day—as little as 15 minutes—and talking to your children about their feelings, hopes, dreams and failures, you can help them find better ways to deal with stress, build up their self-esteem and guide them toward more positive activities and friendships. Establishing a close relationship now will make it easier for them to come to you when they have a problem later on.

And when your child or teenager comes to you with questions about drugs, or even to talk about their own or a friend's experiences with drugs, try not to lose your cool. Answer their questions honestly, and try not to be too judgmental.

Be prepared to answer questions about your own drug use as well. Your children may want to know how you dealt with peer pressure and drugs when you were their age. Be honest. They can learn from your mistakes as well as your successes.

Teenagers often find it difficult to ask questions because they don't want to seem "uncool" or unsophisticated, and this can leave them vulnerable to bad information and bad choices. Really listen to what they are saying, and try to give them good, balanced information and advice on drugs and how to deal with peer pressure.

If you don't feel that you can talk about drugs calmly with your child, ask for help. Your EAP counselor can give you advice, and put you in touch with local resources that can help you.

Be a positive force in your child's life

Young people are less likely to use drugs when they have caring adults involved in their lives. Learn about your child, their friends and their hobbies, and look for ways to share these interests. Volunteer to coach her soccer team, go to his band's performances, or just grab a burger together and talk.

By getting involved in the things your child or teenager is doing and praising their accomplishments, you are building her self-esteem and showing that you care. You will get to know your child better, and be able to tell sooner when they are upset and need help.

It is also important for you to remember that your child and teenager are looking to you to see how they should behave. By not using illegal drugs, using prescription drugs properly, and not abusing alcohol, you are sending your child a clear message about how you expect them to behave as well.

What to do if your child is using drugs

If you know or suspect your child is using drugs, try not to panic. Many of the signs that a teenager might be using drugs—such as moodiness, a change in behaviour or appearance, poor grades and a change in attitudes at home—could be the result of a number of different things including the normal confusion of being a teen.

Wait until you are calm and talk to your child in private at a time when you won't be interrupted. Don't confront your child when either one of you are drunk or "high."

If your child admits to using drugs, try to stay calm. Many teens try drugs out of curiosity and never do them again. Be honest about your feelings, but do not resort to threats, name calling or blaming. Try to explain your specific concerns, and feel free to set clear rules about drugs and alcohol. Knowing their parents strongly disapprove of drugs may just give your child the excuse she needs to say no to peer pressure to try them.

If your teenager comes home drunk or stoned, don't shout, accuse or hurt them in any way. Talk to them and find out what they have taken. Tell them you will "talk about it in the morning," and send them to bed. Check on them during the night, and call a doctor if they become seriously ill.

And remember, you are not alone and can always ask for outside help. Your doctor, EAP counselor or local addiction specialist can help you find the information and resources you need to evaluate the situation and get appropriate help.

Web sites about drugs and alcohol

- Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission: <http://parent.aadac.com>
- Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse: <http://www.ccsa.ca>
- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health: <http://www.camh.net>
(24-hour drug information line: 1-800-463-6273.)
- Dance Safe: <http://www.dancesafe.org>
(The good, bad and the ugly on recreational drugs.)

Family Services offers confidential professional assistance on a wide variety of personal and work-related issues. For more information on your EAP, call :

1-800-668-9920