

## **Laying the Groundwork**

### **Overview**

We, as parents, are the most important role models in our children's lives. What we say and do about drugs matters a lot when it comes to the choices our children make. We can:

- set a positive example and get involved in our children's lives;
- get involved in their activities, know their friends, know where they're going and what they're doing;
- create clear, consistent expectations and enforce them;
- talk early and often about drugs;
- discuss the consequences of drug use;
- show we care enormously about what choices our children make about drugs.

Children learn by example. They adopt the values we demonstrate through our actions. As they grow, they're impressed by our concern for others when we bring soup to a sick neighbor and by our honesty when we admit making a mistake.

Although we believe these traits are important, it's not always easy to be consistent. Telling a friend, you're younger than you really are sends a confusing message to your child — isn't it wrong to lie? If you forbid smoking in the house, how can you allow your friends to break the rules? If you say that drinking alcohol is a serious matter, how can you laugh uproariously at TV and movie drunks? Because alcohol is off-limits for children, even asking them to fetch a beer from the refrigerator or to mix drinks at an adult party can be confusing.

Children who decide not to use alcohol or other drugs often make this decision because they have strong convictions against the use of these substances — convictions based on a value system. You can make your family's values clear by explaining why you choose a course of action and how that choice reflects your values. If you're walking down the street together and spot a blind person attempting to cross, you can both offer to help him and then take the opportunity to discuss why it's important to support those in need. You can also explore moral issues by posing hypothetical questions at the dinner table or in the car — for example, "What would you do if the person ahead of you in the movie line dropped a dollar bill?" or "What would you do if your friend wanted you

to skip class with him and play video games instead?" Concrete examples like these make the abstract issue of values come alive.

## **PLANNING FOR TOGETHERNESS**

Sometimes it's frustrating how few chances there are to have conversations about drugs with our children. In our busy culture, with families juggling the multiple demands of work, school, after-school activities, and religious and social commitments, it can be a challenge for parents and children to be in the same place at the same time. To ensure that you have regular get togethers with your children, try to schedule:

- Family meetings. Held once a week at a mutually-agreed-upon time, family meetings provide a forum for discussing triumphs, grievances, projects, questions about discipline, and any topic of concern to a family member. Ground rules help. Everyone gets a chance to talk; one person talks at a time without interruption; everyone listens, and only positive, constructive feedback is allowed. To get resistant children to join in, combine the get-together with incentives such as post-meeting pizza or assign them important roles such as recording secretary or rule enforcer.
- Regular parent-child rituals. These eliminate the need for constant planning and rearranging. Perhaps you can take the long way home from school once a week and get ice cream or make a weekly visit to the library together. Even a few minutes of conversation while you're cleaning up after dinner or right before bedtime can help the family catch up and establish the open communication that is essential to raising drug-free children.

## **MAKING YOUR POSITION CLEAR**

When it comes to dangerous substances like alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, don't assume that your children know where you stand. They want you to talk to them about drugs. State your position clearly; if you're ambiguous, children may be tempted to use. Tell your children that you forbid them to use alcohol, tobacco, and drugs because you love them. (Don't be afraid to pull out all the emotional stops. You can say, "If you took drugs it would break my heart.") Make it clear that this rule holds true even at other people's houses. Will your child listen? Most likely. According to research, when a child decides whether to use alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, a crucial consideration is "What will my parents think?"

Also discuss the consequences of breaking the rules — what the punishment will be and how it will be carried out. Consequences must go hand-in-hand with limits so that your child understands that there's a predictable outcome to his choosing a course of action. The consequences you select should be reasonable and related to the violation. For example, if you catch your son smoking, you might “ground” him, restricting his social activities for two weeks. You could then use this time to show him how concerned you are about the serious health consequences of his smoking, and about the possibility that he'll become addicted, by having him study articles, books, or video tapes on the subject.

Whatever punishment you settle on shouldn't involve new penalties that you didn't discuss before the rule was broken — this wouldn't be fair. Nor should you issue empty threats (“Your father will kill you when he gets home!”). It's understandable that you'd be angry when house rules are broken, and sharing your feelings of anger, disappointment, or sadness can have a powerfully motivating effect on your child. Since we're all more inclined to say things we don't mean when we're upset, it's best to cool off enough to discuss consequences in a matter-of-fact way.

Contrary to some parents' fears, your strict rules won't alienate your children. They want you to show you care enough to lay down the law and to go to the trouble of enforcing it. Rules about what's acceptable, from curfews to insisting that they call in to tell you where they are, make children feel loved and secure. Rules about drugs also give them reasons to fall back on when they feel tempted to make bad decisions. A recent poll showed that drugs are the number-one concern of young people today. Even when they appear nonchalant, our children need and want parental guidance. It does not have to be preachy. You will know best when it is more effective to use an authoritarian tone or a gentler approach.

Always let your children know how happy you are that they respect the rules of the household by praising them. Emphasize the things your children do right instead of focusing on what's wrong. When parents are quicker to praise than to criticize, children learn to feel good about themselves, and they develop the self-confidence to trust their own judgment.

## **WHAT YOUR OWN ALCOHOL, TOBACCO, AND DRUG USE TELLS YOUR CHILDREN**

Drinking alcohol is one of the accepted practices of adulthood. It is legal for adults to have wine with dinner, beer at the end of a long week, or cocktails at a dinner party. But drinking to the point of losing control sends the wrong message to children, as does reaching for a drink to remedy unhappiness or tension.

Although it is legal for adults to smoke cigarettes, the negative impact tobacco has on a smoker's health is well documented. If a child asks his parents why they smoke, they may explain that when they began, people didn't understand how unhealthy smoking is and that once a smoker starts, it's very hard to stop. Young people can avoid making the same mistake their parents did by never starting and risking addiction.

When parents smoke marijuana or use other illegal drugs, they compromise not only their children's sense of security and safety, but the children's developing moral codes as well. If you use illegal drugs, it is self-deluding to imagine that your children won't eventually find out. When they do, your parental credibility and authority will go out the window. If their parents — their closest and most important role models — don't respect the law, then why should they? Parents who abuse alcohol or other drugs should seek professional help. This help is available at treatment centers and from support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. Their children also may benefit from professional counseling and support from groups such as Families Anonymous, Al-Anon, and Nar-Anon.

### **WHAT TO SAY WHEN YOUR CHILD ASKS, "DID YOU EVER USE DRUGS?"**

Among the most common drug-related questions asked of parents is "Did you ever use drugs?" Unless the answer is "no," it's difficult to know what to say because nearly all parents who used drugs don't want their children to do the same thing. Is this hypocritical? No. We all want the best for our children, and we understand the hazards of drug use better than we did when we were their age and thought we were invincible. To guide our children's decisions about drugs, we can now draw on credible real-life examples of friends who had trouble as a result of their drug use: the neighbor who caused a fatal car crash while high; the family member who got addicted; the teen who used marijuana for years, lost interest in school, and never really learned how to deal with adult life and its stresses.

Some parents who used drugs in the past choose to lie about it, but they risk losing their credibility if their children discover the truth. Many experts recommend that when a child asks this question, the response should be honest.

This doesn't mean that parents need to recount every moment of their experiences. As in conversations about sex, some details should remain private, and you should avoid providing more information than is sought by your child. Ask clarifying questions to make sure you understand exactly why and what a child is asking before answering questions about your past drug use and limit your response to that information.

This discussion provides a good opportunity for parents to speak frankly about what attracted them to drugs, why drugs are dangerous, and why they want their children to avoid making the same mistake. There's no perfect way to get this message across, only approaches that seem more fitting than others. Some suggestions:

- “I took drugs because some of my friends used them, and I thought I needed to in order to fit in. In those days, people didn't know as much as they do now about all the bad things that can happen when you smoke marijuana or do other drugs. If I'd known then what I know now, I never would have tried them, and I'll do everything I can to keep you away from drugs.”
- “Everyone makes mistakes, and when I used drugs, I made a big one. I'm telling you about this, even though it's embarrassing, because I love you, and I want to save you from making the same stupid decision that I made when I was your age. You can learn from my mistakes without repeating them.”
- “I did drugs because I was bored and wanted to take some risks, but I soon found that I couldn't control the risks — they were controlling me. There are much better ways of challenging yourself than doing drugs.”
- “At your age, between homework, friends, sports, and other interests, there are a lot of fun things going on. If you get into taking drugs, you're pretty much giving up those other things, because you stop being able to concentrate, and you can't control your moods or keep to a schedule. You'll miss out on all these great experiences, and you'll never get those times back.”
- “You don't know how your body will react to drugs. Some people can get addicted really quickly and can get really sick even using a drug for the first time.”
- “I started drinking/doing drugs when I was young, and I've been battling them ever since. They made me miss a big part of growing up, and every day I must

fight with myself, so they don't make me miss more — my job, my relationships, and my time with you. I love you too much to watch you set yourself on the same path.”

## **HOW GRANDPARENTS CAN HELP RAISE DRUG-FREE CHILDREN**

Grandparents play a special part in a child's life and, unlike parents, grandparents have had years to prepare for their role. They've been through the ups and downs of child-rearing and bring a calmer, more seasoned approach to their interactions with their grandchildren. They, as well as other extended family members, can serve as stable, mature role models, especially if they need to step in to assume some of the responsibilities of the child's parents.

These important elders have one advantage over parents: Their relationships with their grandchildren are less complicated, less judgmental, and less tied to day-to-day stresses. Grandparents can use their positions of trust and intimacy to reinforce the same lessons in self-respect and healthy living that children are learning from their parents. When grandparents show concern with questions like “Has anyone ever tried to sell you drugs?” or “Why are your eyes so red?” they may be more likely to hear honest answers — especially if they indicate that they are willing to listen in confidence, and will not be quick to judge or punish. Their grandchildren may be less defensive and more likely to listen closely to their advice about avoiding drugs. Grandparents can also help reinforce positive messages and praise their grandchildren when they do well.