

Starting Conversations

How and Why to Talk to Young People About Mind-Altering Substances

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Studies have proven that abstinence only education has failed when it comes to drug use. Honest conversation, as early as possible, is shown to improve relationships and reduce early drug use and abuse. Here are some reasons why it's good to get this conversation started -

1. During teenage years, a third of one's neuroconnections are destroyed and reorganized. This means there is both an opportunity to develop healthy habits, and also a risk of establishing unhealthy habits.
2. Potency and availability of drugs today is unprecedented. Information about drugs from disreputable sources, such as social media, is also unprecedented.
3. As the dopaminergic system is being developed, teens experience heightened thrill seeking impulses. This can create an exaggeration of the reward or pleasure that drugs provide, which in turn, can desensitize them to other forms of pleasurable activities.

Busted! Common Myths and Misconceptions about Mind-Altering Substances

- Teens just know not to use drugs.
 - False! Unless you've already started this conversation, teens might not necessarily know what is a drug or addictive substance and/or not to use drugs. It's important to set expectations for your family the same way you would for grades, chores, curfew, etc.
- Social media users are three times more likely to develop a drug addiction.
 - True! Like drugs, social media provides a short term positive dopamine response that is addictive. While social media is a reality of our world, balance, boundaries, and education are important to develop healthy use.
- Telling teens "Don't do drugs!" will get the message across.
 - False! If you don't have an answer to "Why not?", teens will likely try to find out this information on their own. The most powerful answer will combine your own personal family values with the science to back up your point of view.
- Most teens are using drugs already, there's nothing you can do to stop it!
 - False! Only 50% of young people reported using illicit drugs, and within this reporting category, there is a huge range of use levels. The majority of teens who use drugs are able to stop or reduce use on their own, especially when they are provided with reputable information and/or are involved with causes they are passionate about that can redirect their attention.
- If a teen is using any kind of drug, they should be sent to rehab.

- Every situation is unique, but all use is not abuse and not all drugs are the same. In addition, the “gateway theory” of marijuana leading to use of other illicit drugs has been disproven.
- I don’t know anything about drugs so I shouldn’t talk to young people about them.
 - False-ish! If you don’t know, get educated! Exaggerations and misinformation can be problematic when provided to teens. If you feel uncomfortable speaking to young people about drugs, find another trusted person in your life who can have those conversations with them.
- You should never talk about drugs making people feel good.
 - False! The reality is, drugs *do* make people feel good and provide short term solutions to bigger problems. When teens are using drugs as a coping mechanism, it’s important to address the root trauma and offer alternatives to drugs that meet the same needs, without shaming or punishing. Find out what teens like about the way the drug they use makes them feel and brainstorm how an alternative activity could solve the same problem or meet the same need.
- Marijuana kills brain cells.
 - False! THC is an exogenous substance that is “stickier” than the endogenous substance our brains naturally produce. When it enters the brain, it lodges in receptor cells longer than endogenous cannabinoids, but not indefinitely.

Conversation Starters: Questions for Young People of All Ages

While asking these questions is a great start, listening without judgement to what young people have to say in response is the most important part. Be curious about what they think and why! In response - set expectations, offer resources, and practice how to present your point of view.

Before age 8

- What are some things that make you feel good?
 - Encouraging young people to notice what makes them feel good, whether it be people in their lives, achievements, hobbies, or foods, will help develop a broader understanding of how to create this feeling for themselves as they grow older.
- Have you ever noticed how what you eat changes how you feel?
 - Foods, like drugs, have a huge impact on how our bodies and minds feel. Establish mindfulness and understanding around this early-on.
- How do you make decisions? What influences you?
 - It’s easy to make gut decisions without realizing all of the outside forces that have helped us reach our conclusion. Being mindful of where our information comes from and how we make decisions will help in making decisions about drugs later on.
- Can you think of anything you couldn’t live without?

- Start a conversation about addiction with something benign like sugar or TV to help with understanding later on about how sometimes our need for things can feel out of our own control.

8-12 years old

- What do you know about our family's rules about drugs?
 - Set expectations early, just as you would for other things like bedtime and chores. Marijuana use is illegal before age 21 and the younger people start using, the more likely they are to develop drug-related issues later on.
- Have you seen any ads for marijuana or tobacco? What do you think about them?
 - Billboards can be great conversation starters for hearing what young people already know about drugs and what their opinions are. Talk about how and why drug companies, like social media companies, might have financial reasons for manipulating our feelings and playing off our natural impulses.
- What do you already know about drugs? Have you heard about anything you don't know about?
 - Establish yourself as a reliable resource for information and an open channel of communication. Young people often get their information from peers who are equally ill-informed.
- Let's research a drug together!
 - Make learning about drugs a collaborative process. You can study everything from the science of the psychoactive chemicals in drugs to their social impact to their indigenous use!

12-17 years old

- What do you do when you're bored?
- How are you dealing with stress right now?
- What matters the most to you?
- Why do you think people like doing drugs?
 - It's important to acknowledge the positive benefits that drugs provide, as well as the costs. Find out what they already know and think and brainstorm different ways the same benefits that drugs provide can be reached in other ways. Establish a wide problem solving tool kit.

18 years and older

- Do you know some ways to do drugs more safely, or to help out friends that might be using drugs?
 - Establish a no questions asked rule so young people know you will be there for them without judgement in their time of need. Drugs are much riskier when used alone. Share info about drug testing kits and drug checking methods to reduce harm and risk of drug use.
- Have you heard of the Good Samaritan Law?
 - If you call 911 for a person who is under the influence, you or the person calling will not get in trouble.

- What are some goals you have set for yourself? Some rules to help reach those goals?

Now what?

In the past, ritual and tradition guided people in the use of substances. Today, we have to create our own culture around drugs and their use as new substances get introduced in a dizzying array of new forms. It's important to listen to young people and recognize the context in which they live so that solutions that fit their needs can be created. There's no magic key to stopping drug abuse, but open and honest conversation creates healthy relationships that benefit everyone. In addition to starting these conversations, try some of the following:

- Role play conversations with your peers and other parents.
- Explore some of the further readings listed below.
- Make a list of advice you would have for your past self when it comes to drugs.