

Prepare Preschoolers For Drug-Free Teen Years

by Dean Walker

Here are seven points to consider in raising your preschooler to be a member of a drug-free society:

- Develop a conscious philosophy of child-rearing. Commit yourself to using discipline techniques that have been shown to help develop healthy adults. This will lessen the chances that, in a moment of anger or stress, you will resort to methods that ultimately undermine your child's self-esteem, such as name-calling, shouting or spanking. Self-esteem is crucial when it comes to resisting drug use.
- Especially during the first year of your child's life, spend as much time with him as you can. Carry him, cuddle and coddle him. It is impossible to spoil a child at this age. Talk to him. Respond to his cries quickly with comforting and to his smiles with smiles of your own. This initiates a family bond and gives your child a very important early feeling that he matters in the world, that he is loved and that his needs will be met.
- Allow your preschooler to experience and learn from the realities of social living by using natural and logical consequences. Dr. Rudolf Dreikurs, in his book "Children the Challenge," explains and gives examples of this method. When the child is allowed to make choices, "good or bad," and to experience within safe limits the consequences that follow, her judgment is being developed. Exercise of judgment, just like exercise of a muscle, promotes its strength. The use of more authoritarian methods might give quicker results in the short run, but it stunts the child's intellectual, emotional and social growth, and makes the child reliant on authority. In pre-teen and teen years, when authority shifts from the parent to the peer groups, the child will be much less capable of resisting peer pressure and deciding for herself that drug use is not necessarily "cool." The older child, in rebelling against an authoritarian parent, may actively seek drugs and drug-using friends.
- Stay away from physical punishment! Studies show that spanking children is effective only in the short run, and sometimes not even then. Physical punishment is often a part of an authoritarian approach to child-rearing and, as such, tends to undermine the child's independence. It has been shown that children who are spanked at home are more likely to be hostile and aggressive toward other children at school. Such a child may develop the antisocial stance, which researchers have pointed to as a risk factor in drug use.
- Allow your young child to express feelings and ideas freely. Dr. Thomas Gordon, in his book, "P.E.T.: Parent Effectiveness Training," shows how to use active listening to help the child express feelings and to convey parental acceptance of those feelings. Shaming, denigrating or punishing the child's thoughts or emotions as those that "nice girls or boys" wouldn't have may cause the child to block and actually become unaware of feelings that arouse anxiety because they do not have parental approval. When this happens, the child loses an important part of his vitality. In later years, this child will be less able to rely upon his own feelings as a guide in making decisions about drug use will.
- Teach your child good anger-management skills. While it is important for children to have access to all their feelings, including anger, it is equally important that the child learn how to express anger safely and constructively. Uncontrolled aggression leads to poor peer relations and an antisocial position. Physically and verbally abusive aggression should be against

family rules (which apply equally to parents). The single most important thing that helps children learn to safely and constructively express anger is watching parents consistently do so.

- Encourage the child's interests in whatever direction they may develop. It is not necessary to teach preschoolers in an organized way to steer them away from the risk factor of poor school performance. In fact, attempting to do so may get in the way of learning.

Follow your children's inclinations and answer their questions patiently. Read to them. Let them explore and play. Provide materials for art and other activities, then acknowledge both their products and their efforts. By providing opportunities, then allowing children to take the lead in making use of them, parents help their children build self-confidence and become well-rounded, which is essential to academic success in school. Parents will be training themselves to respect the innate and unique qualities of each child, while the child is developing interests and talents on the basis of which she may later claim membership in a like-minded, constructive, drug-free peer group.

All parents can make an investment now in their preschoolers' teenage years. While we wonder how society at large can cope with the drug problem, it's worth an extra effort to gain the peace of mind that comes with the knowledge that in our corner of the world, in our families, we're doing all we can to prepare our children.

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