

Keeping Children Drug-Free Starts With Parents

by Shannon Thienes

AS a friend of mine likes to say, “You get more instructions when you buy a dishwasher, than you do when you have children.” That is certainly true. Most of us learn how to be parents through on-the-job training and by following the example our parents set for us.

Today, widespread use of alcohol and other drugs subjects children, families and our community to pressures virtually unheard of a couple of generations ago. The very idea that our children may become involved in substance abuse is frightening. And yet, at times it seems inevitable.

But attitudes are changing. People are becoming less tolerant of illegal use, and overall casual use is declining. We now know more about what prevention strategies are working. Although alcohol is the drug of choice among our youth and use is still rising, recent national surveys indicate that the overall use of illegal drugs is going down.

As parents, we can build on that progress in our own families by having strong, loving relationships with our children, by having clear family values, by setting and enforcing rules for behavior, by knowing facts about alcohol and other drugs, and by really listening to our children.

Every family has expectations that are determined by its standards and principles. Youngsters report that their parents are the No. 1 reason they choose not to become involved with alcohol and other drugs. Resistance to peer pressure is often based on the family value system.

For that value system to be effective, here are some guidelines parents can follow:

- Communicate your values. Share with your children the standards that your family lives by. Values such as honesty, self-reliance and responsibility are often the basis of such standards. Teach your children how these values will assist them in good decision-making.

Make sure your child understands your family values. Many parents assume that children “should” know what is expected of them, even though many times those expectations go unspoken. How many times have we heard our children say, “Well, you didn’t say I couldn’t.” Take the time to let children know what you want.

- Recognize how your actions affect the development of your child’s own values. Children whose parents smoke are more likely to become smokers. Look at your own use of tobacco, alcohol, prescription drugs and even over-the-counter drugs.

Think about how your attitudes and actions may be shaping your child’s decision about whether or not to use alcohol or other drugs. If you smoke or drink, be prepared to discuss your use with your children. They can understand and accept that there are differences between what adults do legally and what is healthy and legal for children.

Look for inconsistencies between your words and actions. Remember that children are quick to sense when parents are sending mixed signals by what they say and what they do.

General family values and expectations are relatively easy to discuss with children, and parents need to begin this process as early as possible. Communicating with your children positively is one of the best prevention strategies.

Discussing alcohol and other drugs is usually difficult for parents. Because they believe that it won't happen in their family or because they don't know what to say, parents often put off talking to their children about it. It is better to begin talking with your children about drugs and alcohol as early as possible and to keep the communication lines open.

Use every opportunity you have to discuss the issue. Talk about why someone you know uses, the effects it has on others and the results it can have on the person using. Don't be afraid to admit that you don't have all the answers. Let your child know that you are concerned and that you can work together to find the answers.

Here are some basic hints for improving your ability to talk to your child about alcohol and other drugs:

- **BE A GOOD LISTENER.** Make sure your child feels comfortable bringing problems and questions to you. Listen closely to what your child says. Take note of what your child is not saying, too. If your child does not discuss problems, ask questions.
- **PRAISE YOUR CHILDREN.** Place a strong emphasis on the things your child is doing right instead of focusing on what he or she is doing wrong. When parents are quick to praise, children learn to feel good about themselves and they develop the self-confidence to trust their own judgment.
- **GIVE CLEAR MESSAGES.** When discussing the use of alcohol and other drugs, always give a clear, "no use" message. Children need to know exactly what is expected of them.
- **MODEL THE BEHAVIORS** you want from your children. Remember that children learn from example as well as from teaching. Make sure your actions reflect standards and expectations consistent with what has been agreed upon.

It is also important that children feel that they are contributing to the well-being of the family. If they are given opportunities for involvement, the skills to successfully contribute and recognition for their contributions, they are less likely to be at risk of alcohol and other drug abuse.

It makes sense that we involve children in the responsibilities of running a household now that so many families are made up of working parents, and consistent positive recognition for their contributions greatly enhances self-esteem.

Raising healthy children today requires that we, as parents, do our homework. Spend some time thinking about what you want for your child's future. Share your thoughts with them and listen to what they want out of life. Telling your children what you expect from them and what you want for them will help them develop the confidence they will need to reach their goals and stay drug-free.

Shannon Thienes is a certified prevention specialist and teaches parenting classes throughout Lane County.

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