

Tips for Parents

Talking to your teen for the first time about underage drinking?

Ask open-ended questions and then listen. Resist the temptation to dominate the conversation.

“What’s on your mind?”

“I’ve been thinking lately that I’ve never actually told you that I don’t want you using alcohol or any other drugs. The rule in our house is that minors do not drink alcohol. What do you think about that?”

“Teens today are using drugs at younger and younger ages; I hope you know how I feel about that. I don’t want you drinking. Do you understand why?”

“I’m always going to stand by you, love and guide you, but I do not want you drinking alcohol. I don’t want you making the wrong choice and then having to pay serious consequences for bad decisions at such a young age.”

Be a Good Role Model for Teens

Be a role model of the person you want your kid to be. What stronger anti-drug message is there?

Keep these tips in mind:

- Be a living, day-to-day example of your value system. Show the compassion, honesty, generosity and openness you want your child to have.
- Know that there is no such thing as “do as I say, not as I do” when it comes to drugs. If you take drugs, you can’t expect your child to take your advice. Seek professional help if necessary.
- Examine your own behavior. If you abuse drugs or alcohol, your kids are going to pick up on it. Or if you laugh at a drunk or stoned person in a movie, you may be sending the wrong message to your child. Be the person you want your kid to be. What stronger anti-drug message is there?

Source: The National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign’s Behavior Change Expert Panel

Promote Positive Behavior

What encourages a kid more than his or her parents' approval? The right word at the right time can strengthen the bond that helps keep your child away from drugs. Emphasize the things your kid does right and restrain the urge to be critical.

Try to:

- Reward good behavior consistently and immediately. Expressions of love, appreciation and thanks go a long way. Even kids who think themselves too old for hugs will appreciate a pat on the back or a special treat.
- Accentuate the positive. Emphasize the things your kid does right. Rein in the urge to be critical. Affection and respect that make your teen feel good about himself will reinforce good (and change bad) behavior far more successfully than embarrassment or uneasiness.

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Be Honest with Your Teen

The most effective deterrent to drug use isn't the police, or prisons, or politicians – it's you. Kids who learn about the risks of drug use from their parents are 36 percent less likely to smoke marijuana than kids who learn nothing from them. If you talk to your kids about the dangers of drug use, they are also 50 percent less likely to use inhalants, and 56 percent less likely to use LSD – just because you took the time to talk to them. Research has also shown that kids want to hear what their parents have to say – in fact, 74 percent of fourth graders wish their parents would talk to them about drugs.

Your teen asks you the question you've feared – did you ever do drugs? You want to be honest because you love and respect them, but, unless the answer is an unqualified "no," it's a difficult question. Regardless of your own history with drugs, it's your responsibility to set limits for your teen and to tell them, "In this family drug use is not acceptable." What's important is that you listen to your children and what they're asking – even if it's upsetting – try to avoid an argument.

If you have done drugs in the past, you can tell the truth without appearing to be a hypocrite because, at one time in their lives, everyone has done something they wish they hadn't. Remember – the issue isn't your past; it's your children's future. The key is to look at this as an opportunity – your children have come to you to discuss something that's troubling them. Listen to what they are saying. What's important is to state firmly that you don't want them to do anything that's bad for them – especially smoking, drinking and drugs.

When you are ready to talk, Dr. Tony Biglan, Ph.D., says, “You don’t need to go into detail.” You can just give a short, honest answer like these:

- “When I was a kid I took drugs because some of my friends did. I thought I needed to in order to fit in.
- We didn’t know as much as we do now about all the bad things that can happen when you smoke marijuana or use other drugs. If I’d known then about the consequences, I never would have tried drugs, and I’ll do everything I can to help you keep away from them.”
- “Everybody makes mistakes. When I used drugs, I made a big one. I’m telling you about this, even though it’s embarrassing, because I love you and I want to save you from making the same stupid decision I made when I was your age.”
- “I drank alcohol and smoked marijuana because I was bored and wanted to take some risks, but I soon found out that I couldn’t control the risks — the loss of trust of my parents and friends. There are much better ways of challenging yourself than doing drugs.”

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Monitor Your Child

Know where your teen is and what he or she will be doing during unsupervised time. Research shows that teens with unsupervised time are three times more likely to use marijuana or other drugs. Unsupervised teens are also more likely to engage in risky behaviors such as underage drinking, sexual activity, and cigarette smoking than other teens.