

Drugs and your teenager

Parental worries about smoking, alcohol, cannabis and other drugs in Pre-teens to Sixteens

The arrival of puberty and adolescence in children appears to increase the anxiety many parents feel. This is exacerbated by the many stories which appear in the media about excessive use of alcohol and illegal drugs and promiscuous sexual behaviour in young teenagers. This article aims to help parents to be better able to assess the risk for their own children with regard to actual realities of drug taking and make clear whether their children are in need of extra help regarding risky behaviours, or whether parents can reasonably trust their individual children to act sensibly and responsibly most of the time. More detailed information about the problems associated with drug use is not included as it is to be easily found elsewhere on the Internet. Government websites are a good place to start. Please be clear that, while the numbers of teenagers putting themselves at risk is of great concern, this article aims to reassure the majority of parents that worry about their particular children may be an overreaction, which can lead to a loss of trust between parents and teenagers.

Introduction

The use of drugs in a high risk way is relatively low for many children. We need to assess the risk factors for our own children and then act accordingly.

In considering the risks, it also helps to be clear whether statistics are referring to children trying something once or to regular use, or over-use—

there is a big difference in consequences between a polite taste of alcohol, one drink on a weekend, a once off learning experience of getting drunk, and regularly getting drunk. These things can muddy the statistics and also lead to parental panic.

Tobacco

The numbers of teens smoking tobacco in most English speaking countries is now very low overall (4% of Australians 12 to 17 years have smoked more than 100 cigarettes in their life time— 2013 National Drug Strategy Household Survey: Key findings, by Australian Institute of Health and Welfare). Certainly more than this do try it—23% of 12 to 17 year olds have smoked at least once, but if we remove the age range, 50% of 17 year olds have smoked at least

once. In other countries where smoking is still part of adult life, with fewer legislated restrictions, like France or in Asia, it will still be more of an issue and may need to be worked with more intensively. In Australia where smoking has been banned from air flights, hospitals and public buildings for many years and is also banned restaurants and eating places and many other areas as well, the smoker is increasingly isolated, at 12.8% of the population.

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Whether a child's friends and family smoke is now an even more significant factor than earlier. Parents who smoke are faced with a dilemma here of how to educate their teenagers about the

health risks of smoking, especially in pregnancy, when they themselves are obviously not following present medical advice about tobacco use.

Alcohol

The risk of alcohol use and other drugs is of much greater concern in English speaking countries and Europe. Alcohol is widely consumed by adults and teenagers alike and can be part of the way different nations see themselves. This too is gradually changing in Australia but its widespread use complicates many efforts to bring common sense to its use. In addition, new sorts of alcoholic drinks, especially the cheap yet highly alcoholic sweet drinks favoured by teenagers (especially girls) add to the potential for highly damaging drinking habits. Nevertheless, the statistics on alcohol use would suggest that it is still only a minority, about 10 to 15% of Fifteens for example, who are at serious risk from alcohol, consuming it regularly and to the point of being drunk. These are the children at risk of liver damage, and worse when alcohol is combined with other drugs and unprotected sex. Many

more teenagers regularly consume alcohol but not to the point of being drunk.

The 2013 National Drug Strategy Household Survey (AIHW) found 72.3% of children aged 12 to 17 had not had alcohol in the previous 12 months. Of those who did drink, these teenagers obtained 30% of this alcohol from their parents. While it could be argued that our liver function would be healthier without any alcohol at all to deal with, what is crucial to our children's general well-being is whether the amount of alcohol consumed compromised their integrity, behaviour or safety. Generally this is what worries parents most, with good reason, with alcohol contributing to the three main causes of teen death: injury, homicide and suicide. However, in regard to this, as in sexual behaviours, the majority of teens do not show high risk behaviours.

Other drugs

The numbers of children and teenagers using other drugs, including legal pharmaceuticals, again is very concerning but is still lower than alcohol. The use of different drugs varies with time, social favour and the legislation in place in different states and countries. For example the Australian survey mentioned above found that 14.8% of Australian teenagers 12 to 17 years have tried cannabis with 10.2% of fourteen year olds who had used it in the last year. This makes it the most commonly used illicit drug in

Australia. The same study found 2.9% of Australian children aged 12 to 17 years have used meth/amphetamines (over half of which was crystal or ice). Other figures are 1.6% for heroin, 1.7% for cocaine, 2.7% ecstasy, 3% hallucinogens and 2% steroids without a prescription. The teenagers at risk here are still in a minority.

So once again parents need to look realistically at the risk factors for your own children.

Risk factors

Whether or not your children use drugs is affected again by personal and environmental factors, similar to those which affect sexual behaviour.

Personal factors (relating both to your teenager and those in their peer group) include: previous sexual and emotional abuse, low self-esteem in the child or a parent; teenagers in serious rebellion looking for power, recognition and affection; absent parents; parents who don't care or who are not around physically or emotionally; and adult modelling that drug taking is acceptable behaviour.

Prevention strategies

One of the most powerful strategies for parents to use in preventing drug use in their own children is to teach them to have a deep respect for themselves and in particular, the health of their bodies. Have your children learned to care for themselves through eating nutritious, unprocessed food, getting good sleep, keeping warm, wearing appropriate clothing, valuing movement and exercise? Have they learned to have respect for the body's warning systems, for pain and illness processes, as symptoms of the body's need for more attention and support, including giving time for healing and recovery? This of course is best done all throughout childhood, through modelling what good care of the body involves in illness and in health. Then when the question arises for adolescents of whether they themselves want to use alcohol and drugs, they already have a foundation for making a healthy choice, especially when they are given additional information about what these drugs do to the body. However, in adolescence they are ever more capable of learning how to look after themselves well, given the right guidance from you, from

If your children are strongly centred young people, with good self respect, no need to prove anything, able to say 'no' when they need to, even within their peer group, sensible enough and knowledgeable about how to keep themselves safe and healthy, they are not at high risk. Much depends too on who your children hang out with and the sort of activities they take part in. Pre-teens and younger teens are at higher risk if they are mixing with older teenagers.

teachers and even sports coaches. When the coach says no drinking the night before a match it is saying something about the effects of alcohol on the body.

If teenagers are also emotionally healthy, one can add the question in discussion, do you really need these drugs to be happy or social, or can you be these things without them, without losing self-control and integrity? The more we meet our children's needs in healthy ways, the less need they will have to meet their needs in unhealthy ways, like in using drugs and being vulnerable to peer pressure and commercial messages. The article on *Avoiding Trouble* with pre-teens and teenagers can help remind parents about what to consider here.

The right information is also important for teenagers to have. Educate yourself and then talk with your children about the effects of various drugs and why people take them. Share stories about people you know who have taken or are taking drugs, or overindulging in alcohol. Fill out their experience and knowledge with

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yours. This needs to be done matter-of factly as information sharing, not fear mongering.

Children also need to know that it is clear from current research that the risks of long term damage from drug use are much higher for children who start taking drugs of any sort when young, and when brain and sexual development are not complete. A very recent Australian/New Zealand longitudinal study of cannabis use before 17 years of age has shown that even low level of its use affects the parameters they examined, including school leaving age, degree attainment, drug dependency and suicide (Silins et al, The Lancet Psychiatry, Volume 1, Issue 4. Pages 286-293 Sept 2014). Keep in mind though, that most people (not just teenagers) have difficulty giving up something they enjoy now just because of possible negative consequences later, particularly when the consequences are years ahead and are presented via abstract numbers. This information is important, and useful, but can't be relied on to change behaviour.

Have conversations with them about what they or their friends think about the different drugs, what is considered 'normal' and how your teenager might be able to participate socially, but not take the drugs when 'everyone else is doing it'. Help them to see that even adults can be pressured to drink, smoke and take drugs and have to be strong to hold their own in a group who feels threatened by a non-drinker for example. Teach them ways around this social pressure problem, like always having a half glass of something in their hand, water will do, so people are more likely to leave them alone. Talk to your children about the social dynamics of this. They are coming into the ages (Fourteen especially) where they enjoy trying to understand 'how people tick', human psychology. Help them to see that personal integrity is the best defence they have. To be

true to themselves and their ethical stance brings more respect in the long run than 'people pleasing' and giving in to group pressure.

Think carefully about what you as parents are modelling. Some people have argued that it is better to let your children use drugs at home because at least you know where they are and you can keep an eye on them. But is this not colluding with what you know is unhealthy for them and what does this collusion teach them? Research has shown that when parents act with integrity on what they believe in – in this case that drugs are not healthy for their bodies and their wellbeing – that it is far more powerful and effective to stand up for what you believe in. It is perfectly reasonable to insist that in your sphere of authority others agree to act with integrity and in healthy ways, if they want to be in your company, in your car, in your house, on your property. You can make it clear that underage drinking of alcohol by other teenagers, alcohol consumed unwisely by adults and drugs are not allowed in your house. That you respect the health and wellbeing of others too much to allow it. This takes courage to do.

You can support your children in other practical ways too. For example you can offer to or insist on picking them up at specified times from parties where there will be alcohol or drugs. You can have an arrangement where they can call you any time to come to get them if things look like they are going to get out of hand in a social situation. You can offer to be the 'bad guy' for them if they need that support in your insisting they be home at a certain time. Help them to work out for themselves ways to keep themselves safe. Support them in finding ways to have fun that do not involve drugs – often teenagers don't know how to have fun without having alcohol. Keep the statistics on drug use in mind here. "Everyone" is not doing it, though many of their friends may be. Do they need to

develop new friendships, join in different activities where the emphasis is not on alcohol or drugs? Teenagers can get caught in social situations where it seems all those attending get drunk, and are smoking pot and cigarettes, every weekend. These teenagers are mixing with high risk teenagers and are at high risk themselves. And unfortunately along with the drugs and drunkenness also comes unprotected sex with multiple partners, often in situations which lack respect for relationships and other people. These teenagers need firm but flexible guidance. They need to know you care. You need to be able to be a wise mentor, before a friend.

Deep parent commitment can make a big difference in dealing with drug problems in another way. A woman giving a talk on teenagers and drugs was asked by a mother how she could support her teenage son to kick his cannabis use habit. The advice given was surprising but insightful. It was for the mother to identify one of her own addictive behaviours and get an agreement with her son that they would each change their addictive behaviour and support each other in the process. This is no time for 'armchair' or 'remote control' adult support, for teenagers will have no respect for that; what this speaker was suggesting was that by modelling what her son needed to do in her own efforts, using her own will, on something that was difficult for her to do, she would strengthen her son to also attempt to overcome

his own dependency, out of his own independent decision. This takes courage and commitment. (If any adults have trouble identifying their own addictive behaviours, their teenagers will probably be happy and able to suggest a few, maybe even one where its elimination might help them as well—like what they feel is compulsive over-concern for them!)

Finally, if you have taught your children well, trust them. There is a sad danger that parents who have trusted their children up to this point suddenly panic and withdraw their trust. Sure, teenagers may lie and make mistakes, just as we ourselves may have at their age, but it is more helpful to still have faith in them to become increasingly responsible for their health and well-being and to help them to learn from mistakes. It is reasonable to trust most teenagers to do what is sensible, with your support. You need to make sure they have the information they need to stay safe and healthy. It is far more helpful and respectful for parents to be able to talk about risky behaviours with teenagers while still trusting them to be sensible. Trust helps to build trustworthiness, on your side and theirs. If they do try drugs, encourage them to talk about these experiences too. Many people have tried things once or twice and used these experiences to decide they don't want to do it again. These trials push up the figures in the statistics, but can actually be positive learning experiences.

Pre-teens and teens showing moderate to high risk behaviour need extra help

Clearly if your particular teenagers are in the "at serious risk 10 to 15%", they need added help urgently. Whether they listen to you now will depend on how you do it and how you have been doing it over the past few years. If their behaviours have been troubled and rebellious or

shown vulnerability only for a short time, and you have a reasonable relationship with them, you may be able to help them sufficiently yourself. But if these behaviours are well established over a long time you will probably need professional help. For both short term and

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long term troubles it may help to use the article *Avoiding trouble with Elevens, Twelves and Teenagers* to trouble-shoot where things might be going wrong and what would help. If, after working through the many problem areas in detail and putting new strategies in place to support your teen, behaviour changes for the better, these changes may be sufficient. If nothing changes with all your efforts, then you probably need extra help from people qualified to help in the area of concern. Health professionals and 'help lines' can usually point you in the right direction for support.

With rebellious teenagers, often all parents want to do is to put their heads down and keep out of trouble with them. Teenagers can be powerful in their energy and in their anger. But they need to

know you care enough to fight for their well being, even if they resist it. You have to find the right way of going about it. This is where professional counselling can help.

This process of supporting your children through their teenage years is an ongoing responsible task but should not be based on fear. They need information, trust and the courage to talk about what they are experiencing in life. In sexual feelings, interests, and in social situations with alcohol and drugs and they need you to model what you teach them— self respect, good healthy habits, care for others and so on. This gives them the best chance to live their lives happily, with integrity, and without drugs.

A last word about worrying and trust

Worry only about those things you have the power to change and put your energy into working with those things. Use your wisdom and experience to give information and context to the situations your teenager meets. Teach them mindfulness and safety, but also courage and enthusiasm. Stay away from fear and generalities and work with the specifics of your teenager and each situation. They will learn to trust you more when you are rational and reasonable about the real risks to them in a particular situation. When you have worked things through together, and a decision is made,

let it go. We say, yet again, if you have brought your children up to be well informed and trustworthy, trust them. If you haven't, well try to trust them anyway to draw the best out of them. If they make mistakes, work with them to learn from the mistakes and trust them to try again with more wisdom. Things do go badly wrong sometimes, with the best made plans, but that is life. Worrying does not help there. What helps most is that lessons can be learned from mistakes, and the blessings counted. Learn to breathe out and let go.

Further reading

More current statistics on drug use by Australian children, with other useful current information on drugs and their effects, plus resources for parents, can be found on the Australian Drug Foundation website. <http://www.adf.org.au/>