

## Raising Drug-Free Sons

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Talking with boys about drugs can be a challenge. But if that boy is your son, it can be a bit easier if you follow one simple rule: know your teenager. Know what motivates him and recognize his unique strengths that will help keep him drug free.

When asked, boys say they turn to alcohol and illicit drugs for one or more reasons:

- To do what their friends are doing
- To fit in
- To escape emotional pain in their lives
- To ease boredom
- For fun
- Because they're curious
- To take risks. Many teenage boys yearn for a sense of adventure and, for them, using illicit drugs such as marijuana provides that prospect in an indirect way.

### *The Conversation*

**Understand your son's leanings, and tailor the discussion to suit his personality.** For instance, if your son tends to be a risk-taker, talk with him about getting involved in activities that challenge him physically or mentally or help him find positive activities that excite him in other ways. Just lecturing him about the dangers of drug use while not respecting his need for adventure may not make the right impression. Similarly, efforts to transform him into a placid young man will be counterproductive. Help him identify role models—such as entrepreneurs and athletes—that have successfully incorporated risk-taking into their lives. Do not discourage his daring. Rather, play to that strength.

**Choose the right time, place and tone.** When talking with your son about a subject as touchy as drug use, avoid what researchers call a "harsh start-up." This is a conversation that begins with critical, accusatory or mocking verbal jabs. Conversations that start this way often lead to defensiveness and end in failure and hard feelings. Instead, choose a time when you are both calm—perhaps when taking a walk, driving to practice, eating a snack or just watching TV. In addition, using a softer tone will dramatically increase the chances that your conversation will have a positive outcome.

**Open the door for a range of emotions.** Reassure your son to feel free to express a variety of emotions without fear of criticism or ridicule and then help him manage his emotions. Since many young men are prone to emotional overload, you can coach your son to use calming techniques by modeling them when your own emotions are high. Teach him to use breathing exercises, positive self-talk or distraction to help calm himself. Allow for self-imposed time-outs when your son is angry—or remove yourself from the situation if necessary—because it is impossible to carry on a reasonable dialogue when tensions are high. Do not push for closure until both of you are able to communicate productively.

**Guide him as he asserts his masculinity.** Help your son build personal power and sense of purpose. Encourage conversations that reflect his natural yearning for exploration and purpose and avoid imposing fear-based responses no matter how anxious you feel. Talk with him about his role models and respect his desire to emulate them in reality and fantasy.

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