

Talking with Teens About Drugs, Including Alcohol



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Teenagers feel a need for acceptance and connection with others, and may seek this in friendships with peers, particular activities or relationships with family members. Sharing a connection with family members is helpful to them. Talking with your teen can be challenging at times, especially if you haven't built this connection or discussed serious subjects in the past. This publication offers some tips on how to communicate with your teen in general, as well as on issues about drugs, including alcohol.

Tips on Talking with Teens About Alcohol and Other Drugs

Teenagers usually are interested in talking about what they *can do* with their time and choices, such as going out with friends, getting a driver's license or buying a new outfit. However, parents and caregivers also need to discuss with them tough issues that may relate to what they usually *can't do*, or at least should avoid, such as use of alcohol and other drugs.

So, how do caregivers approach or talk to their teens about drugs, including alcohol? Talking to your teen can be difficult at first if you haven't sat down with him or her to discuss many serious subjects. Communication with teenagers means listening as much as talking. The tips that follow can help you open the lines of communication and connect with your teenager so you can talk about the real issues facing your teen.

Find a Spot Without Interruptions

Finding a place where you and your teenager can have a conversation without interruptions is important. Teenagers need to feel their time talking with you is not constantly pressured by outside distractions. Possible locations or activities that

may allow you to communicate without interruptions can include:

- *Going for a walk together in your neighborhood or at a local park*
- *Starting a private e-mail conversation that allows time to exchange thoughts*
- *Taking a nature hike together*
- *Visiting while in the car running an errand or going to the store*
- *Going out to talk at a quiet restaurant or shop*
- *Finding a quiet room at home or in your location where you can sit and visit*
- *Turning off the TV and sitting together in the living room*
- *Doing something together that allows you time and space to visit (washing dishes, folding laundry, etc.)*

Going for a walk, visiting the store or doing something together in the evening (cooking dinner, fixing the car, etc.) can give you the time and location you need to talk with each other. If you are in a situation that makes such time or locations difficult, you may explore other ways to pursue such conversations.

Side-by-side conversations in an informal setting often are easier for teens and adults. Face-to-face confrontations can be scary and often don't promote true discussions. Any time caregivers can provide an environment that is calming or relaxing while discussing difficult

issues can help the conversation flow more easily. Conversations can take place anywhere, but respecting one another and not embarrassing the other person is important.

Sometimes if other siblings, family members or people are around, finding time and space alone with your teen can be difficult. However, it still is extremely important. Plan a time together even though siblings are around if nothing else is working. Ask a friend to watch the other children so you and your teen can go for a walk or just hang out in another room. Turn off the television or computer, and don't answer the phone

to show your teen you are focused only on him or her and his or her needs. It sends the message to your teen that he or she is more important than other things around you. This can be a powerful way to connect and send positive messages, most of all a message of love.

Use Conversation Starters to Begin

Think about what you want to discuss regarding alcohol and other drugs, and plan to use conversation starters to reduce anxiety or discomfort. Difficult

subjects can be the hardest things to bring up with a teen. Anxiety, discomfort, defensiveness and other feelings can take over and lead to a disagreement or avoidance of the topic. Therefore, thinking about what you want to discuss and having a plan is important. Tips for starting the conversation include:

- *Make a list of key items or topics you would like to discuss.* Write down your topics, and even what order to discuss them, on a piece of paper. This can help you remember to use statements that express how much you care or allow you to focus on your wording of a situation. This can make a difference!
- *Only address one subject at a time.* This will allow for time to focus on all areas of concern related to one specific subject.
- *Start a conversation with a positive remark, a smile and a short explanation of your current mood or general feelings about the topic (concerned, curious, etc.).*
- *Ask a specific question and seek some input from the teen.* A good question requires more than a nod, or a "yes" or "no" answer. It also allows the other person to take part in the conversation. For example:
 - What did you do today?
 - Did you win the track meet?
 - How was Chess Club?
 - Did you learn anything new in 4-H?
- *Don't rush in with attacks, such as: "I heard you blew the test in math today! Were you too smashed to study?!"* This will stop conversations before they start.

Nonthreatening questions you ask can get teens or other adults to open up a little and trust you. To build this trust, you must be genuinely interested in what the other person is saying. Avoid distractions while the two of you are talking. Then bring up a few concerns you have using statements that reflect how you are feeling, such as: "I am feeling frustrated, angry, but most of all confused as to why you would want to try drugs. Can you tell me how you ended up in this situation?"

Brainstorming Alternatives to Alcohol and Other Drugs

Teens typically list one of six primary reasons for getting involved with alcohol or other drugs, which are to: (1) *feel grown-up*; (2) *fit in and belong with others*; (3) *satisfy curiosity*; (4) *take risks and rebel*; (5) *relax and feel good*; and (6) *avoid pressures and stress*.

Teens and caregivers need to be able to brainstorm and discuss positive alternatives to alcohol and other drugs. Fill out the table below with your teen by thinking of different options for each area, and try to provide your teen with learning experiences you can share.

Instead of choosing alcohol or other drugs in response to these issues, what might you do instead?	Teen's first idea	Teen's second idea	Parent's idea
Feel grown-up			I like to go out to eat at a nice restaurant and take time for myself. (Example)
Fit in and belong with others			
Satisfy curiosity			
Take risks and rebel			
Relax and feel good			
Avoid pressures and stress			

Stop Talking and Use Active Listening

As a parent or caregiver, you need to know when to stop talking and listen to what your teenager has to say in the conversation. Listen to your teen with love and attentiveness. If you are listening, usually this means your teen is talking more. Teens need to know their words have meaning to you, and you care about them and not just the mistakes they might have made.

As adults, most of us need to express our feelings and opinions while processing situations or concerns. Teenagers are the same. They need to be able to express feelings or frustrations while feeling connected to those around them. Teens need to say what is important to them and why. Active listening really means encouraging more conversation. Responding with a few words can show you are paying more attention to the conversation, such as:

- "I see."
- "Uh-huh, tell me more."
- "Wow, I didn't know you felt that way. Can you tell me more about that?"
- A few words with a head nod can show you are listening to your teen.
- Restate what your teen just said: "If I am hearing you right, you are saying ..."

Don't Make Accusations

Do not begin the conversation with your teen by making accusations or threats about his or her choices or behavior. If you begin a conversation in this way, teens are likely to immediately become defensive and will avoid your questions or be highly negative. Although you need to be specific and have your teen be honest with you, an approach that uses accusations generally does not work. Don't accuse your teen of doing something wrong without any proof.

Often, teens already are experiencing other adults in their lives who assume they are only making bad decisions. Attacking someone because you think he or she might have done something wrong can put up a wall in any

relationship, which makes future conversations difficult, destroys trust and complicates relationships. Trust is a powerful bond between caregivers and children. Instead of accusing without proof, try sitting down in a quiet place and discussing situations or issues that arise. Discuss what is happening in each other's lives.

Focus on Solutions Together

Work with your teenager to move beyond criticism of personal mistakes and instead focus on developing options and finding solutions together. Issues related to alcohol and other drugs often can lead parents and teens toward disagreements with each other. Such disagreements keep parents and teens from making progress on solving concerns. Together they need to think about options (good and bad) and explore the best choices.

At times, people pick the wrong option for their behavior when they make a bad choice. With alcohol and other drugs, such choices can have serious consequences. If a teen cannot see the positive options, then making better choices is harder.

Think briefly about the scenario described below, then list the options that might be available (both positive and negative).

- **What are Margaret's options?**
All day long, Margaret and her friends have been talking about going to a football game after school. Margaret knows her team is playing against its rival school (making the game exciting), so she is excited about attending. Margaret goes to the football game and meets her friends. Her friends want to leave the game after only a few plays. They say they know a good place to "party" and might be able to get some "interesting stuff." What are her options (list some)?
 1. *Example – Tell the friends she really wanted to see this game and is staying to watch, but they can let her know what their plans are after the game next time.*

2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Review these possible options you have listed, and discuss *both* positive and negative ones with your teen. Discuss *why* some options are positive and *why not* to make negative choices. Through working together to pick a possible solution that would work for your teen and match your family values, situations can be less threatening. This will help a teen identify positive choices before encountering a questionable or bad situation.

Important Communication Reminders

Sometimes the communication parents or caregivers have with children can become one-sided and limited. The only real conversations happening in a home might be a parent's instructions to "take the garbage out" or "pick up your room." Remember these important communication reminders:

- Give teens an opportunity to express their feelings and develop a sense of positive independence in their lives.
- Spend time talking with your teens so they come to feel valued, appreciated and connected with the family.
- Send messages of love and let your teen know he or she can turn to you in a difficult situation.
- Focus on making your conversations successful so you won't be nervous about approaching your teen for tough conversations.
- Acknowledge your concerns and use honest, caring conversations to discuss alcohol and other drugs with your teen.

Conclusion

If these suggestions are not working for your family, seek additional help through other resources. Valuable resources include your support systems, such as family, friends, neighbors and community professionals. Helpful information always is available in books, newsletters and classes, and through family counseling or therapy. Counseling can provide families with additional tools to overcome difficult times.

Helpful Phone Numbers

North Dakota Helpline

211 or (800) 472-2911

Or call your county office of the NDSU Extension Service to find phone numbers for agencies that can assist you.

Regional Parent Resource Centers with the NDSU Extension Service can provide phone numbers of other agencies to assist you. A local NDSU Extension agent also can provide you with information.

The mental health associations or departments in each state can provide you with resources, locations of mental health professionals or answer your questions.

- Mental Health Association of **North Dakota**, (479) 255-3692
Web site: www.mhand.org/
- Mental Health Association of **Minnesota**, (612) 331-6840
Web site: www.mentalhealthmn.org/
- Mental Health Association of **Montana**, (406) 727-6642
Web site: www.montanamentalhealth.org/
- Division of Mental Health **South Dakota**, (605) 773-5991
Web site: www.state.sd.us/dhs/dmh/MentalHealthResources.htm

Helpful Resources

- Walsh, D. (2004). *Why do they act that way? A survival guide to the adolescent brain for you and your teen*. New York, N.Y.: Free Press.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1997). *Keeping youth drug-free: A guide for parents, grandparents, elders, mentors and other caregivers*. DHS Publication No. (SMA) 97-3194. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Visit the Web site at www.drugfree.org/ to find additional information on alcohol and other drug use. This is a national leader in organizations working to educate parents, reduce alcohol and other drug use with resources, and provide articles to help parents, educators and teens.

References

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- Nesbitt, S. (2002). *Teens and alcohol*. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Extension Service. Retrieved Oct. 17, 2006, from www.extension.umn.edu/info-u/families/BE929.html
- Parents: The Anti-Drug (Public Health Campaign). *Laying down the rules: Tips for parents*. Retrieved Oct. 17, 2006, from www.theantidrug.com/ei/tips_for_parents.asp
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1997). *Keeping youth drug-free: A guide for parents, grandparents, elders, mentors and other caregivers*. DHS Publication No. (SMA) 97-3194. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Van Vranken, M. (2004). *Drugs: What you should know*. Retrieved Oct. 17, 2006, from www.kidshealth.org/teen/drug_alcohol/drugs/know_about_drugs.html
- Walsh, D. (2004). *Why do they act that way? A survival guide to the adolescent brain for you and your teen*. New York, N.Y.: Free Press.

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