

How to Talk to Your Teen About Substance Use

Research shows that clear rules help keep kids safe

EN ESPAÑOL

By Rae Jacobson, Child Mind Institute

Adolescence is a tricky time. Teenagers are just beginning to establish their identities and this often means testing the limits of parental controls. When it comes to drugs and alcohol, pushing the boundaries can lead to dangerous territory.

Setting clear rules about substance use helps give teens the structure they need to stay safe. Let's be realistic: You can't guarantee that your rules won't be broken. But research shows that kids who have clear rules are less likely to get into serious trouble than kids who don't. Even when the rules are broken, teens whose parents have clearly outlined what is and isn't acceptable are less likely to run to extremes and more likely to make safer choices.

So you need to have the talk, but for a lot of parents initiating a potentially difficult conversation is daunting. A few guidelines can help get the ball rolling and make for a smoother, more productive experience for all.

Plan to have the talk

Springing a serious conversation on your teenager can make her feel ambushed and defensive. Give her a heads up before hand and make sure to be clear about what the conversation will entail, so everyone can be on the same page. "Tomorrow night let's have a talk about drinking and drugs. You're not in trouble. I just want to talk about where we stand and hear any concerns you might be having."

Related: [Tips for Communicating With Your Teen](#)

Spell out the rules

Clearly spell out your rules and the specific consequences of breaking them. Avoiding ambiguity lets your teenager know where you stand, and research shows that kids tend to be safer when parents set limits. And for kids who are being pressured to do something they aren't comfortable with, it can make it easier for them if they know they can use their parents as an excuse for saying no.

Explain your reasons

Be very clear about your reasons for prohibiting substance use. Teenagers are often ordered to do things without being given a clear reason why and by explaining yourself you're inviting them to have a more open, adult conversation.

The potential consequences of drinking and using drugs are real. Any kind of experimentation is illegal when you're a teenager, and it's dangerous.

Be honest and rational. Obviously, some illegal substances are more dangerous than others. Heroin is more perilous than pot. But any substance can be harmful: one beer is intoxicating but 10 beers could be deadly.

And any substance use impairs judgment and kids are more likely to find themselves in problematic and potentially dangerous situations like driving drunk or having unwanted or risky sexual encounters. It can affect them in school, too. If they get caught it could go on their record—something they won't want when they're applying to colleges—and if they play sports they could be cut from the team.

Related: [Teaching Your Teen About Binge Drinking](#)

Obey the golden rule

Speak to your kids the way you'd like to be spoken to. Teenagers are acutely sensitive to condescension, and it's important to remember that at the end of the day they are the ones who will make the final decisions. Treat them like the adults you want them to become. By showing respect you're modeling good behavior and letting them know you expect them to act responsibly, not just for your sake, but for their own as well.

Let them speak

Give kids a chance to express their concerns and feelings. They may have been hoping for a chance to ask questions or check in about something troubling. Opening an equal, active dialogue will increase the chances that your teen will feel comfortable being honest with you in the future.

The 'I learned it from you, Dad,' dilemma

Parents sometimes feel hypocritical hiding their own experiences. If your daughter asks if you've ever tried drugs, you can choose to keep your experiences private (not everything in your history needs to be available to your kids) or to share them, but don't reminisce or otherwise glamorize your experiences. You can also explain that as a parent, it's your job to help them avoid things they will regret, and substance use definitely increases the chances of doing something you will regret.

Related: [Talking to Kids About Alcohol and Drugs](#)

Conditional amnesty

What we want, first and foremost, is for kids to be safe. Being open and honest with your kids about drugs encourages them to reciprocate. One way to create safeguards for your teen is to have an "amnesty policy."

In an amnesty situation, your child can call and ask for help without incurring the regular repercussions she might if she'd tried to hide her behavior. Amnesty policies keep kids safe and encourage them to make appropriate choices without letting them off the hook.

For example: If your daughter (or her designated driver) is drunk at a party and she wants to leave, she can call you and ask for a ride or cab fare instead of putting herself at risk. She'd then be allowed to come home and go to bed without yelling or grounding. In the morning you and she could have a talk about her drinking and safety.

An ongoing conversation

Talking to your teen about substance abuse should be a process, not a single event. Risk factors for substance use can change and multiply as teenagers weather the trials and pressures of adolescence. Keep an eye out for changes in your child's mood and demeanor, shifting peer groups, and other signs that it might be time to check in about their safety and your expectations.

Make sure they know your conversation is an open-ended one, and that it's two-way street — "I'm going to be checking in with you about this sometimes, and if you have any questions or concerns you can always ask me, too." Keeping the lines of communication open will help you and your teenager feel engaged and safe during a potentially turbulent time.