

Helping your child avoid drugs



Studies have found that teens who have learnt about the risks of drugs are up to 50 per cent less likely to use drugs than those who learnt nothing about drugs at home.

Preventing substance abuse is a process that begins early in your child's life. A child growing up in a supportive, loving home where strict rules are enforced is less likely to get into trouble as a teenager.

Open communication is key

Start a preventative strategy by talking openly with your child about the dangers of substance abuse. One conversation is not enough because your child's views will change as they grow older. Listen to what they tell you about their peers and structure your message accordingly.

Don't just say, "Don't do drugs" and leave it at that. Explain the physical and emotional harm that drugs can cause, empathise over the peer pressure and help them to practise the art of saying no.

Keep in mind that substance abuse can begin as early as mid-primary school and that most children are introduced to drugs by their peers. Peer pressure is incredibly hard for a child to resist. Prepare your child for this through role playing, emphasising the fact that one can say no to peers and still be cool.

Some teens will still experiment with drugs no matter how secure and loving their homes. Stay alert to the signs of substance abuse and take action as soon as you spot any.

Signs may include:

- Withdrawal, depression, hostility and aggression.
- New or undesirable friends.
- Disobedience, lying and breaking curfews.
- Sudden deterioration in academic performance.
- Loss of interest in sports and other favourite activities.
- Changes in eating and sleeping patterns.
- Red eyes and/or a runny nose without being ill.
- Drug paraphernalia such as cigarette papers, medicine bottles, homemade pipes, as well as eye drops and breath freshener.

If the signs are there

If there are signs that your child is using drugs, stay calm and rational and discuss your suspicions with them. They are likely to deny any knowledge of substance abuse. If you are convinced that your child is taking drugs, have them evaluated by a doctor or consult a professional counsellor.

If your child is already addicted to drugs, they will need help from a trained counsellor. Drug addiction is a chronic, relapsing disease and it may require a number of attempts before your child can remain drug-free.

Adult supervision is a great deterrent to substance abuse. Try to ensure that all activities your child takes part in are supervised by adults. Fill their day with absorbing extramural activities, such as sport, arts or music classes.

Know where your child is

Explain to your child that this need-to-know policy is not based on mistrust, but rather that it allows you to come to their aid whenever they needs it. This includes calling ahead to check whether the parties they are invited to will be supervised by parents. If your child objects to this, too bad. It's far better to be an uncool parent than the parent of a child who dies of a drug overdose. If necessary, let them take a cell phone with when going out so that they can call you to fetch them if a party gets out of hand.

Staying involved in your child's life is another deterrent to substance abuse. Get to know their friends, and steer them away from bad influences wherever possible. Maintain open dialogue about daily activities and remain alert to possible danger signals.

Finally, maintain set rules. Contrary to some parent's fears, strict rules don't alienate teenagers. Establish rules about time and acceptable behaviour and stick to them. Agree with your child on reasonable punishment if rules are broken.

Punishment could include withholding of privileges such as pocket money or television viewing, or being grounded for a period of time. Bear in mind that overly restrictive boundaries will not leave your child space in which to exercise their own judgement and develop their independence.

Conclusion

If your best efforts fail and your child does become involved in substance abuse, consult your doctor or call a drug or alcohol support group for advice. There is no shame in getting help!

