

Weller Health Tip for Parents: Talking to Your Child About Drugs

Just as you inoculate your kids against illnesses like measles, you can help “immunize” them against drug use by giving them the facts before they’re in a risky situation.

When kids don’t feel comfortable talking to parents, they’re likely to seek answers elsewhere, even if their sources are unreliable. Kids who aren’t properly informed are at greater risk of engaging in unsafe behaviors and experimenting with drugs.

Preschool to Age 7

Before you get nervous about talking to young kids, take heart. You’ve probably already laid the groundwork for a discussion. For instance, whenever you give a fever medication or an antibiotic to your child, you have the opportunity to discuss the benefits and the appropriate and responsible use of those drugs. This is also a time when your child is likely to be very attentive to your behavior and guidance.

Start taking advantage of “teachable moments” now. If you see a character on a billboard or on TV with a cigarette, talk about smoking, nicotine addiction, and what smoking does to a person’s body. This can lead into a discussion about other drugs and how they can potentially cause harm.

Keep the tone of these discussions calm and use terms that your child can understand. Be specific about the effects of the drugs: how they make a person feel, the risk of overdose, and the other long-term damage they can cause. To give your kids these facts, you might have to do a little research.

Ages 8 to 12

As your kids grow older, you can begin conversations with them by asking them what they think about drugs. By asking the questions in a nonjudgmental, open-ended way, you’re more likely to get an honest response.

Kids this age usually are still willing to talk openly to their parents about touchy subjects. Establishing a dialogue now helps keep the door open as kids get older and are less inclined to share their thoughts and feelings.

Even if your question doesn’t immediately result in a discussion, you’ll get your kids thinking about the issue. If you show your kids that you’re willing to discuss the topic and hear what they have to say, they might be more willing to come to you for help in the future.

News, such as steroid use in professional sports, can be springboards for casual conversations about current events. Use these discussions to give your kids information about the risks of drugs.

Ages 13 to 17

Kids this age are likely to know other kids who use alcohol or drugs, and to have friends who drive. Many are still willing to express their thoughts or concerns with parents about it.

Use these conversations not only to understand your child’s thoughts and feelings, but also to talk about the dangers of driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Talk about the legal issues — jail time and fines — and the possibility that they or someone else might be killed or seriously injured.

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Consider establishing a written or verbal contract on the rules about going out or using the car. You can promise to pick your kids up at any time (even 2:00 AM!) no questions asked if they call you when the person responsible for driving has been drinking or using drugs.

The contract also can detail other situations: For example, if you find out that someone drank or used drugs in your car while your son or daughter was behind the wheel, you may want to suspend driving privileges for 6 months. By discussing all of this with your kids from the start, you eliminate surprises and make your expectations clear.

Laying Good Groundwork

No parent, child, or family is immune to the effects of drugs. Some of the best kids can end up in trouble, even when they have made an effort to avoid it and even when they have been given the proper guidance from their parents.

However, certain groups of kids may be more likely to use drugs than others. Kids who have friends who use drugs are likely to try drugs themselves. Those feeling socially isolated for whatever reason may turn to drugs.

So it's important to know your child's friends — and their parents. Be involved in your children's lives. If your child's school runs an anti-drug program, get involved. You might learn something! Pay attention to how your kids are feeling and let them know that you're available and willing to listen in a nonjudgmental way. Recognize when your kids are going through difficult times so that you can provide the support they need or seek additional care if it's needed.

A warm, open family environment — where kids are encouraged to talk about their feelings, where their achievements are praised, and where their self-esteem is bolstered — encourages kids to come forward with their questions and concerns. When censored in their own homes, kids go elsewhere to find support and answers to their most important questions.

This information was provided by the Weller Health Education Center. For more medically reviewed health information written for parents, kids and teens, please visit www.wellercenter.org.

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