

Keeping your Kids safe from Drugs

This is an outline to the key steps that parents and carers can take to help keep kids safe from drugs as they grow up.

Why do kids start (and continue) using drugs and other intoxicants? What steps can I take to protect my children against the dangers of substance abuse?

When it comes to teen drug abuse, some parents seem to have their heads in the sand. Others simply prefer to avoid talking about the issue.

This is unfortunate, since ignorance and denial only increase the dangers associated with this problem.

The fact of the matter is that no child is immune from the drug epidemic and your kids WILL come into contact with this culture. It spreads without regard to economic, racial, geographic, educational, religious or family boundaries. Even in households that are closely knit and hold strong values there are no guarantees that substance abuse won't affect one or more of the kids. Parents have no choice except to educate themselves about this issue and take an aggressive, pro-active approach to preventing drug abuse in their homes.

There are several reasons kids start using drugs. Parental attitudes toward tobacco, alcohol and other substances can be a major factor - after all, children learn what they live and imitate what they see at home.

Then there's the attractiveness of drugs as they're perceived and presented in popular culture, as well as the pleasurable "high" they provide. Other key influences include peer pressure, simple curiosity, rebelliousness, a desire for thrills, and a perceived need to escape from the painful realities of life.

How can you minimise the risk that your children will be drawn into this destructive mode of behaviour? We have a number of suggestions:

1. First and most importantly, make a determined effort to build a strong family. Create a home environment based around a corporate identity and shared attitudes that are resistant to drug use. Get involved in your children's lives. Take an interest in the things they like to do. Share meals together as frequently as possible. A strong feeling of belonging to a loving family builds accountability and helps prevent loneliness, which can be a set-up for drug experimentation.
2. Next, model the behaviour you want your children to follow. Think carefully about the role of alcohol, smoking and drugs (including prescription medications) in your own life. Remember that the smoking, drinking and other drug-related behaviours of parents will usually be duplicated by their children.

3. Begin talking early about smoking, alcohol and drugs, and *keep* talking about them as opportunities arise. Find out what they know about drugs. Be aware of current trends in your community. If you hear that a group of kids are smoking, drinking, inhaling or injecting drugs, discuss it as a family. Most importantly, make sure that you have the time and energy to carry on these conversations. If you're too overworked, overcommitted or overtired to keep tabs on the home front, you may wake up one day to find a major drug problem on your doorstep.
4. Meanwhile, don't hesitate to do everything you can to protect your children from direct contact with drug use. If your adolescent has a long-time friend who has become involved in the drug culture, have the courage to impose limits on that relationship. Don't allow a teen to go to a party, sleepover or other activity that isn't supervised by someone you trust. Keep track of the influences to which your kids are being subjected on a day-to-day basis.
5. Finally, create significant consequences to discourage alcohol and drug use. If your adolescent confesses that she tried a cigarette or a beer at a party and seems genuinely remorseful about it, a heart-to-heart conversation and encouragement would be far more appropriate than grounding her for six months. But if your warnings repeatedly go unheeded, you will need to establish and enforce some meaningful penalties - for example, loss of driving, dating or even phone privileges for an extended period of time.

Keeping your kids safe - what the law says

Some children and teenagers will drink alcohol or take drugs. But whether this is at home with their family, or with friends at a party, it's a parent's responsibility to make sure they:

- are safe
- are aware of the risks
- know when enough is enough.

It's **against** the law:

- for under 18-year olds to buy alcohol or ask anyone else to buy them alcohol
- to give a child alcohol if they are under 5 years old.

It's **legal**:

- for over 18s to buy 16-year olds beer, wine or cider if they're having a meal together in licensed premises, like a pub
- for a child aged 5 to 17 to drink alcohol at home or other private premises.