

# Talking with Your Teen About Drugs and Alcohol

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Talking with your kids about drugs and alcohol can be difficult. It is a highly sensitive topic, but the possible consequences of drinking and taking drugs are far too dire to ignore. So even though you might stumble and falter, the stakes are too high for you to remain silent.

Communicating your beliefs and values about drugs and alcohol gives your children a set of guidelines and limits to help them make healthy decisions. One "big talk" (like the "birds and bees" lecture) is not the route to follow; you can find many opportunities to introduce your opinions, beliefs, and questions. TV shows, news reports, movies, and newspaper stories are good starting points for a conversation.

Discussions about these issues should begin in early childhood, long before the teenage years. Adolescence is actually the worst time to begin talking to kids about drugs and alcohol; teens are the most likely to reject their parent's advice and to be influenced by their peers. In spite of this, it's never too late to begin the dialogue.

## **Why do they do it?**

Why did you drink, smoke, or take illegal drugs as a teenager? Was it peer pressure? Curiosity? Or did you just want to feel happier and better about yourself? Your teen's reasons are probably the same.

The vast majority of teenagers don't take drugs or drink because they are clinically depressed, suicidal, or lacking in self-esteem. They do it because it gives them pleasure, in the same way that drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes, drinking liquor, and taking drugs (prescription or illegal) gives adults pleasure.

## **Just say no!**

"Just say no" is absurd advice to give teenagers when it comes to drugs and alcohol. It grossly simplifies a very complex issue; it insults the kids it purports to help. It's part of an adult mindset that says "good kids" don't take drugs or drink alcohol; "good kids" know these substances are bad and simply repeat the mantra "just say no" to conquer temptation. Oh, if all of life's tough problems could be solved simply by repeating a campaign slogan!

Taking drugs or drinking alcohol has nothing to do with your teens' being "good" or "bad" kids. It's got everything to do with the allure of experimenting with "forbidden substances" that promise pleasure, status, and acceptance.

You can prohibit your teenagers from drinking or taking drugs, but that does not necessarily mean you can prevent it. This does not mean that you should casually accept your child's alcohol and drug experimentation. Your biggest concern should be the prevention of chronic use and addiction.

## **Do as I do**

Do you "have to have" your morning coffee, your after-dinner cigarette, your evening cocktails, your stress-relieving Valium? How often do you turn to over-the-counter, prescription, or illegal drugs to relieve your symptoms or to make you happier? Do your kids see you drink and drive? Through your own example, what messages are you sending your kids about drugs and alcohol?

Your teens will notice any hypocrisy on your part. Talk is cheap. Serve as your own example of your beliefs and values concerning drugs and alcohol. Don't just preach it — LIVE IT!

### **Give them facts**

Teenagers don't buy the argument that trying a "milder" drug means they'll soon be shooting heroin. They aren't scared by this "domino theory," because they rarely see it happening in real life. In place of scary theories, you can give them facts. You and your teen should know the names of all popular drugs, what effects they have on young minds and bodies (short- and long-term), and the legal penalties for drug possession and use.

Tell them that drugs and alcohol make teens more prone to dangerous accidents. Tell them that they can never trust the quality of drugs or know exactly how they will respond to them. Tell them that drugs can poison and kill them. Tell them that their lives are too precious to take these chances. Tell them that you love them.

### **Drinking and driving**

Drinking and driving is the biggest killer of adolescents. You must be steadfast and clear about your rules concerning drinking and driving. You have every right to insist that your teenager not drive after drinking or ride with a driver who has been drinking. These same rules should apply to any drugs.

This rule should be accompanied by a heartfelt promise: If your teen is ever faced with drinking/drugging and driving or riding with an intoxicated driver, he **MUST** call you up. You will pick him up (regardless of the time) or arrange to have him picked up. Upon his safe return home, you promise you will not question, punish, or lecture him. If your teen fears calling you, he may drive drunk and never make it home.

### **Doing your best**

You can't eliminate your teenager's curiosity about drugs and alcohol; you can't shield her from the social pressures to use them. Keeping silent and letting her come to her own conclusions about this is unconscionable. You can encourage her self-worth, give her the hard facts, establish firm limits, set a positive example, and always keep the lines of "communication without condemnation" open.

<http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/streetterms/default.asp>

Street terms