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Whose kids? Our kids!

When a parent has used drugs

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For parents who have used drugs in the past, talking with their children about not using drugs can be a sensitive and difficult topic. If your child asks whether you have used drugs, it is important to acknowledge that many people who were young adults back when you were growing up did try marijuana or other drugs. It's also important to mention that when you were growing up, people didn't know the harmful effects of these drugs and that the risks of using drugs are now more severe.

If your child presses you to answer about past drug use, think carefully about your answer. Being dishonest with your child is not recommended;

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honest and open communication is important for a trusting parent-child relationship. Yet, as a parent, you may lose credibility and authority if you admit to every aspect of your past drug use.

If this situation arises, consider the age and maturity level of your child. Younger and less mature children may not be able to process the details; instead, it may be best to talk about drug use in general and ask your child's opinion. If your child is older and more mature, this is a valuable opportunity to have a healthy discussion about drug use and its risks and potential consequences. Never glorify or glamorize past drug use.

Talking with your child about past drug use

The following conversation provides an example of responses you may find helpful when talking with your child. (Source: Center for Substance Abuse Prevention)

Child: I learned about drugs today. The teacher said that lots of people your age used to do drugs. Did you? (You have many opportunities here. Your child, in asking this question, is providing a chance for you to develop your listening skills in addition to answering his/her question, so try not to react too quickly. It's understandable that a question about your own drug history would make you uncomfortable, but see what might be possible here.)

Parent: Wow, you're learning about drugs already? What are they teaching you?

Child: Well, just about drugs and alcohol, and the teacher said a lot of people your age used drugs when they were young.

Parent: Well, I'm not sure what your teacher meant to say, but I can tell you what I know about those times. Would you like me to? (Here you offer a choice, because some kids might prefer to keep their knowledge general and not specific to their parent. Others will forge on.)

Child: Sure.

Parent: Well, many people my age, who were young adults back then, tried marijuana. We mostly called it pot. But we didn't know as much about it as we do now. It was the same with cigarettes. We didn't think smoking was very harmful either. So do you still want to know if I smoked marijuana? Think about your answer. How will you feel if I say yes?

Child: I don't know. You always say it's important to be honest, but I'm not sure what I'll think about you. If you say no, you'll just be a regular parent. If you say yes, I don't know, that would be kind of weird.

Parent: You're exactly right. That's why I wanted you to think about it. But remember, whatever you decide is okay, and whatever my answer is, we can talk more about it. (Many opportunities have opened between you and your child even prior to your answering the original question. That's more than half the battle in helping kids resist drugs and alcohol. A strong parental connection, even if sometimes a rocky one, always helps the child.)

Child: Are you just trying not to tell me?

Parent: No, I'm trying to be thoughtful about how I answer you so I'll know more about what you think about my drug use.

Child: So you did?

Parent: Yes, I tried it. A couple of times because friends of mine were doing it. And then I stopped because I decided it just wasn't a good thing to do. (It's important to make a distinction between past adolescent or young adult use/experimentation and current adult usage. You should not divulge current use unless directly confronted by the child. You should seek help for yourself and the child in dealing with this situation.)

Parent: So what do you think?

Child: About what?

Parent: About my saying I used it but then stopped.

Child: Oh, it's okay. I don't know.

Parent: Are you wondering if I would give you permission or think it's okay to use drugs because I tried them?

Child: Well if you tried them, what's the big deal?

Parent: Well, whether or not I used is not the main issue here. The main issue is you. I definitely do not want you to use alcohol, marijuana or any other illegal drugs. I'm not going to give you a lecture but I want you to think about this: you—plain and simple—don't need drugs. You have too much going for you. Drugs don't really help anything. They don't solve problems. They won't make you popular. They won't help you grow up. And they surely won't help you build a strong body and mind. In fact, just the opposite can happen. Now go ahead and get ready for soccer practice —that's something that makes you feel good about yourself.

(Obviously this conversation could go a number of ways. But the point is to really listen. Make it clear that you value this young person and believe that he or she has the right to talk with you about anything and that you do not want him or her to use drugs.)

Most importantly: 1) listen; 2) slow down the dialogue; and 3) obtain feedback between each segment.

Be sure to make a distinction between your past drug use as a young adult and the fact that you do not use drugs as an adult. If you do currently use drugs, do not divulge this unless directly confronted by the child. In such a case, you may want to seek help for yourself and the child in dealing with this situation.

Make it clear that you value this young person and believe that he or she has the right to talk with you about anything.

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