

Having Impactful Conversations *With Our Kids* About Substance Use

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- Substances trending among teens are getting stronger, more appealing, accessible, dangerous, and easier to conceal. Today's caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, cannabis and prescription meds are not what we grew up with!
- Due to the above, youth overdoses and addiction have increased in recent years, and there is an increase in use-related medical and mental health problems. Including from THC, nicotine and caffeine.
- An explosion in fentanyl and other drug lacings has made just experimenting with drugs potentially deadly.
- Using any substances regularly or in binge amounts can disrupt brain growth and do long-term cognitive damage.
- THE GOOD NEWS is that research shows us that open conversations in our family about the risks and realities of substances sharply decreases the likelihood and amount of our kids using, as well as the likelihood of their experiencing overdose or problematic use. The more your child feels comfortable talking with you, the greater chance you have of knowing what's going on with them and being influential in guiding them towards healthy choices. HERE'S HOW!!

Talking Tips

◆ Talking Substances = A Family Norm

Talking about drugs and alcohol often and openly is approached simply as a family norm, as early as possible. This is just what we do as a family – we talk about all the complicated, scary, confusing things in the world.

◆ Communication=Trust=Freedom.

Establish communication as an expectation for your child to get what they want...freedom. In order for you to trust them out of your sight, on-line, or with friends, you need to know what the decisions are that they are likely to be faced with, and how they are likely to handle those situations. This means that you need to know what their genuine thoughts, feelings, values, strategies and plans are re: substances and choices surrounding them.

◆ Ask open-ended questions.

Questions beginning with “How,” “What” and “When” encourage more discussion than those your child can shut down with simple “yes” or “no” answers. “How was the party?” vs “Did you have fun at the party?”

◆ Listen, listen, listen.

As *important* as making sure your child knows your opinions, values, and wisdom, is knowing what *they* are experiencing, wondering, deciding, feeling, and doing re: substances. Our kids need to feel that we are talking *with* and not *at* them. Aim to be listening at least 50% of the time and keep yourself in check from dominating the conversation and going into lecture mode, or trying entertain, or “score points” by showing your child s/he's wrong.

◆ Check your reactivity.

It only takes one perceived “freak out” for your child to decide you’re not a trusted source of guidance and support on issues involving drugs and alcohol. Take a breath, stay calm and avoid judgment, escalation, or sarcasm. If your child makes a statement that’s inaccurate, shocking, or scary, get CURIOUS instead, seeking to understand their experiences, perspectives, and where they come from. Remember they will test to see how much they can trust you as a sounding board re: these topics by being provocative. If you get angry or judgmental, you’re demonstrating that they can’t. If you show respect for their viewpoint, they’re more likely to listen to and respect yours.

◆ Replace judgement w/validation & empathy.

You can validate and express respect for their opinion, even if you don’t agree. “That makes sense that you think that” or “I can see why you feel that way.” vs “That’s ridiculous!! How the hell could you possibly think that??” It doesn’t mean you have to agree! They’re more likely to listen to and respect your opinion, if they feel listened to and respected by you first.

◆ The Almighty AND vs The Big ‘Ole But

THEN you can add your “AND” and “I statements” to express your own differing opinion or experience. “...And I’m terrified of what that could do to you because I heard a new study that...” After you have validated their perspective DO NOT insert your “big ‘ole BUT” – it invalidates your validation.

◆ Don’t go “all FBI” on them.

Resist the urge to interrogate them about exactly who is doing what. Their feeling cornered to “narc” on their friends is seen as potentially devastating to their social world and will lead to lying and eroding trust in you. What’s most important is that you know what *your child* is exposed to, what they think and feel about it, and what kind of choices *they* are making. Make it ok for them to be anonymous in their reports, as long as no one is in significant danger.

◆ Educate accurately & honestly.

Kids WILL learn about drugs and alcohol from media and other kids, so better they learn accurate facts and risks from you before the other influences take hold. This means that we need plug into some reliable resources ourselves stay updated on accurate information. If our kids ask us questions we don’t know don't make up what you don't know! Offer to find out, or research together. Avoid repeating rumored unchecked information. Using scary stories can be powerful if they’re relatable but scare tactics can’t be the only tool in your box, or you’ll be dismissed as “over-dramatic.” Your adolescent will trust you more if you “keep it real.”

◆ **Acknowledge & Explore hypocrisies.**

Your kids are seeing a lot of hypocrisies around substances (i.e. what is legal and what's not despite their associated death tolls, cannabis being prescribed and proven helpful for many adults, psychedelics being used in therapy). Instead of arguing their points, acknowledge them as valid, and explore these issues with them. This including using "an almighty AND" where appropriate i.e. "AND use for adults is different than for growing adolescent brains," or "the version of what's used for therapeutic purposes is very different than what's available on the streets, and it's a carefully guided process with a trained professional."

◆ **Take a Harm Reduction approach with older teens.**

Even with all the information, most of our kids will experiment with a substance by the time they graduate high school simply because they're curious. We need to make sure they have the information to minimize their risks to not hurt themselves or someone else if they do choose to go there. In today's reality of fentanyl-lacings this also means providing them with Narcan and Fentanyl test strips and educating them on how to use them.

◆ **Speak to THEIR values & goals.**

Explain how drugs and alcohol can negatively affect things that they value, who they want to be, and what they want for themselves (which means asking and listening for these), i.e sports performance, academic achievement, reputation, appearance, influencing a younger sibling, trust, freedom. Take advantage of their hate for being controlled, desires to be non-conformists, and/or keen radar for hypocrisy when discussing not falling prey to peer and media pressures to use.

◆ **Strategize peer pressure & tough situations.**

Ask them what peer pressure looks/sounds like at their age and help them strategize how to take care of themselves and refuse use while still keeping their "cool points." Encourage them to use you as an excuse! Plan how they will handle an intoxicated driver and other uncomfortable/unsafe situations, and how they can stealthily contact you in an emergency. Identify signs of responses to overdoses, and when it's important to seek an adult's help for others' dangerous or problematic use.

◆ **Teaching through your own experience.**

Someone who has "been there and done that" is a much more trusted source of info to your teen than someone who hasn't. Using your own lessons learned can be very powerful, whether from your mistakes and consequences, someone's close to you that affected you, or healthy decisions you've made at tough moments. Be careful not to romanticize your use or story-tell just for laughs, keeping in mind your focus is to encourage delaying experimentation and making low-risk decisions. Explain what attracted you, what you now know that you didn't then, why your opinions have changed on use, what you would do instead if you could go back in time, and why you want them to avoid the same choices.

◆ **Seize everyday teachable moments.**

Make these discussions organic and relevant as much as possible.

- **Current events and news stories** - The news story about the latest drug bust, overdose, drunk driving accident or celebrity in rehab are ripe discussion opportunities.
- **Advertising** – Use that TV beer commercial or vaping billboard to talk about how the

alcohol and tobacco industry spend billions of dollars a year and hire psychologists to devise devious advertising that'll brainwash *them* to buy their products for life. Highlight hypocrisy of its messages (i.e. alcohol gives you 6-pack abs, vaping makes you happy).

- **TV and Movies** - Whether it is a pro-use or anti-use message, or somewhere in between, many popular TV shows and movies provide opportunities to discuss perceptions and realities of substance use and pressures to use. Instead of flipping the channel immediately when you run across questionable material, consider using them.
- **Music** - *Much* of today's popular music among teens encourages drug use. What do they like about it? What do they understand or think about the lyrics? Even if they're not impacted themselves, what impact might that have on the kids listening to it? What do they know about the artist's relationship to substances? Talk about how many musicians have overdosed on or quit using the substances they're singing/rapping about.

◆ **The Drive-by Rule**

It can feel less threatening and anxiety-producing to weave discussions about substances (and other "cringy" topics like sex, mental health, dating) into everyday functioning by keeping chats *under five minutes, when you aren't looking at each other*. Bringing things up when you're cooking, walking the dog, fixing the car, shooting baskets etc. Car rides w/background music are perfect times for some kids, and can feel entrapping for others.

◆ **Acknowledge all your kids' GOOD decisions.**

No matter how innocent you think your child is, by middle school they know who they could go to if they wanted to score alcohol or other drugs. By high school, they are likely exposed to and navigating through options to use every single day. You have no idea how many times they could be seeking out and using substances that they are NOT. Even if they say yes at some point, they've said no 100 times more. Make sure you are acknowledging and celebrating this!

Conversation Sparkers

- I experience peer pressure a lot to drink/use weed. It looks/sounds/feels like.....What's it like for you?
- What are you learning about ____ in health class? What's interesting about that?
- We didn't have vaping when I was your age. I hear it's everywhere and imagine how tempting that can be. How are you handling that?
- I keep hearing about THC & drug overdoses on school campuses across the country. That's so scary to me. What are they doing at school to prevent that on campus?
- I just heard this news story/research study about...what are you hearing about that?
- It seems so much easier to get away with drug use on campus now compared to when I was a teen. Things smelled more and devices weren't as sneaky. What's going on at your school?
- I don't want any names, but I'm curious if you're seeing any of the people you know starting to drink/vape etc...
- What does the school do when they bust someone? How effective is their reaction in stopping use on campus? What do you think would make a difference?
- What do you think would make a difference in preventing kids from OD's/vaping etc?

