

Families Offer Best Protection Against Drug Abuse

by Jim Slempp

The war against drug and alcohol abuse is being waged today on many fronts. At our school, we feel we are making progress in helping our students avoid problems in these areas.

Few would deny that the process of prevention is the most important strategy of all. For parents, that priority means the first responsibility is theirs. The home is the grass-roots level where prevention must take place.

However unlikely we may think our children will become involved in substance abuse, we must remember that no family is immune to the problem. It is critical that, as parents of middle-school-age students, you plan now for prevention if you have not already done so. The information that follows contains some important guidelines:

Be a good example. Studies show a strong correlation between rates of drug use in adolescence and the standards of their parents, both in their own use of drugs and in other more general areas of day-to-day life. You must provide a living example.

Respect drugs yourself. Parents who abuse their own minds and bodies with alcohol, tobacco, drug and/or pill use forfeit their credibility for counseling their children in this matter. Remember that the family medicine chest or liquor cabinet is often the source of a child's first drug experience.

Handle personal challenges maturely. Drug abuse often signals an attempt to escape unpleasant realities, both in adolescents and adults. The drink taken to relax after a hard day teaches children that routine stresses of life require chemical relief. Ask yourself, "How do I handle frustration, boredom, conflicts with other family members? What message am I conveying to my child?"

Build your child's self-confidence. A second common source of drug abuse is low self-esteem. As a parent, you hold the most important key to your child's estimation of himself or herself, a love that can nurture both security and courage. Keep in mind these priorities.

Use praise. Sooner or later, children argue with most of what their parents believe with one exception. They almost always accept without question their parent's evaluation of themselves. What do your words and actions tell your children about their worth?

Foster competence. Kids need to find some area in which they can become skilled and confident. Parents can provide opportunities and encouragement for excelling in an area of the child's interest and comfort for the minor failures that are inevitable in the process of growth.

Strive toward unity at home. Disunity at home can be another cause of drug abuse in young people. Some homes resemble either a prison, with each cellmate isolated in his or her own little room, or a battlefield. Some helpful suggestions:

- Plan family activities. Most troubled teens report they can't remember their families ever doing much together or developing any common interest.
- Discuss mutual commitments. A family without basic agreements about values, goals and priorities will result in confused standards of rebellion in the children.
- Finally, work toward positive communication. The bridge of communication between parent and child is one of the most important structures a family can build. If it's strong, it can become a channel to your child for resisting peer pressure and a bridge for discussing temptations. Building that bridge requires time; not just quality but quantity as well. It also requires humility and a willingness to listen and be open to suggestions.

Most of all, however, the bridge of communication is built on sensitivity to your children's needs and interests, hopes and fears, strengths and weaknesses. Being in touch with your children's world, both the world within them and their environment at school, will be the most critical key of all to help your children say no to drug abuse. That key is in your hands.

DISCIPLINE GUIDELINES

Teenage discipline is often more effective if your teen participates in deciding on the consequences of her inappropriate behavior. This calls for each of you to put yourself in the other's shoes in the situation. Ask your teen, "What consequences would you think appropriate if you were the parent and I were the child?"

In the resulting honest answer, teens are usually more harsh with themselves than you would have been, and there are no arguments about the method of correction being arbitrary or unjust. Added benefit: This treatment assumes maturity on your child's part and usually encourages him to act accordingly.

Setting fair rules and boundaries that work with teenagers isn't easy, but following these guidelines will help:

1. Anticipate issues well ahead of time. Snap judgments won't be necessary, and emotions will be far less of a factor.
2. Set an appointment specifically to talk things over. Talking takes time.
3. Consult first with other parents to discover what they are doing. Pick up on their creative ideas.
4. Think over past policies, and move away from rules that don't seem to be working.
5. Limit rules to issues of health and morality. Your teen can decide the rest, and you only have to go to the mat for things that really matter.
6. Focus on exposing reasons behind the views you and your teen hold. This makes finding common ground and alternatives much easier.

HAVE YOU RECENTLY . . .

- Admitted to your teen-ager your ignorance on a subject?
- Been wrong and admitted it to your teenager?
- Offered to help your teenager reach one of her immediate goals?
- Told your teen about one of the stupid mistakes you made as a teenager?
- Admitted your fears about something going on in your life?

Praised your teenager for something he does well?

Told your son or daughter that there is nothing he or she could do to turn off your deep love for him or her?

Asked your teen for forgiveness upon realizing that you were wrongly harsh or vindictive?

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