

Lakewood Counseling and Career Center

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TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

By Brian Ross MA, LMFT

How old were you when you first began to learn that powerful and dangerous drugs existed in your world? Many of us, who are at least as old as I am, learned in their early teens or even older. The world has changed. Images of drugs and alcohol, that often lessen their impact or even extol their virtues, are evident in all of the media that inundate our kids.

This issue of drugs and alcohol can be very confusing to kids. We need to help our kids establish fact and interpret fiction. We all know that kids are begging to experiment at age twelve and younger. When then do we begin to broach this subject with them? Studies show, and I would agree based on my work with kids, that they are beginning to formulate questions as early as kindergarten. You know your kids best. Learn where they are by listening. When they are asking or talking about drugs and alcohol you should be responding. Don't wait for a magical age or developmental level. Listen!

Use and adapt the following guidelines for discussion.

Kindergartners

Kindergartners don't need specific information about specific drugs. They need generalities, and they need to know that most people don't use illegal ("bad") drugs.

- **Emphasize health, diet and exercise.** Help your kids to develop positive habits. Teach them that positive habits can't occur at the same time as unhealthy ones.
Healthy habits = healthy bodies. By helping kids learn healthy habits you help them learn to practice the power of saying "yes" to healthy behaviors and "no" to unhealthy behaviors.
- **Provide guidance to your child about what to do when they are not feeling well.** Your child already has a sense of who to trust when confused or scared. Reinforce this knowledge.
- **Explain to children what medicines are.** Explain how medicines can be both helpful and harmful. Talk about who it is OK to accept medicines from.
- **Talk about poisons and how to recognize them.** Talk about the importance of notifying adults when something dangerous occurs.
- **Nurture and cultivate self-esteem in your child.** Help your child to develop their own self-image. Children with good self-esteem will be better able to relate to and help peers and other parents as they contemplate their lives and decisions.

First and Second Graders

When your children get to this age they already have experience in relating to others; and have developed into more social people.

- **Help your kids to identify situations in which others may try to influence them.** Role-play and practice both wise and unwise responses and interactions. Discuss how each feels and what happens to feelings of self-worth when they make healthy decisions.
- **Encourage and practice saying the word "no" with respectful authority.** Practice with peers, family members and imaginary "dudes" and "chicks".
- **Involve your kids in healthy chemical-free hobbies and activities.** Again, promote and help them to value a healthy lifestyle.

First and second graders may begin to need specific information on specific chemicals. Listen. What are they asking about? What are the prevalent chemicals in your community?

- **Describe the general effects of chemicals.** Effects on the body and behavior.

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- **Discuss the differences between medicines, poisons, and illegal drugs.** Emphasize that medicines can be helpful when you are sick, but that others may try to get you to take medicines for unhealthy reasons.
- **Describe the effects of all chemicals on people.** How can these effects impact the individual and the family?

Third and fourth graders

These kids have already formed a strong sense of themselves. They need to survive in the world that we are discussing. Nurture and support their strengths. Help them to build upon their strengths. These kids are making more and more decisions for themselves each day. Help them to cultivate their decision making skills. Encourage open and honest discussion. Reinforce individuality. This is the time when peer pressure really rears its head. **Remember, the pressure that your child will feel from a peer is much stronger than any pressure that you can ever exert as a parent.**

- **Teach children to recognize which parents are responsible people.** Who can be trusted and who can't; not just specific people, but types of people.
- **Make telling your or another responsible adult about any danger a responsibility, not an option.**
- **Talk to your kids about cause and effect relationships.** All actions have consequences – positive or negative. Consequences do not only affect the person making the decision. People who use and abuse chemicals face negative consequences.
- **Discuss helpful ways to handle and express negative emotions and feelings.** Negative emotions and feelings are part and parcel to growing up. They must be dealt with. Help your child to learn as many positive outlets as possible; such as relaxation, talking, hobbies, sports, and so on.

Children of this age are intelligent enough to process and internalize:

- **Legal and personal consequences of chemical use.**
- **Situations where chemicals may be offered.**
- **Skills with which to refuse.**
- **The “no use” rule you give them.**
- **The role importance of law.**
- **Abuse, dependence, and dire consequences including death.**

To all parents of all children, or those who live in a community with children (All of us) – Possibly the most potent tool we have as we try to protect the little charges that we love is our action and inaction. For heaven's sake – be a good role model. Kids are forever watching us and learning. Are you teaching the right behavior for a long healthy life?