

Parents Need to Know... *What can I do?*

HOW TO HELP OUR KIDS STAY AWAY FROM TOBACCO, ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS

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With all the stress that parents face providing for our families, we may sometimes worry that we are not giving the time and support they need. We may end up feeling that we have very little influence on our children's decisions, such as those concerning the use of tobacco, alcohol or other drugs.

In fact, it is surprising how strong our influence is - in childhood and throughout the teenage years - in helping our kids set goals and make the really important decisions for themselves.

We have tried here to help parents increase their positive influence and reduce the risk of alcohol and other drug abuse within their families, by:

- *presenting facts about drug use among young people today*
- *answering questions parents commonly ask about drug use*
- *addressing issues that have been shown to be connected with drug use*
- *responding to parents' concerns by offering practical suggestions*

We hope you find this information useful.

Let's Begin with a Few Facts...

Children and teenagers have tough choices to make. As parents we want to help our children make good decisions about alcohol and other drugs.

Perhaps a few facts will tell us just how widespread the problem of alcohol and drug use is.

Here is a look at some of the latest findings:

ALCOHOL IS, IN FACT, THE MOST COMMONLY-USED DRUG. From the 2001 studies from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), we know that:

- 62.6% of students (grades 7-13) had used alcohol (drank one drink or more on any occasion) during the past year.
- 15.5% of these students drank weekly or more frequently.
- 39.6% of these students had had five or more drinks at one occasion at least once in the past month

Perhaps an even more startling fact is that **CANNABIS (MARIJUANA OR HASH) IS THE SECOND MOST POPULAR DRUG USED BY OUR YOUTH.** The CAMH study showed that

- 28.6% of the students surveyed reported using cannabis in the previous 12 months
- 31.1% of these students had used the drug 20 or more times during that period.

While there has been a recent important decline in the rate of smoking, **THE THIRD MOST COMMONLY USED DRUG IS TOBACCO.**

- 22.3% of students (grades 7-13) smoked in the previous year.
- 72.2% of these students smoked one or more cigarettes daily.
- The majority of regular smokers start smoking by age 15.

Not all students use drugs; in fact, 27.4% reported no drug use (including alcohol or tobacco) and the large majority (two thirds of students) did not use an illicit substance.

However, many of those using tobacco, alcohol and other drugs reported dependence on and problems associated with their substance use.

When do I start talking to my child about drugs?

We need to start talking with our children when they are very young. Drug use is part of everyday life. Sometimes we forget that cough syrup, headache pills and other medications are also drugs.

At a very early age, children begin to learn that taking a pill or other drug can make them feel better. They learn this from television and from our own example. There are many opportunities to teach the safe use of medications when they are very young.

Young children are naturally curious and often ask questions about what they see, including the use of tobacco and alcohol by family members or others around them. We need to encourage their questions and give them direct answers. We also need to think about our attitudes and actions and how these might influence our children.

How likely is my child to use drugs?

Our children are very likely to come across tobacco, alcohol and other drugs on the street, in the schoolyards, among their peers... and in our homes.

They will have to make decisions about their own use of these drugs throughout the adolescent and later teenage years.

Why should we be concerned about our kids' use of tobacco, alcohol or other drugs?

As parents we need to realize that many teenagers will experiment with smoking, drinking, or marijuana and then choose never to use these drugs again, or use them very infrequently. For most children, taking some risks is a normal part of growing up.

However, we must also recognize that there are serious risks associated with any use of alcohol and other drugs. These risks are there whether it is the first time the drug is used, whether the drug is used rarely or used often.

These risks include:

- *Serious physical reaction (for example slower breathing or increased heart beat);*
- *Not knowing how one person's emotional make-up will respond to the drug at a particular time (one person's mood response could be quite different from someone else's and it can change any time the drug is used);*
- *Poor judgment and decision-making (many people, young and old, admit that their actions were careless, stupid or even dangerous when they have used alcohol or another drug).*

Young people who are new to using tobacco, alcohol or any other drug, can be very sick or frightened the first time they use it. This can sometimes be a good thing, if it helps them decide to never use the drug again! However, some young people find that the use of tobacco, alcohol or another drug satisfies a need they have - for confidence,

dealing with stress for personal problems, friendship or taking risks. Then it is more likely that they will continue to use the drug, at increasing rates, and a whole new set of problems can begin. Furthermore, adolescents who become used to using one type of drug, such as tobacco, are more likely to use another drug, such as alcohol or marijuana.

Especially during the adolescent stage of life, when their bodies are developing and they are learning to make decisions for themselves, our kids need to protect themselves from the problems that any drug use can bring.

Families Matter!

Families come in many different forms. Families can range from having a single parent to having two sets of mothers and fathers. A parent may live with the child or in another city or even in a distant country.

When we use the term "parent" here, we are referring to anyone who is actually providing a child with nurturing and care. This may include a parent, grandparent, aunt/uncle, other important family member or close adult.

Whatever your particular family arrangement, it is the family that gives children their sense of belonging. Home is where children look for a safe place to be themselves and the support to grow into responsible adults.

Sometimes parents feel that they have very little influence over what will happen to their children. And whatever influence we do have seems to decrease as our children grow older! We are concerned that peer pressure, the media, and other factors take over, affecting the decisions our kids make.

Let's look at some of these factors.

Peer pressure:

Friendships are very important for children. Some parents, who grew up in an environment where family or neighbourhood was their most important influence, may find this difficult to understand.

For many children the need to be with and talk to friends peaks in the early teenage years.

It is true that kids will do things to fit in with a friend or a peer group. At times it may be hard to accept their hairstyles, clothing, choice of music or the constant (and lengthy!) phone conversations.

The adolescent years are a natural time of searching, trying out different styles, looking to "be different" within the safety net of a peer group. It's part of the normal process of getting to know "who I am". It doesn't mean that our kids have lost their respect for our family values or their need for our caring and support.

How do I respond?

- Make a real effort to know and appreciate your children's friends and make them welcome in your home.
- Set your limits about what really matters for your children's health and safety, and what really counts in your own values - and then give your children some room to be themselves.
- Understand that children can go through some very difficult friendship changes that can affect their moods and behaviour at home and at school.
- Continue to do regular, enjoyable activities as a family even as your children choose to spend more time with their friends. This will maintain your children's sense of belonging within the family and give you a relaxed time to discuss what is going on in each member's life.

What about "cultural conflicts"?

Children who have to balance the culture of home with a different culture at school can find it stressful. When a family is new to the country, even young children can be burdened with the responsibility of translating for adults in their family or helping them solve problems in the outside world.

Some children may begin to rebel against their culture by choosing friends over family, resenting their heritage or questioning religious customs.

Parents have to work hard to help children achieve a balance between family traditions and the pull of the "outside" community.

How do I respond?

- Give children an avenue to question traditions and customs and respond to their concerns with honesty.
- Make cultural and religious traditions a time of sharing and warmth.
- Show respect for and appreciation of the many different cultures and customs around us, particularly those of their friends.

Working it out with the school...

Our education system has to deal with many things these days. As parents, we have the right to expect a lot from the place where our children spend over six hours a day. But we must recognize how difficult it is for schools to meet the needs of each child all the time. So much can happen inside and outside the classroom to make kids feel good, or bad, about themselves. It is important to help children feel positive about their time at school.

How do I respond?

- Encourage your children to take part in school activities from an early age.
- Support the schoolwork and assignments your child is expected to do at home.
- Take advantage of opportunities to speak with school staff and attend events, from kindergarten through high school.
- Be honest if you feel there is a problem. Try to solve problems together with the school.

Some Special Concerns:

My child seems to be more 'challenging' than the others...

Children, of course, have their unique combinations of strengths and weaknesses. Some children have special physical or medical needs; some children have learning, behaviour or adjustment difficulties. These children may struggle, and need extra support, to develop a positive self-image. When kids don't like themselves they may be more open to trying risky activities that can harm them. Seeking professional help early may be an important step to prevent problems from developing later.

How do I respond?

- Be realistic in what you expect from your children. At the same time encourage their hopes and dreams for themselves.
- Make a very special effort to appreciate their unique talents and build on their strengths.
- Help them find at least one activity such as art, sports or drama that will give them satisfaction and a sense of belonging.
- Give your child the opportunity to help you and others and recognize their contribution.

Someone in my family smokes...

Young children have learned about the harmful effects of tobacco. As a result, they may be very concerned about a family member who smokes. They may even put extreme pressure on that person to quit. It is important to acknowledge their concerns about the smoker's health.

Even if you are the one who smokes you can try to protect your children from the harmful effects of the smoke. Your words and actions can also help protect them from becoming smokers themselves.

How do I respond?

- Take responsibility for your own choices. Never ask your child to bring you cigarettes.
- Show concern for your children by keeping them safe from the harmful effects of second-hand smoke. Don't smoke in front of them. In fact, it is better not to smoke in your home at all.
- Acknowledge that smoking is a harmful and addictive habit.
- Give a clear message that you wish you (or someone else) had not started smoking and that you hope and trust your child will not start.

Someone in my family drinks too much...

A drinking problem in the family can have serious effects for a child. However, there is strong evidence that having a caring and responsible adult in their lives can be a very important factor in helping children avoid alcohol abuse themselves.

Children need to build a close, trusting relationship with an adult. If a parent is not able to provide this, an uncle or aunt, grandparent, teacher, minister or other close person can help.

How do I respond?

- When someone close has problems with drinking, let children know they did not cause the problem and they cannot change the way the adult behaves.
- Recognize that children in this position may adopt behaviours, such as rowdiness, extreme quietness, clowning or trying to be perfect at whatever they do, as a way of coping with their situation.
- Make sure children have a trusted adult in whom they can confide.
- Help children to be children, and not carry the burdens of the family on their own shoulders.

Back to the Basics

There are some aspects of parenting which are the foundations for a solid parent-child relationship. With these building blocks in place a more positive relationship is likely to last throughout the adolescent years.

Building a healthy self-esteem...

Very young children need to feel that they are the centres of their parents' worlds. It is this sense of being special that provides the root for self-esteem to grow. As they get older, we need to nurture this sense of personal worth by giving our children the security to challenge themselves and meet new goals. Kids will develop self-confidence when they realize that they have the courage and ability to overcome problems.

How do I respond?

- Show appreciation of your children's efforts - even when the results are far from perfect.
- Use many opportunities to tell them they look nice or have done a good job. Adolescents particularly need to be assured that at least one person thinks they look good!
- Give each child an area of family life to contribute to. This will allow children to show responsibility and be recognized for doing their share. Chores and family outings are some of the important family areas where children can play a meaningful role. Involve kids in making the decisions as well as doing the jobs!
- Encourage your children to explore new experiences, even when there may be some social or emotional risk involved.
- Let them know they have your support and that you are available for guidance (if they want it!). Discuss the outcomes of their attempts to try new things.

Supervision: how much is enough?

In a positive sense, parental supervision spells out to children that we care about their health, safety and well-being. As children get older the amount and the type of supervision typically change as they become more responsible and independent. However, our concerns about their safety and well-being do not decrease. We need to work out a system so that they become comfortable with giving us information about their whereabouts.

Supervision has become a particularly important issue today because so many parents work long hours and children are often left on their own after school. Unsupervised time can allow kids to get bored, or feel lonely or not cared for. Although we may not be able to physically supervise their activities, we still can check in on them and let them know we care.

How do I respond?

- Start early finding out the 'where, when, and who with' of children's activities and keep it up all through their adolescent and later teenage years. It works best both ways - keep your children informed of your whereabouts as well.
- If your children are alone for a period of time try to set up a situation for them to have a personal contact with a caring adult such as a neighbour or nearby relative. If there is some way for you to check in with them by telephone each day, do so.
- With your children, try to come up with a routine for the time before you arrive home. The routine should involve a fair amount of responsibility, such as beginning to fix dinner combined with a reasonable amount of relaxation time. Let them know that you appreciate their efforts and their ability to be trusted.
- Be conscious of each child's own level of comfort in being left unsupervised or ability to be responsible. If your children are anxious, talk about these fears and discuss ways to make them more comfortable in the situation.

Communicating about your family's standards...

Sometimes we assume our kids will 'just know' what our family values and expectations are. We need to find the words to state our position clearly about a number of important issues but we also need to be open to having our kids express a different viewpoint.

How do I respond?

- Make use of opportunities to discuss different standards among families. Understand that your child may feel that your standards are unfair if they are different from their friends.
- State clearly what you expect from your children at each stage of their development - for example, "I know that some of your friends may experiment with smoking, but I expect you not to smoke".
- Understand that although children may not always practice what we believe, our beliefs and standards can still be important to them. Having a clear sense of their own family standards helps protect them when they are faced with the different attitudes of some of their peers.
- Show by your actions that you have standards for your own behaviour.

Remember...

Our children continue to look to us for support and encouragement for values and standards from early childhood through adolescence.



PARENT ACTION ^{ON} DRUGS
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