

Learn to listen

Make it clear that you are listening and trying to understand your child's point of view. When your child describes events, repeat what you think they have just told you by saying something such as, "Sounds like you are saying..." "When that happens to me, I feel like..." "Do you mean that..."

Try not to use every conversation with your kids as an opportunity to give advice or lecture. Ask open-ended questions that encourage conversation. Avoid questions that kids can answer with a simple yes or no. Try not to react to what your kids say in a way that will cut off further discussion. For example, if your child tells you a close friend tried marijuana, try not to immediately say, "Who is it? I don't want you talking to that person ever again."

Be ready to talk when they want to talk

Sometimes kids want to talk at 11:00 right before you go to bed. You've had a long day and just want to sleep. You need to somehow find it in yourself to listen when they want to talk. Stop everything else you are doing. Multi-tasking may make us feel more efficient, but when we split our attention between two chores, such as sending e-mail while people are talking to us, we lower our effectiveness at each task. If we really want to learn from our children and strengthen our relationships with them, we must stop everything else we are doing and listen.

Make the most of teachable moments

Sometimes a situation presents itself in a TV show or in a movie that deals with taking risks. Use these situations as springboards for discussion. Maybe something controversial just happened in your city or town with regards to alcohol or other drugs. The goal is to listen and find out what your kid thinks, but also to remind your kid what your family's expectations are around these behaviors.

When is a good time to talk?

When you are just hanging out and having fun together – cooking, going fishing, watching TV, walking, discussing books or movies, eating dinner together, doing chores, long car rides, etc.

What do you say if your child asks if you have ever done drugs?

Most experts agree that it's best to be honest. Answering questions untruthfully can cause you to lose credibility with your kids if they find out later that you lied. However, you should talk about these issues when you feel ready. It's okay to ask them why they are asking the question. It's also okay to tell them you will get back to them, as long as you remember to do that. When you are ready to talk about it, you don't need to go into a lot of detail. You can answer simply by saying something such as:

- "When I was a kid I took drugs because some of my friends did. I thought I needed to in order to fit in. We didn't know as much as we do now about all the bad things that can happen when you smoke marijuana or use other drugs. If I'd known then about the consequences, I never would have tried drugs, and I'll do everything I can to help you keep away from them."
- "Everybody makes mistakes. When I used drugs, I made a big one. I'm telling you about this, even though it's embarrassing, because I love you and I want to save you from making the same unhealthy decision I made when I was your age."

- “I drank alcohol and smoked marijuana because I was bored and wanted to take some risks, but I soon found out that I couldn’t control the risks — the loss of trust of my parents and friends. There are much better ways of challenging yourself than doing drugs.”
- “I never took drugs because I believed what I learned about the risks. I never wanted to disappoint my parents and sports were really important to me. I’m glad I never did drugs because it has made me a stronger person and I really know who I am today.”

How do you talk about your family’s rules and expectations?

Risk-taking is a part of growing up. Some risks kids take will be healthy, such as trying out for the basketball team or the school play. Some may not be healthy, such as trying cigarettes and marijuana. Part of what you can do as a parent is set limits. Let your kids know that you do not want them in risky situations. Be clear about your expectations. Some tips on what to say:

- “I don’t want you riding in a car with a driver who’s been using drugs or who’s been drinking.”
- “Honey, I love you, but you’ve got to know I’m your parent, not one of your friends. As your parent, I will not put up with you being in a place where drugs are being used.”
- “It’s my job as a parent to keep you safe, so I’m going to ask questions about who you’re with and what you are doing.”
- “I care enough about you to let you know that I don’t want to see anything happen to you, and it would be hard not having you in my life.”

Setting a firm rule of no drug use will help your child navigate peer and other pressure to use drugs. Here are some examples of rules that experts recommend:

- “If you’re at a party and you see that drugs or alcohol are being used, the rule is to leave that party. Call me and I’ll come and get you.”
- “I’ve been thinking lately that I’ve never actually told you this: I don’t want you using alcohol, tobacco or illegal drugs.”
- “I love you and I want the best for you, so I don’t want you using marijuana or any other drug.”
- “The rule in our house is that nobody uses drugs.”
- “You know, drugs are not games. I don’t want you doing them, not now, not ever.”

Be pro-active. Make clear rules and consequences for breaking them before your child is in one of these risky situations. That way, if a situation occurs, you are armed and ready instead of scrambling around trying to think of a way to deal with it in the heat of the moment.