

Alcohol and drugs: What can I do?

Tips for parents?

Talk to your child and really listen to them

This is the key to building understanding and trust in your family. The more you know about your teenager's life and their concerns, the easier it will be for you to pick up a problem before it gets too big. Get to know all that you can about your children. By showing interest, and being genuine about it, shows them that you love them. By not asking them about their lives and what they do, you are showing them that they are not important to you.

When you go to talk to your child about drugs – choose a good time

Don't react on the spur of the moment or when you and your teenager are not at your best. If you suspect or find your teenager has been drinking or using other drugs give yourself time to calm down and think through what is happening if you are upset. Strong reactions due to fear are natural but are not necessarily going to help the situation. There is a very real danger that a big argument may put you in a situation where you say things you don't mean and may harm your relationship with your child.

Keep informed

This will help you answer questions that your teenager may ask. It will also help you work out your own views about drugs well before you have to discuss the issues with them. Don't rely on friends or the media to get information and if you have to use these sources, be critical of what you see, read or hear. There are a range of websites that contain useful information but once again, choose carefully and make sure you look for sites that contain balanced information.

Set a good example

Keep your own use of alcohol, medicines and other drugs within safe and sensible limits. Young people learn most about the world by watching those around them. Overuse of prescription medicines, over-the-counter medications or alcohol sends a very strong message to young people about your attitude towards drugs. One thing that many teenagers cannot tolerate is hypocrisy. Telling children you have strong anti-drug feelings and then using large amounts of painkillers or drinking to excess does not make sense to young people. Try not to make alcohol an automatic inclusion every time you get together with friends – let your teenagers know that it's possible to have fun without alcohol.

Don't panic

If you discover that your child has used, or is currently drinking alcohol, don't over react. Although things can go wrong, the vast majority of teenagers make it through this phase unscathed. Express your concern and reinforce the rules you have set.

Be honest about drug use

The truth about drug use is scary enough without trying to frighten your child with tales of death and destruction that may not match their own experience. The one thing that you need to try and maintain is your credibility when it comes to issues such as alcohol and other drugs. A sure-fire way of losing that is by telling tall-tales or perpetuating myths about drug use. Stick to the facts, acknowledging why some young people may use alcohol and other drugs, and then challenge this with the negative consequences. A balanced approach is much more effective and realistic.

Negotiate some rules about acceptable behaviour

Think back to when you were a teenager and how you felt about rules. Remember that as your child grows up, many rules need to be reviewed regularly and sometimes relaxed bit by bit. Your teenager is on the way to becoming an adult and needs some freedom to gain the experiences that help them cope with the adult world. However, it is also important to remember that teenagers want and need limits and boundaries, so let them know what your expectations are regarding acceptable behaviour.

Be willing to say no to your children

Young people who get everything they want don't usually turn out to be very happy children. Teenagers learn discipline, self-control and how to delay self-gratification when they are told no by their parents. It may be hard, particularly if you have a number of children and you've been through the 'teen stage' a number of times before, but saying no, meaning it and carrying it through will help you to have a happy, healthy and cooperative family.

Illicit drugs are rarely the biggest problem

While there is a lot of concern about illegal drugs, the most harm and the greatest risk to young people comes from using legal drugs such as tobacco, medicines and of course, alcohol. However, young people want to experiment with new things and test limits, so it is not surprising that some of them may try illegal drugs. Fortunately, of those who try, few will go on using drugs regularly and only a small number will develop serious problems.

Tell your children that they're great... at every opportunity

It is very rare that we talk about the great things our young people do. Even though we usually let them know when they are not doing the right thing, it is also very important to let them know how great they are the rest of the time. It is particularly important to tell them this when they're not at their best. Make it a point to tell them specifically what you think is great about them. This will be more meaningful and effective for them than more generalized praise.