

How to Hold **Crucial Conversations about Drugs** *with Your Teenager*



Our research shows that better skills can decrease conflict, increase influence, and produce more successful conversations with your teen around important issues like drug and alcohol use. And better conversations mean better outcomes.

Here are some specific skills parents can implement when tackling the topic of drug use with their teens:

Keep Your Best Motives in Mind. When we feel upset, we become angry or fearful, and as a result our motives change. Without realizing it, we begin to focus on punishing, being right, or keeping the peace rather than healthy problem solving. Before talking to your teenager about drugs, pause for a moment and ask the focusing question: What do I really want? This pause can help you get your motives in check and move from simply “keeping the peace” through silence to being a powerful influence on your teen.

Confront with Facts, Not Judgments. When you present the facts, you obligate your teen to respond to the information. When you use judgments or accusatory language, it appears you intend simply to humiliate or punish, and your teen feels no obligation to engage in the conversation. Replace, *“You’re a liar, and I won’t stand for this,”* with *“Over the past week I’ve noticed alcohol missing from the garage refrigerator. Your dad and I haven’t moved it or drunk it. I just looked there a few days ago, so it must have disappeared recently. As far as I know you are the only one who has been at home.”*



Five Tips for Talking about Drugs with Your Teenager

Make It Safe. Teens may become defensive during your crucial conversations *less* because of what you're saying than because of *why they think* you're saying it.

- ▶ State what you *don't* intend and what you *do* intend. *"I want to reassure you that I have no desire to make your decisions for you, or to cut you off from having a happy life. I want to be supportive of you, and I want to influence choices you might make that I believe will hurt you."*
- ▶ Be flexible about *when* you talk, but not about *whether* you talk. Control is a huge issue for teens. Sometimes parents provoke unnecessary conflict by demanding conversations be on their terms. It's best to try to engage your teen in dialogue by respecting his or her preferences about when to talk. For example, *"I'd like to talk openly with you about your concerns and mine. I'm interested in hearing your views even if we disagree. Is now a good time to do that or would it be better later? And if later, when would be good for you?"*

Respecting your teen's timetable for talking does not mean you are no longer the parent. If he or she doesn't want to talk now, show respect by being flexible—within reason. If your teen just doesn't want to talk at all, help him or her understand why talking is required. For example, *"I understand that you don't want to talk right now. I also know that you intend to go to a party tonight where I have reason to believe there might be bad influences. If we can't talk before then, I'll need to decide how to deal with the party tonight on my own. If we can talk before then, it will give me a chance to hear your point of view. What would you prefer we do?"*

- ▶ Create a "safety reserve" by creating safety even when there are no problems. Communicating respect, praising small positive signs, "catching" them when they are being good, and showing an interest in your teen's life will help him or her feel safer talking to you when problems emerge.

Discuss, Agree On, and Stick With Boundaries. If you talk about rules around curfews, choice of friends, and your expectations of knowing where your teen is *before* he or she is tempted to make bad choices, it is much easier to enforce them later. Then when boundaries are violated, hold your teen accountable consistently. If it's a boundary, it should *always* be a boundary.

Evaluate the Dialogue. You're aiming for a two-way, face-to-face conversation that gives your teen room to disagree with you and communicate a different point of view. After the conversation, ask yourself who did most of the talking. If your teen didn't do at least 25 percent of it, you didn't ask enough questions—or you didn't create enough safety to allow your teen to participate fully.

For more information on the National Youth
Anti-Drug Media Campaign, visit
www.theantidrug.com
or call 1-800-788-2800.

For more information on how to hold crucial
conversations about drugs with your teen, visit
www.crucialconversations.com/anti-drug