



## **Alcohol and Drugs: How to Talk to Your Teen**

Since the day she was born, you have been protecting her. When she was just a baby, you spent countless hours in the middle of the night rocking her to sleep. When she was a toddler you were there to wipe away her tears when she scraped her knee. When she rode her bike for the first time without training wheels, you were right there running alongside her to catch her if she fell.

There will come a day, if it hasn't already, when you will no longer be able to protect your child from every bad thing that may happen to her. You won't be able to physically protect her from all hazards and pressures she will face, but there are still steps you can take to protect your child, even when you are not around - especially when it comes to protecting her from drugs and alcohol.

As a parent, you are the most powerful influence in your child's life, no matter how unlikely that may seem at times. You are also the biggest deterrent to your kids' using drugs or alcohol. Talking to your kids about the dangers of drugs and alcohol is almost as difficult as talking to your kids about sex. Discussing alcohol and drugs with your children is definitely a challenge, but substance abuse is too important an issue to confront indirectly.

According to a recent study by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the average age for a first drink is 13. More than 10 million teenagers drink, and last year alone more than 7 million teenagers engaged in binge drinking. When it comes to drugs, in the next 24 hours, 15,006 teenagers will use drugs for the first time. One of them could be yours.

I see some of the faces behind these numbers each day. I work with troubled teens, and nearly all of them struggle with substance abuse. The abuse of drugs and alcohol is a very real problem that almost every teen has to confront one way or another.

A large majority of parents think they have had serious discussions with their teens about drugs and alcohol, while only about half of teens think they had a similar talk with their parents. You, as a parent, may need to re-learn how to communicate in a way your kids can relate to. Without communication, everything else you try with your teen will fail. Remember, discussing difficult subjects like alcohol and drugs with your teen is not a 10-minute talk. It's a deep conversation. Encourage him or her to ask questions. Your goal is to build an ongoing dialogue with your teen. Just by talking to your teen about the dangers of alcohol and drug use decreases the likelihood of their trying marijuana by 36 percent, inhalants by 50 percent and LSD by 56 percent.

Talking is only half of the equation. You also have to learn to listen. Teens, like adults, have valuable things to say. When parents show a genuine interest in listening to their

teen, it helps promote self-esteem and confidence, along with making him or her more comfortable about opening up to them.

Just as important, your kids need to know for certain that you will not tolerate their using drugs or alcohol. Anywhere. Anytime. And there are consequences if they do. This may not carry as much weight with your teen if you have not enforced other daily rules. As with any rule, you must consistently enforce a consequence if a rule is broken.

Your behavior also plays an essential role in whether your kids use drugs or alcohol. If you abuse drugs or alcohol, your kids know about it. As a parent, you are a role model - giving your child an example of how to live as an adult. Do not expect your teen to stay away from drugs and alcohol if you don't. Be a living example of the same values you are trying to instill in your children.

You've heard the old saying, honesty is the best policy - it is. Follow that motto even when your kids are asking you very difficult questions such as, "Did *you* ever do drugs?" If you have, say so. Everyone is allowed to make mistakes. If you're honest, your teens will respect you more. Also, look at this question as an opportunity. Your kids want to talk. The best thing you can do is listen.

If you think your teen will not be subject to the pressures of drugs and alcohol, consider this - more than half of the nation's junior and senior high school students drink alcoholic beverages, and many binge drink to relieve stress and boredom. These pressures are real, but you have the power to be a positive force in your child's life. Protect your teen by talking to them frequently and openly about the dangers of drugs and alcohol.

*Penny. Baker has devoted her career to the healing and restoration of children and their families. For more information about Three Springs, please call (888) 758-4356.*