

Parenting Skills: 21 Tips & Ideas to Help You Make a Difference

What's the biggest deterrent to your kids' using drugs and alcohol? It's you.

Look at the facts: Kids who learn from their parents or caregivers about the risks of drugs are 36% less likely to smoke marijuana than kids who don't. 50% less likely to use inhalants. 56% less likely to use cocaine. 65% less likely to use LSD.

Still think there's not much you can say or do? You are the most powerful influence in your child's daily life. But anti-drug parenting strategies rarely are instinctive, even for the best of parents. The 2 tips that follow can help you turn your child away from the drugs that seem almost inevitable nowadays. You can do something. And you can start right now.

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Get Involved

Kids who are close to their parents are least likely to engage in risky behaviors. The more involved you are in your children's lives, the more valued they'll feel, and the more likely they'll be to respond to you.

1. Establish "together time." Establish a regular weekly routine for doing something special with your child - even something as simple as going out for ice cream.
2. Don't be afraid to ask where your kids are going, who they'll be with and what they'll be doing. Get to know your kid's friends - and their parents - so you're familiar with their activities.
3. Try to be there after school when your child gets home. The "danger zone" for drug use is between 4 and 6 pm, when no one's around; arrange flexible time at work if you possibly can. If your child will be with friends, ideally they have adult supervision - not just an older sibling.
4. Eat together as often as you can. Meals are a great opportunity to talk about the day's events, to unwind, reinforce, bond. Studies show that kids whose families eat together at least 5 times a week are less likely to be involved with drugs or alcohol.

Learn to Communicate

Do you know your kids' favorite music group? What's cool at school? The more you communicate, the more at ease your child will feel about discussing drugs and other sensitive issues with you.

1. Be absolutely clear with your kids that you don't want them using drugs. Ever. Anywhere. Don't leave room for interpretation. And talk often about the dangers and results of drug and alcohol abuse. Once or twice a year won't do it.
2. Be a better listener. Ask questions - and encourage them. Paraphrase what your child says to you. Ask for their input about family decisions. Showing your willingness to listen will make your child feel more comfortable about opening up.
3. Give honest answers. Don't make up what you don't know; offer to find out. If asked whether you've ever taken drugs, let them know what's important: that you don't want them using drugs.
4. Use TV reports, anti-drug commercials, news or school discussions about drugs to help you introduce the subject in a natural, unforced way.
5. Don't react in a way that will cut off further discussion. If your child makes statements that challenge or shock you, turn them into a calm discussion of why your child thinks people use drugs, or whether the effect is worth the risk.
6. Role-play with your child and practice ways to refuse drugs and alcohol in different situations. Acknowledge how tough these moments can be.

Walk the Walk

Be a role model; the person you want your kid to be. What stronger anti-drug message is there?

1. Be a living, day-to-day example of your value system. Show the compassion, honesty, generosity and openness you want your child to have.
2. Know that there is no such thing as "do as I say, not as I do" when it comes to drugs. If you take drugs, you can't expect your child to take your advice. Seek professional help if necessary.
3. Examine your own behavior. If you abuse drugs or alcohol, know that your kids are inevitably going to pick up on it. Or if you laugh uproariously at a movie when someone is drunk or stoned, what message does that send to your child?

Lay Down the Law

Kids between 11-13 - ages highly at risk for drug experimentation - are increasingly independent. Despite their protests, they still crave structure and guidance; they want you to show them you care enough to set limits.

1. Create rules - and discuss in advance the consequences of breaking them. Make your expectations clear. Don't make empty threats or let the rule-breaker off the hook. Don't impose harsh or unexpected new punishments.
2. Set a curfew. And enforce it strictly. Be prepared to negotiate for special occasions.
3. Have kids check in at regular times. Give them a phone card, change or even a pager, with clear rules for using it. (Remember, pagers are not allowed in some schools.)
4. Call parents whose home is to be used for a party. On party night, don't be afraid to stop in to say hello (and make sure that adult supervision is in place).
5. Make it easy to leave a party where drugs are being used. Discuss in advance how you or another designated adult will come to pick your child up the moment he or she feels uncomfortable. Later, be prepared to talk about what happened.
6. Listen to your instincts. Don't be afraid to intervene if your gut reaction tells you that something is wrong.

Praise and Reward

What encourages a kid more than his or her parents' approval? The right word at the right time can strengthen the bond that helps keep your child away from drugs.

1. Reward good behavior consistently and immediately. Expressions of love, appreciation and thanks go a long way. Even kids who think themselves too old for hugs will appreciate a pat on the back or a special treat.
2. Accentuate the positive. Emphasize the things your kid does right. Restrain the urge to be critical. Affection and respect - making your child feel good about himself - will reinforce good (and change bad) behavior far more successfully than embarrassment or uneasiness.