

## **Counseling Corner**

### **Talking with Your Kids About Drugs**

from the American Counseling Association

Drugs are very much a part of life these days. Medical marijuana is now legal in a number of states. Meth labs are raided in towns small and large, and the availability of a variety of prescription pills has never been more widespread.

With this increased likelihood that virtually every child is going to be exposed to illicit drugs, talking to your kids about drugs is a critical part of parenting. And it might surprise you to learn that experts recommend such conversations start as early as age five.

Five years olds are able to comprehend some basic concepts as to what substances fall into the drug category, including cigarettes, alcohol and household products. You should be prepared to explain why these substances are harmful, especially for children.

As children age, it is recommended that parents help a child develop a "plan of action" about what to do when confronted with drugs. Ask questions such as "What would you do if a friend wanted you to try drugs?" "How you feel about that person?" Listen to your child's responses without being critical. If the answers aren't what you hoped for, try to gently lead him or her into thinking in more appropriate ways about the situation, without criticizing or forcing your own ideas on the child. You simply want to ensure that your child has thought about drug-related issues, rather than being shocked or overwhelmed the first time drugs are encountered in the real world.

With older children, try questioning what drugs might mean to their lives. Ask what goals the child may be considering, such as college or military service, and then ask what effect drugs might have on achieving those goals. Encourage your child to be open and honest with you.

Be careful, however, about sharing too much of your own use or experimentation with drugs. Adolescents often have a "If it was okay for you then it's okay for me..." attitude. But in most cases, open, honest communication is the best approach in talking with your kids.

Basic education about the problems and dangers that drugs can bring is an effective tool in helping your child avoid drug usage. As important is parents modeling appropriate behavior. When children are aware that mom or dad uses drugs or drinks heavily, it is hard for them to see why they can't do the same themselves.

"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to [ACAcornet@counseling.org](mailto:ACAcornet@counseling.org) or visit the ACA website at [counseling.org](http://counseling.org)

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