

Teen Health Kit for Parents

✓ How to Raise Healthy, Drug-Free Teens: Teen Health Experts Respond

Parents are sometimes surprised to find they have as many questions about raising teens as they had when they were raising toddlers. Some of the hardest questions concern teens' risk-taking behavior — using drugs, for example. Below, teen health experts respond to common questions about teen drug abuse and what parents can do to raise healthy, drug-free teens.

1. Is a certain amount of experimentation a natural part of adolescent development? How can I make my kids less likely to use drugs?

Experimentation is certainly a part of growing up, but it is difficult to know which teens will experiment and quit and which teens will continue to use and develop serious problems with drugs. There are a number of factors that influence drug use, such as genetic predisposition, family behaviors, circle of friends and drug availability. Parents can play a big role, however, in helping teens avoid experimenting with drugs. For example, research suggests that children who share at least five meals per week with their parents are less likely to use drugs. Early awareness of behaviors that are risk factors for drug abuse should become part of every parent's preventive strategy for keeping kids drug-free. In preschool, behaviors such as aggression and poor social skills may be risk factors for later drug use and deserve special attention. In elementary school, aggression is also a warning sign, as is academic failure. Prevention should focus on improving academic performance and social and emotional awareness. In middle and high school, prevention should focus on increasing academic performance and social competence through good study habits, peer relationships and communication. In other words, nurturing your teens' strengths and helping them succeed academically and socially will help them avoid problem drug use.

—Eric T. Moolchan, MD: Clinical Investigator and Director, Teen Tobacco Addiction Research Clinic National Institute on Drug Abuse, National Institutes of Health, Baltimore, MD

2. I smoked pot when I was younger. How should I respond when my children ask me whether I have ever used drugs?

Be honest. Tell them why you did it, and why it was the wrong thing to do. You can tell them that you began smoking pot to "fit in," to feel accepted, but you soon learned about the negative consequences. Smoking pot can cause impaired memory, slowed reaction time and the inability to perform tasks that require concentration and coordination, such as driving a car. Make sure your children know that this means pot users are prone to accidents, and their grades generally go down, because it is hard to focus on work and to retain information. It also increases chances of developing cancer. According to some studies, smoking one joint is equivalent to smoking five tobacco cigarettes, in terms of exposure to cancer-causing chemicals.

—Adelaide Robb, MD: Medical Director of the Adolescent Inpatient Psychiatry Unit, Children's National Medical Center, Washington, DC

3. Is it okay if my child drinks alcohol at home?

There is a common misperception that it is okay for a child to drink alcohol at home. However, there is no data to support this, and I personally don't think it should be allowed, except for very small amounts during an occasional religious ceremony or for a celebration. Even in those circumstances, parents need to be present. Young children are especially vulnerable to the effects of alcohol. It can cause distorted vision, hearing and coordination and alter perceptions and emotions. The way parents handle alcohol helps shape a child's attitude and behavior. As a parent, you can set a good example if you:

- Always drive sober.
- Use coping techniques--not alcohol--to deal with problems, stress or anger.
- Demonstrate you can have fun and be social without alcohol.
- Do not allow teens to attend parties where alcohol is served or there is no adult supervision.
- Do not serve, or allow anyone to bring, alcohol to your teen's parties. (Parents are legally liable for minors' consumption of alcohol in their home.)
- Talk with your children about alcohol, tobacco and other drug use.

—Charles Irwin, Jr., MD, FASM: Editor-In-Chief, Journal of Adolescent Health, Professor of Pediatrics, Director of the Division of Adolescent Medicine, University of California, San Francisco

Local Resources: Council on Alcohol and Substance Abuse of Livingston County

For Treatment/Referral: (585) 243-9210
(Geneseo Office)

OR (585) 335-5052 (Dansville Office)

For Prevention and Education Information:
(585) 243-9236

www.casa-livingston.org

Genesee Valley Health Partnership, Inc.

Healthy Communities that Care

(585)748-5146

www.gvhp.org

Useful Web sites:

www.family.samhsa.gov

www.theantidrug.com

www.nida.nih.gov



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