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Talking to Your Kids About Drugs: Why and How to Get the Dialogue Going

By Janene Mascarella

When you are a parent, there are many things to worry about. Keeping your kids safe is at the top of the list. First, you worry about the pacifier your infant dropped on the floor; so you pick it up and wash it with soap and water. Next, your toddler isn't eating enough vegetables, so you do your best to hide some veggies in his meat loaf. Then, you bite your nails as your second grader scales the tallest tree in the yard. You want to run and catch him when he starts to slip, but you see that he's beaming with excitement, so you stay watchful and quiet; careful not to spoil his fun.

As the kids grow older, the dangers they are faced with become more intense. One danger heavy on the minds of parents these days is substance abuse. And for good reason. With the popularity of "designer" drugs on the rise, and all the peer pressure kids are faced with, the worries parents encounter are mounting.

The Usual and Unusual Suspects

Sure, it's the usual suspects; experimenting with marijuana and alcohol that begin a pattern of self-destruction, but be aware, there are new drugs on the block, and they can be found in your medicine chest. According the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, the menu of drugs kids and teens are using is changing. They report 1 in 5 teens has tried Vicodin (a narcotic pain reliever) to get high, and 1 in 11 has admitted to getting high on cough medicine.

They also report a number of teens now party with other prescription and over-the-counter drugs. Along with the other illicit drugs out there that pose a dangerous risk to our kids, it's difficult not to be alarmed. The Partnership for a Drug-Free America (

www.drugfree.org

) is arming parents with

need-to-know information about the risks of dangerous substances.

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A local program reaching out

On the local front, there are programs that are taking action. Program coordinator for the Student Athlete Leadership Team (SALT), Paul Grafer, stresses the need for a proactive, honest dialogue between parents and their children about substance abuse. He oversees programs emphasizing leadership and character for young people in 40 districts in the New York Metropolitan area.

SALT trains thousands of high school athletes to serve as role models and mentors in their school districts to 5th graders. If you think 5th grade is too young to begin a dialogue about drugs, think again. National statistics show that the average age for experimentation with drugs and alcohol is 11 years old.

How does this program help? The SALT Program promotes healthy, positive behaviors and decisions. Included in this philosophy is a commitment to life long activeness and playing sports for enjoyment, health benefits, and to obtain life–skills; and, remaining substance abuse free by developing proactive, real–life refusal skills and strategies to navigate a culture of underage drug abusers (alcohol, tobacco, and steroids). The SALT Program is offered at Adelphi University in Garden City. For more information visit

<http://www.adelphi.edu/communityservices/sli/pdw.php>

On Long Island

The grips of drugs are known to be prevalent on big city streets, but they are a problem here on Long Island. Suffolk County Police Officer Daryl Quinones explains, his experiences have given him great insight and compassion to those who are drug addicted and the knowledge that even experimenting with the "softer" drugs can easily lead a kid down a path of self–destruction and crime.

He suggests that parents must be truthful, and lay it all out there for kids to understand what may happen if they fall under the spell of drugs and alcohol and stresses the importance of speaking up before it's too late. "As a police officer I have spoken to teenagers about these issues upon parents' request," he says. "And on certain occasions, years down the road, I'll see the parents and they will thank me for turning the kid around." Quinones has seen the consequences when the child doesn't listen: they land out in the system for some drug related crime.

Expert Advice

So how do you get a child to listen? What do you say? When should you say it? I asked Dr. Susan Bartell, psychologist and author in Port Washington specializing in tween and teens, to shed some light on this important issue.

Q: What age do you recommend bringing up the issue?

A: You can start talking to kids about drugs beginning at six or seven—by talking about smoking cigarettes because that is something they see in their world and can understand that it is "bad".

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As they get older (about ten) they can begin to understand the issue of other drugs. Middle school kids are ready for direct conversations, naming drugs (marijuana in particular) and explaining that they are illegal and dangerous.

Q: Can you give me some tips about how to make the "talk" go smooth?

A: With middle schoolers, look for a "teachable moment"...a TV anti-drug ad, a TV show when kids are drinking, smoking, using drugs and ask them what they think about it; then give your feelings in a low-keyed way, explaining that it is something you feel strongly about.

As kids get older—young high schoolers, the conversations need to begin to revolve around their social life: what would they do at a party if there was alcohol/drugs there. Help them come up with ways of handling it that aren't judgmental or critical.

Q: What's the biggest mistake parents make dealing with drug issues and their children?

A: They are too preachy, too critical of kids and don't give enough problem solving strategies. They also don't listen for their kids' concerns about how to handle peer pressure, or curiosity about drugs.

Q: How can parents be proactive about deterring their children from taking drugs?

A: First, being clear that you disapprove, next, making sure that you drive your child to and from parties or get-togethers—they'll be much less likely to use if they know you're picking them up. Don't let them get rides from other kids.

Q: Is there anything else parents need to know?

A: Conversations about drugs must include alcohol—which is also a drug and is actually usually the "Gateway" drug to others. Parents often feel that alcohol is okay, when in reality their kids can become alcoholics without them realizing it.

In addition, parents need to look for signs of chronic drug and alcohol use like: grades dropping, social isolation, secretive phone conversations, new friends that they don't let you meet; dropping old friends; sleeping a lot, changes in personality; sudden depression; sudden mood swings.

When it comes to raising kids today, it really does take a village. Keeping your child out of harm's way is no easy task, but experts agree that staying involved in you're your child's life— is a great start. When they're young and scaling that tall tree, you stand back and let them giggle their way down, but when it comes to drugs, parents cant afford to be silent. There's too much at stake.

Janene Mascarella

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Writing Good Dialogue.

By Nicole Murphy

There's nothing that kills a scene like hackneyed dialogue. Just stop and think about the average B-Grade Hollywood Movie. Sure, at times the plot is bad and the characterisation woeful but most of the time, what stops it from being a good movie is the dialogue. Cringe-worthy dialogue.

So, how do you write good dialogue? There are a number of factors and the most important one is: don't try too hard. Not every thing out of a character's mouth has to be scintillating. Sometimes, the best dialogue comes about because it's so simple and normal. So relax.

You need to let your characters speak. If they are highly educated, they will probably speak with great grammar and have a high vocabulary. If they left school at fourteen and have worked for five years in the local abattoir, their language is likely to be more colourful. If your character is a chatterbox, let them ramble. If they are the strong and silent type, let them be silent. Don't force words into their mouths and don't try to make them conform to your own views of good communication.

Good dialogue flows. The characters react to what another character has said. For example:

"I went to the show the other day."

"Really? Was it any good?"

"Not bad. The dogs were cute but the cows were too noisy."

"I was talking to George the other day."

Huh? How did talk about the show bring George into the conversation? To make it flow, it needs something more like:

"I went to the show the other day."

"Really? Was it any good?"

"Not bad. The dogs were cute but the cows were too noisy."

"Speaking of dogs, I was talking to George the other day..."

If you aren't sure if your dialogue flows, the classic way to test it is to read it aloud. You'll hear any problems, just like you do in the bad Hollywood movies. Better still, get your family and friends to act it out for you. It gets them involved in your writing and you can stand back and really observe and listen to what is going on.

The other thing dialogue needs is connection to the action of the story. Stop and think about the

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conversations you have. They are always related somehow to the action of your day, whether it's a conversation you're having as you catch the bus to work or a conversation with a work colleague or catching up with your partner at the end of the day.

Keep the dialogue connected to the characters, the setting and the plot by surrounding it with action. The example above is quite bland. But surround it with action and it comes alive.

Carrie sat down, opened the sugar packet and sprinkled it in her tea and then stirred it. "I went to the show the other day."

"Really?" Sophie took a long sip of her coffee. "Was it any good?"

Carrie shrugged. "Not bad. The dogs were cute but the cows were too noisy." She poured milk into her tea.

Sophie put her coffee cup down and leant forward, eyes sparkling. "Speaking of dogs, I was talking to George the other day..."

Now the dialogue seems real, because we can picture the characters and their setting. We also get an idea of how they're feeling. Carrie's shrug tells us the show didn't really thrill her. Sophie's sparkling eyes tell us she's got something exciting to say.

So spend a bit of time developing your dialogue, and your stories will be much more successful.

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