

## How do I talk to my teenager about drugs?

### OTHER TITLES

#### Create It

*Teaching your children to talk about their feelings*

*How can I help my young child learn to get along with others?*

*If you're a parent, you're a role model: How to teach your children by example*

#### Nurture It

*How can I teach my young child to deal with peer pressure?*

*Teaching your children the truth about drugs and gambling*

*How can I help my young child to be more confident?*

*How to listen actively to your children*

#### Choose It

*How can I help my child if my partner is addicted?*

*Helping your teen work through anger*

*The truth about popular drugs*

*How do I know if my teen is using drugs?*

*How do I talk to my teenager about drugs?*

*Raves and club drugs: How do I protect my kids?*

#### Get It Back

*Helping teens evaluate their drug use*

*How bad is my teen's drinking or drug use?*

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*How to get through to your teen*

*Intervening when your teen is using drugs*

*Getting help for your son or daughter who is drinking, using other drugs or gambling*

*Supporting your son or daughter in recovery*

TALKING TO YOUR TEEN about alcohol and other drugs can be challenging. It's hard to know where to start. You might worry that if you raise the topic, it will somehow encourage your child to experiment. You might feel unsure about the subject. Sometimes it seems that teens know more about drugs than you know.

It may seem that the whole issue of drugs is beyond your control, especially as your child indicates more and more that their world is with their own friends and associates, and not with you at home. These feelings of doubt and uncertainty are all normal.

Raising a teenager can be a challenging time for you. But it can also be very rewarding to see someone you love growing up to become a capable young adult.

### Why do some kids use drugs?

Some kids start using drugs out of curiosity—just to see what it's like. Some experiment because their friends are using drugs. Others think it proves their maturity or independence. They see drug use as a sign of growing up, and perhaps showing that they don't care about what others think.

Teenagers are more likely to abuse alcohol or other drugs if they lack social skills or confidence. Teens who have a strong sense of their own self-worth aren't as likely to need drugs in order to escape or to change their personalities.

### Your changing role as a parent

As your child grows up, your role as a parent also changes. Before, you were concerned with your child's safety and protection. Today you need to be there mainly as a coach or guide. Your teen still needs your love and support, but they want to be able to make some decisions on their own.

It can be hard for you to let go, especially when you know that things could easily go wrong. You have the wisdom that comes with experience, but your child may not want to benefit from your experience. Teenagers need to learn some things for themselves.

### Encourage questions

Teenagers have lots of questions, but they are often reluctant to ask questions. They don't want to appear to be ignorant or unsophisticated. This can lead them into social situations and actions they feel unsure about, but are too embarrassed to avoid. Perhaps they are not sure about the effects of a drug and so they decide to try it. Maybe they are not comfortable with saying no to pressure from their friends.

You can help your child by listening to what they have to say, and keeping the lines of communication open. Encourage your teen to ask you questions, and think of ways to open a conversation with them. For example, you could ask what it's like to be in their social group at school. Questions that require more than a one-word answer may help you to engage in real conversation with your teen, and may give you an opportunity to learn from your teen.

If your teenager can count on you to respond to questions and concerns in a reasonable and non-judgmental way, they may get into the habit of talking with you. Once your teen learns to trust you, they'll be more likely to ask for your

opinion on issues related to sexual relationships, and the pressures to use alcohol and other drugs. You may want to think about incidents from your own past that you would like to tell your teen—stories that might in some way be helpful to your child.

If you believe that your child is using drugs, take time to learn a little about the drugs you suspect may already be part of their life. Avoid the temptation to use scare tactics. You can get information about different drugs and their effects. By discussing this factual information with your teen, you can be sure that you both have the same understanding of the drugs and their effects.

### **Some guidelines**

Communicate. Work on listening to your child. This may turn out to be the most important thing you can do for your child.

Educate yourself. Obtain accurate, up-to-date facts about alcohol and the other drugs your child may encounter.

Look at life through your child's eyes. Help your teen try to make sense of the lifestyles they see in advertising and on TV shows. These examples often include the liberal use of alcohol, and attribute too much importance to a person's looks and sexual relationships. Use examples from the media as openings to talk about drugs and decision-making.

Set guidelines for behaviour in discussion with your teenager. Be prepared to renegotiate these guidelines from time to time. Be clear about the consequences of both appropriate and inappropriate behaviour.

Practise what you preach. Demonstrate responsible decision-making in your own use of drugs, including alcohol, tobacco, prescription drugs and over-the-counter drugs.

Help your kids to feel good about themselves by recognizing their efforts.

Encourage and participate in a variety of activities with your teen. Help them to become independent and to choose challenges that are neither too difficult nor too easy.

Let your child know that it is natural to have problems and to make mistakes.

If you suspect an alcohol or other drug problem may exist, stay calm and consider your response. It's best to intervene early and talk about your suspicions with your teen. If there is a pattern of problems, you may want to seek professional advice.

Keep in mind that your child looks up to you. If they see you making healthy decisions about alcohol and other drugs, they will be more likely to make healthy choices themselves.

### **For more information**

We understand that everyone's needs are different. Whether you want to prevent your child from using alcohol, tobacco or other drugs, or you want to help your child deal with a drug problem, we can help. Information and prevention programs, group and family counselling, outpatient and residential treatment, and the Protection of Children Abusing Drugs program are offered by Alberta Health Services and its funded services to help your child and your family.

For more information and to find an addiction services office near you, please call the 24-hour Helpline at 1-866-332-2322.

## Activity Page

### Some tips...

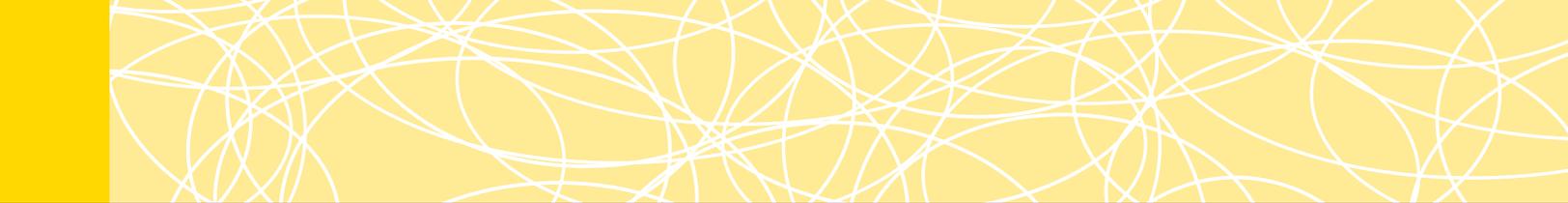
- Model responsible use of alcohol, other drugs and gambling. For example, if you are going out and know you might drink, plan in advance how you will get home. When filling prescriptions, be sure to check about possible side effects in relation to driving.
- Look for opportunities to discuss relevant issues with your teen. Television shows or media coverage of celebrities can give you openings to discuss important issues and to hear what your teen thinks.
- Keep in touch with your teen on a daily basis. It's easy to allow hectic schedules to get in the way. But you can look for opportunities to connect. Even driving your teen to and from activities can be a time to talk, when neither of you is distracted with other responsibilities.
- Make sure your teens can reach someone if they need a ride—either you, a grandparent, another relative or a friend.
- Most importantly, look for every opportunity to acknowledge their accomplishments and their efforts. Even if things turned out differently from what was planned, acknowledge what they did achieve, and the fact that they learned from trying.
- Allow them to feel comfortable with their mistakes. When something goes wrong, use it as an opportunity to discuss different choices.
  - What would they do differently next time?
  - What did they learn from this?
  - What do they think would happen if they tried it differently?

### An idea...

If you are uncomfortable discussing alcohol, other drugs and gambling with your child, you may find it easier to talk in more general terms. For example, ask what they think of kids who use alcohol and other drugs. Discuss some of the potential consequences for these teens.

### And remember...

When you're discussing alcohol, other drugs or gambling, you don't have to be the expert! Admit to your teen that you don't know everything. Ask what your teen knows about the subject, and then work together to check out your teen's understanding of the facts.



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