



Ohana
Montage Health

Talk to your teen about drugs

We urge every parent to talk to their children about drugs regularly. How to have a loving and fruitful conversation about this difficult topic:

Set the stage of understanding.

It is important for adults to understand why teens can be especially drawn to experiment with drugs. First, teens have a natural developmental drive to pull away from their parents, towards peers. Peer pressure is very persuasive at this age. Second, their developing brains at this age lead them to seek new experiences, pleasure, and stimulation; and they do not tend to worry about risk. While they are very good at assessing risk, they naturally tolerate higher levels of risk than adults in pursuit of novelty. And their assessment of risk can be heavily influenced by their peers. Knowing these powerful forces are at play, adults can emphatically talk to their children about the potential consequences of drug use and emphasize the need for a plan to stay healthy.

Pick a good time and place to connect.

Choose a time when you and your teen will be relaxed, such as in the evening after dinner or a lazy morning on the weekend. Location matters too. Teens are generally more receptive to serious discussions when they occur in a setting that affords privacy and some comfort, like their room or a favorite couch.

Stay calm.

It's okay to be nervous. Do what you can to center yourself before talking with your teen. The conversation may be uncomfortable, but your child will feel that you care about them by bringing it up. Chances are you've already had to have difficult conversations. Remember what worked well in the past.

Ask, listen, and talk together. Resist the urge to lecture.

Facilitate an open conversation with your teen by asking them what they've heard, learned, or what they're curious about regarding drugs. Some opening questions could be: "What have they taught you at school about marijuana? What did you think about in that movie when...?, How many of your classmates have tried...?, What do you think would be my reaction if...?" or "Who would you go to if...?" Listen and keep a calm, compassionate posture. Welcome their questions, and answer them to the best of your ability. If your child asks questions you don't know the answer to, let your child know you'll get back to them and follow up.

Have targeted conversations.

Help your child understand the risks of drug use (without lecturing). Some of the main risks for teens are that drugs and alcohol can lead to an increase in risky behaviors, they can be more addictive for teens than adults, and there is risk of damage to the brain in learning, attention, and memory. Risky behaviors can lead to life altering experiences such as assault, pregnancy, or arrest for driving under the influence (DUI). Sadly, sometimes they can even be fatal.

Once they understand the risks, guide your teen in thinking through the social scenarios they might find themselves in where drugs may be present. Brainstorm ways they could avoid using drugs and still maintain their dignity in front of peers. Help them plan their answer for the question — “Do you want to try some?”. Telling your teen that having a plan for how to respond ensures they are really making the choice, not giving into peer pressure. Help them consider words that they would be comfortable with.

No, thanks, not my thing. — for the teen who is comfortable in their skin

I'm allergic. — for the teen who is constantly making jokes

Nah, doesn't mix with sports.

Help your teen consider what words would feel easy to them. If it is hard for them to imagine, help them imagine they were speaking for a best friend who is shy, but didn't want to try.

Be direct.

Set clear expectations about drug use as a teen, and state the consequences of breaking the rules. It's okay to say that your expectation is that your child not do drugs, but be ready to talk about why. Letting your teen offer their ideas about consequences will increase your chances for success. If you discover your child has tried drugs, or if they are regularly using them, explore reasons why your child has used and discuss together about alternatives and support. Take care not to interrogate, lecture, or shame your child.

Collaborate on a safety plan.

Reassure your teen that you will be there to help them if they get into an uncomfortable or unsafe situation regarding drugs and alcohol. Even if they are breaking the rules you have established, they need to know they can always call you for help rather than stay in an unsafe situation. Decide together how and when they should reach out to you for help. Make sure your parenting partner is on the same page.

Get to know your child's friends and their parents.

Spending time with your child's friends is a protective factor against teen drug use, so get to know them. Build a support group as parents. Chances are they're facing similar challenges. Together you can discuss rules and boundaries, and you can learn from one another.

Acknowledge family history of substance use.

If there is a significant history in the family of substance use, bringing it up can be a teachable moment. Children will be able to relate to a family story. If you are experiencing addiction, acknowledge it and get help (e.g. attending a support group or starting addiction treatment) so you can recover and be a role model to your teen.

Additional thoughts:

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Studies have shown that there are things parents can do to reduce the likelihood that their children will experiment with drugs and alcohol, many of which most parents do routinely.

- Eat dinner as a family as often as possible (at least three nights a week)
- Be aware of what your children are doing and get to know their friends
- Teach your children stress management skills
- Provide warmth and supportiveness. Communicate your appreciation for your child
- Identify your child's interests and gifts
- Have meaningful family rituals
- Be a role model (talk about it and walk the walk)

HOW TO GET HELP

If at any point you feel that your teen is acutely in danger, seek help at the nearest Emergency department. Otherwise, you can make an appointment with his or her doctor to address your concerns about their drug use behaviors and/or emotional wellbeing. This can be extremely difficult, as people suffering from addiction often do not want to acknowledge it publicly or receive treatment. Let your child know that family and loved ones are there for support.

Ohana is a Center for Child and Adolescent Behavioral Health. For more resources, visit montagehealth.org/ohana or call **(831) 642-6201** to request an appointment for your child.

