



How to talk to your teenager about drugs and alcohol



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You are the most important adult in your teenagers life. In a non-stop world of media saturation, with it's many toxic social influences, a teenager's connections to family members and other caring adults is more important than ever. This is especially true when it comes to talking about drugs and alcohol.

Balancing warmth and understanding with clear expectations and discipline is a tightrope that all parents of teenagers walk. Knowing when to back-off and when to step-in is often difficult. Indeed, that decision depends on circumstances and the unique dynamics of your family. Here are some general principles, tips, and ideas garnered from experience.

Don't Panic! If your teen has used drugs or alcohol, don't over-react. Initial harsh punishments and anger are often counterproductive. Take a deep breath, count to ten, and rationally address the situation. Understand that many teens who experiment with drugs and alcohol do not go on to develop problems.

Initiate the conversation: If you are waiting for your teen to bring up the issue, you may wait a long time. Just because it isn't a topic of conversation doesn't mean it isn't an issue. Be prepared to talk about it whenever the topic arises. There is no right time or place. Some ideas about how to start the conversation include:

Talk directly and clearly about family rules and expectations around drinking and drug use. For example, "We expect you to wait until _____ before you drink" or "I do not allow drugs in our house". Ask about their reactions to your expectations.

Talk about drug or alcohol use you see in media such as advertising, movies or newspaper articles.

Be alert for openings when discussing friends and specifically talk about social events. For example, "Do you think there will be alcohol and drugs at the party?", "If your ride is drinking or using, call me so I can give you a ride home", "Was there drinking or using at the party last night?" if so "What was that like for you?".


Listen: Once you get your child talking, listen to them. Resist the temptation to make suggestions, lecture, or interrogate. Instead, take an actively curious stance. This is difficult to emphasize enough. Kids have plenty of adults who will tell them what to do, they appreciate and rely on adults who will listen to and understand them.

Avoid Moral Judgment: Teens are acutely aware of others judgmental attitudes towards them. Threats, scare tactics, and sarcasm are not helpful. Harsh language shuts teens down and in some cases they will actually do the opposite of what they are told.


Encourage Autonomy: Emphasize personal choice and control. You will not be with the teen when they decide to use or not use drugs and alcohol. So, help them work out for themselves how they will handle these situations. Be prepared for them to make plans you do not fully agree with. As hard as it is to accept, you can not control what the teen does in regards to their drug and alcohol use. Likewise, friends, peer pressure, and other influences do not excuse a teen from their responsibility.

Be a good example: Be aware of how your own drug or alcohol use may influence your child. If you have been drinking, do not drive.





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Establish a clear family position: Families have different values and expectations. Make sure everyone in your family is on the same page ahead of time. Have a conversation between adults in the family to ensure you agree on rules and expectations. Clearly communicate your family's values around drug and alcohol use to your children. Your teen may not always follow your rules, or agree with them, however it is important they know them.

Repeat yourself. One conversation is not enough. Have ongoing talks about drugs and alcohol, repeat rules and expectations so they are understood.

If you are having or suspect ongoing issues with drugs and alcohol with your teenager:

Get professional help: When one member of the family is having a problem with drugs and alcohol it impacts the whole family. Find a counselor or treatment program that has experience with teens and families. A counselor specializing in drug and alcohol problems can help you determine the extent of the problem and help you respond in a positive way.

Seek Support: Talk to family, other parents, friends, and teachers. Take care of yourself so you can cope with stress and not feel overwhelmed. Just because your family member is on an emotional rollercoaster, doesn't mean you have to be. Be sure to continue family traditions and celebrations.

Don't give up: Hang in there with your teenager. Drug and alcohol problems can last for a long time and there are no quick fixes. There will be times when they are doing well, and times when they slip back into old ways.

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