

This pamphlet is written for parents of children up to age seven. It is meant to give parents an early start in helping their children avoid problems with alcohol and other drugs.

Introduction

Drug use is part of everyday life. Sometimes we forget that cough syrup, headache pills, alcohol and tobacco are drugs. Children learn about drugs in school, from other kids and on television. But what parents do in our own homes is the beginning of drug education.

You are your children's most important teacher. Your words and actions help shape their ideas about alcohol and other drugs.

The first few years of life are important in building good values, self-esteem and the skills needed to prevent the misuse of alcohol and other drugs.

Parents need to start talking with children about all sorts of things, including drugs, when they're very young. Children need to be given clear and consistent messages about what's expected of them. They need rules and limits. Children are naturally curious and should be encouraged to ask questions about what they see around them. Children know they're important when parents listen carefully to their questions. Simple, direct answers often satisfy them.

Help Your Children Understand the Safe Use of Medicine

Children can understand that people put good and bad things into their bodies. They know that milk and fruit will keep them strong and healthy but that too much of even good things can make them sick. They can learn that medicine can also be good for people but only when used properly.

As a parent, you can start to tell your children about medicines even when they are very young.

For example:

- "Medicine is not candy."
- "Even a little too much medicine can hurt you."
- "Never use someone else's medicine."
- "We keep medicine in a safe place."
- "We use medicine only when we really need it. If I get a headache, I try rest, using a cold cloth or getting fresh air to get rid of it."
- "Only I may give you medicine. If I'm not with you, I'll tell you who is allowed to give you medicine."

Some children require medicine for health problems such as asthma or diabetes. It's important for you and your child to understand what medicines do and to follow the doctor's directions for use.

Let's Talk About Smoking

Tobacco is one of the most addictive and deadly drugs. Anti-smoking campaigns have made a difference in the way our society looks at smoking. However, some young people are still taking up the habit. Children under age seven believe that "smoking is bad", but they see glamorous images of smoking on television and in movies. They often copy celebrities or people they know.

Here are some common situations and possible responses to help you talk with your kids about smoking:

"Look Mommy, I'm smoking!"

"I see you're pretending to smoke! I'm glad it's just a pretend cigarette, because we know smoking is really bad for you."

"If smoking is so bad, why do you smoke?"

"I know that smoking is not good for my body. Once you start to smoke, it's very hard to quit. I wish I had never started. I have to make sure I keep the smoke away from you."

"I'm afraid that Grandpa is going to die because he smokes."

"I can see why you're worried. I worry too. Cigarettes contain drugs that make your body hungry for more, so it's very hard to quit. That's why Grandpa doesn't want you to start."

"Michael's older sister and her friends smoke. They think it's cool."

"Maybe they think it makes them look grown-up, but you know that smoking is bad for you. Sometimes you have to do what is good for you and not worry about what others think."

Let's Talk About Alcohol

Alcohol is a legal and accepted drug in our society. Parents' attitudes and use influence a child's view of alcohol. Try to imagine your children watching you and others drink. Do they see you unwind with a drink? Do all of your social events and celebrations include alcohol? Do you ever ask your children to bring a drink to you?

It is important to let your children know your family values and rules about drinking. You can start by answering their questions about alcohol. Here are some practical answers that may help you:

"Can I have a sip of your beer?"

"No. This is a drink for adults and it's not good for growing children. Would you like some juice?"

"Why do you drink it?"

"I enjoy the taste, but if I drink too much it will change the way I feel, so I have to be careful."

"What's in this pop that makes it taste so funny?"

"This drink has alcohol in it. It's a drink for adults. I need to be more careful to keep it out of your reach and you need to remember not to take someone else's drink."

“I thought you’re not supposed to drink and drive and that’s what you’re doing!”

“I’m drinking a can of juice. When I have a drink that contains alcohol, like beer or wine, I will not drive.”

“Why did Uncle Jim start walking and talking funny at the party last night?”

“Uncle Jim had too much alcohol to drink. Too much alcohol can make you feel and act differently. It can even make you sick to your stomach. What do you think about the way he acted?”

Make sure there are no leftover drinks or open bottles that a child could get into around your house. A child can be harmed seriously by even a small amount of alcohol.

Help Your Children Feel Good About Themselves

Children need healthy self-esteem and a sense of responsibility to help them stay away from alcohol and other drugs.

Parents can help their children feel good about themselves in many ways. Children need to feel that they are an important part of the family. Spend time with your children and listen to them. Let them know that you want to hear about their thoughts and feelings.

Children can help with family jobs such as making beds or doing the dishes. When we recognize their work as helpful – even when it is not a complete or “proper” job – we build their self-image and their sense of responsibility.

Let your children play and have fun – by themselves, with other kids or with your family. Children get a sense of pride when they learn new skills or take on challenges. Remember that the point is for children to enjoy themselves and get involved - not to win or be the best!

Setting the Rules, yet Letting Your Children Make Choices

Children need clear limits and rules, but they also need a chance to learn how to make decisions. For example, you can set a definite bedtime hour, but even very young children can choose their own pajamas. With older children, let them choose what to do after school, as long as you provide the choices. For example, you could say, “Would you like to play outside or read a book?” Later, you could ask them, “Are you glad you made that choice? Would you do something different next time?”

Show Your Love

Finally, let your children know how much you love them – “just because” – regardless of what they do or how they act. Let them know this “unconditional” love and respect is there, even when you are angry or disappointed in how they’re behaving. Children who feel loved and accepted have a much better chance of avoiding problems with alcohol and other drugs when they’re older.

This pamphlet was developed by Parent Action on Drugs and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health: www.camh.net