

TIP SHEET FOR RELATIVES AS PARENTS

#3

6/05

TALKING ABOUT ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS

Children hear about drugs everywhere – on television, in movies and music, from their friends. That is why it is so important that they learn about drugs from you – so that you can teach them both the facts and your own values.

WHEN TO TALK ABOUT ALCOHOL AND DRUGS

When the child asks – Believe it or not, many children do start up conversations about drugs. You just need to know what to listen for. When your child asks you if you ever used marijuana, tells you about someone in school who is selling drugs, or even asks about a television show about heroin, he wants to talk about drugs. Take a deep breath, and go.

Be prepared – It is important that you have done your homework and know some basic facts about drugs. Children, especially teens, will only listen if you get the facts right. Know what drugs are being used now. And talk about facts like, “marijuana today is much stronger than it used to be” or “alcohol is a drug too, even though it is legal.”

Create opportunities to talk – Choose a time and place that is good for both you and the child, like when you are alone together and relaxed and have time for a real discussion.

Use “Teachable Moments” – Sometimes, opportunities will come up when you are not well prepared. Like when you are watching a television show about someone using drugs. Or when your child comes home talking about a neighbor who was arrested for selling drugs. These are “gifts” that give you a natural starting point for a discussion. Use them as chances to clear up any myths, and to state your own values.

WAYS TO BE A GOOD COMMUNICATOR

Good communication involves four skills: observing, listening, questioning, and probing:

Observing– Take a look at the child’s body language. Is he fidgeting, tapping his foot, pulling at this hair? Does she look bored? Keep looking at her watch? These signs give you a feel for how the child feels about having this talk.

Listening – involves much more than not speaking while someone else talks.

- Do not be afraid of silences
- Listen to the complete message before you say anything
- Focus on what the child says, not how he says it
- Deal with whatever might block you from listening

Questioning – Your questions help both you and your child understand better. You might ask questions to help the child figure out which problem needs attention first. You can also ask questions to help the child think more about the situation.

Probing – is a way to gently help children explore a topic further, especially when they may be afraid to . A good way to “probe” is to help the child think about other options he might not have considered.

Pre-schoolers (3 – 5 years old)

Children this age are learning how to make their own decisions and handle their feelings. They need help to understand what they hear and see. You do not need to give a lot of details at this age. Instead, talk about drugs in general. For example, you might say, “Some drugs are important, like medicine the doctor gives you when you are sick. Other drugs make you act strangely.” Talk about who they can trust to take them places, feed them, or give them medicine. Help them learn to develop solutions by breaking down problems into smaller pieces.

Children (6 – 10 years old)

Children in elementary school want to be grown-up and make their own choices. Friends (and what they think) are very important. They may have a hard time focusing on the future and the results of their actions. Some of these children may have already been offered drugs and alcohol. When you talk to children at this age, you need to talk about the facts and focus on the here and now. Talk about what alcohol and other drugs are like, why they are against the law, and what harm they can do. Set clear rules and support healthy friendships. Help them use healthy ways to get their feelings out – like talking, drawing, or writing in a diary. Help them make smart choices and help them see the difference between a quick fix and a long-term answer.

Teens (11 – 18 year olds)

By the time young people become teenagers they are at high-risk for drug problems. They are filled with questions. They have a strong need to be liked by other teens, even if it means disobeying adults. This is the most common time for children to begin using drugs or alcohol. Even if they get drug education in school, you have to do more. Talk about how alcohol and drugs affect the body in ways that matter to teens – stained teeth, skin problems, and bad breath. Talk about how and why addiction happens, and what that means to people who are children of substance abusers. Help teens come up with ways to take a stand against peer pressure. Find healthy ways to deal with stress – bring out their creativity and praise even the little things.

For more information or to discuss this topic, please call Families And Children Together (FACT) at 1-866-298-0896 and ask for a Maine Kids-Kin staff person.

This information is excerpted from the *Ties That Bind* fact sheets printed by
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