

Think Your Kid Won't Try Drugs?

Most parents can't imagine their children lighting up a joint, smoking a pipe of crack, snorting heroin, or taking a hit of Ecstasy. Only 20 percent of parents think their kids may have been offered illicit drugs; 53 percent of teens report having been offered an illicit substance. Since kids today may not turn to their parents for help after being offered drugs, this gap isn't likely to close soon.

Parents can miss some of the warning signs that their kids are at risk. For example, cigarette smoking by teens has been linked with an increased chance that they'll try illegal drugs. One in five 12th graders is a daily smoker.

Drug use by kids is high. In 2000, 54 percent of twelfth-graders reported having tried an illegal drug -- up from 43 percent in 1993. But less than one-third of teenagers name their parents as a source of information about drugs. Is there a connection? You decide.

Inhalants are among the most dangerous substances kids abuse today. Almost one in five kids report having used inhalants by the eighth grade. One half of all eighth graders can name at least three inhalants. And inhalants are also the easiest substance for kids to get, since they can find them right in the garage or under the kitchen sink. Many kids sniff, snort, "bag" or "huff" ordinary household products like nail polish remover, cleaning fluid, gasoline, and spray paint. Kids may not realize the enormous risk they are taking. Inhalants starve the body of oxygen and can cause severe brain damage and even sudden death.

Prescription drugs, such as Ritalin, can be sold and abused as street drugs. Be sure to monitor the medications taken by everyone in your household. Warn your children of the dangers of taking even legal drugs that have not been prescribed for them by a doctor.

Teens live every day with the reality of easily available drugs. Peer pressure and positive images of drug use in the media can push them toward drug abuse. Parents need to deal with that reality. They need to offer hope and help. Let your kids know it's okay to act independently. Teach them to say no. Experts often recommend role playing as a teaching tool.

Listen to your kids. Student surveys reveal that when parents listen to kids' concerns and feelings, kids feel more comfortable and are more likely to stay drug-free. Kids who receive lots of love and attention from parents feel more secure and have a higher sense of self-esteem. When they confront new or stressful situations, they are less likely to turn to drugs and alcohol.

- The average age at which teens start using tobacco is 12. The average age at which they start drinking is almost 13. And the average age at which they start smoking pot is 14.
- Eighty-nine percent of 12th graders say marijuana is easily available.
- More than half of teen surveyed say they were offered drugs in 1998.

This article is brought to you by the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign. For more information on how to keep your child drug-free, visit www.theantidrug.com, the parent Web site of the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign.