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## Whose kids? Our kids!

# Teens and drugs

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**M**any teens who use drugs started doing so before they entered high school. While drug use at any age is dangerous, there's no denying that early first use of drugs puts young people at greater risk for drug dependency later in life.

### Parents make a difference!

**W**hen did you last talk with your teen about drug use? Like other serious subjects, it's often easier to avoid the topic. Yet we know that youth whose parents have had meaningful discussions with them about the risks of drugs are less likely to use drugs. Telling yourself that your child could never become involved with drugs, being afraid of "planting" the idea to use drugs in your child's head, or not feeling comfortable talking about it are all excuses that leave your child vulnerable.

Make your position clear—drug use will not be tolerated. Be sure the message you send is straightforward so your child will know exactly what is expected. Here are some examples of the types of statements you might make:

- ✓ "In our family we don't allow the use of drugs of any kind, including alcohol and tobacco."
- ✓ "Because I love you, I do not want you to use alcohol, marijuana or any other illegal drugs. You have too much going for you."

Make it clear the rule remains the same at all times whether your child is at home, at a friend's home, or anywhere else. Establishing the idea that you, as a caring parent, do not want your child to use drugs provides strong motivation for teens to refuse drug offers.

Establishing a clear no-use rule is only half the job; you must also be prepared to enforce consequences if the rule is broken. Decide with your teen the negative consequences of breaking the rule as well as the positive consequences for following it. Consequences related to social opportunities, driving privileges, telephone time and work responsibilities are often effective.

sometimes difficult..." Avoid responding with, "You should..." or "If I were you..." or "When I was your age..." Teens often hear these responses as the beginning of an unwanted lecture.

- ✓ Give lots of praise. Emphasize what your teen is doing right instead of focusing on things that are wrong. When parents are quicker to praise

"Sure, I'd talk with my parents about drugs—that is, if they ever asked me. I figure they're basically afraid to bring up the subject—probably think I'll go out and get high. Plus, I probably know more about drugs than they do, so what's the point?" —8th grader

### Consider these additional hints for improving communication with your teen to help prevent drug use:

- ✓ When talking with your teen, listen more than talk. Pay attention to what your child says. If he or she says something that upsets you, don't allow your anger to end the discussion. If necessary, take a 5-minute break before continuing. Notice what your child is not saying. If your child does not tell you about problems, take the initiative and ask questions about what is going on at school or in other activities.
  - ✓ Remember not to interrupt and do reserve judgment until your child has finished and asked for a response. When responding, you might say, "I am very concerned about..." or "I understand that it is
- than to criticize, kids learn to feel good about themselves and develop the confidence to trust their own judgment. They are also more likely to feel comfortable talking with you.
- ✓ Model healthy behavior. Children learn by example as well as teaching. Make sure your own actions reflect the standards you expect of your teen.
  - ✓ If your child tells you something you don't want to hear, don't ignore the statement. Ignoring it says "See, you don't care; even when I say this, you ignore it."
  - ✓ Make sure you understand what your child says. Repeat things back to your child to confirm you understand their meaning.

## Know the facts

While you may know little about illegal drugs, many youth are inherently curious about them and will seek information. Since unreliable sources abound, it's important parents have some basic knowledge to share with their teens. In addition to being well-informed, you will be better able to recognize if a child has symptoms of a drug problem. For free information on drugs, call the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information at 1-800-729-6686.

## Counteracting peer pressure

Wanting to fit in and belong is one of the most natural parts of growing up. In the early teens, peer pressure is strongest and teens are most vulnerable to influence from their friends. How can you help safeguard your child against peer pressure to use drugs?

One way is by showing your child how to say no to drugs without "losing face." And let's admit it, a teen that knows

how to refuse is much more likely to reject drugs than one who is caught off guard.

Here are some suggestions you can offer your teen about how to refuse:

- ✓ "What? Are you talking to me? You know I don't do drugs."
- ✓ "My parents would ground me forever. I can't risk that."
- ✓ "I've got a big game tomorrow and want to play my best, so no thanks."
- ✓ "No, I've read that those drugs give you bad breath and can make you throw up—that's not my idea of fun."
- ✓ "No way man—that's illegal and could give me a permanent record."
- ✓ "Hey, that's not my style; I like to be in control of what's happening."

Practice these and other ways to say no with your teen. Teach your child to recognize problem situations, such as being at a house where no adults are present or outside school where smokers gather. The younger your child, the more practice that is needed. Don't rely on just one practice session to protect your teen in all situations.

**"I don't think my parents understand just how hard it is to say no. I've been at parties with my friends and a joint is passed around—I know what I'm supposed to say, but I can't get it out! It's embarrassing and I feel pressured."**

—8th grader

## How to help prevent drug use

- ✓ Limit your teen's unsupervised hours at home. Especially important are the hours from 3 to 6 p.m. when adults may be at work and kids may be home alone.
- ✓ Encourage your teen to become involved in a local drug prevention program.
- ✓ Support your teen's involvement in extracurricular school activities, church groups and community service. The busier your teen is, the less likely he or she will be bored and tempted to use drugs.
- ✓ Volunteer with your teen, even if only for a few hours a month.
- ✓ Cooperate with other parents to make sure that parties and social events for teens are drug-free.
- ✓ Talk with your teen about the future. Discuss your teen's ambitions and develop a plan about how to achieve them.
- ✓ Stay informed about the effects of drugs and share the information with your teen. It's far better for youth to obtain reliable drug information from their parents than from peers or on the street.
- ✓ Make family time a priority. Teens with families who get together around the dinner table, in church, and at play are less likely to use drugs.

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