

Parents info

Understanding Adolescence

Adolescence is the stage in development that bridges the gap between childhood—being dependent on parents, and adulthood independence. It is a period in which young people search for their own identity, to find out where they fit in the world, discover who they are, etc. This means that they often evaluate and imitate adults. They are often acutely aware of what society expects and they compare these expectations to inadequacies they may perceive in themselves. As a result, teenagers often feel accepted only when they are with other teenagers and, therefore, it is very important for them to fit in with their peers. For example, they often don't mind looking "weird" to their parents as long as they look OK to their friends.

Talking with Young People- Communication is vital.

One of the first steps in communicating with your teenager about drugs (or any issue for that matter), is to try to understand where they are coming from and what they are going through. Don't forget they are growing up and trying to make their own decisions in life. They may be frightened and they may blame you. Don't Worry. It's normal, but it doesn't make communication easy.

As a parent, you have been through adolescence yourself and, although your experiences won't have been exactly the same as your teenager's, there will be similarities.

Try putting yourself in their shoes and explore what they may be feeling. Parents often want to know what is going on in their child's lives, but then fall into the trap of telling their child what they should be doing rather than listening to them. You will need to discard the notion that your point of view is the only correct one.

So what can you do to make talking easier? - Keep lines of communication open

Start talking to your child about drugs at an early age, usually before secondary school. And let them know they can discuss things with you if they are worried, You can't solve their problems for them. You can, however be there to help and provide a listening ear. Show them you always care- no matter how angry you might sometimes get.

Communication Barriers

Be aware of any barriers in your communication as these will probably lead to an abrupt end to the conversation. These barriers often include:

- **ordering** - You must..., You have to..., You should..., etc;
- **over-sympathising** - Don't worry, you'll be all right;
- **warning or threatening** - You'd better ... or else...;
- **lecturing** - Did you know..., The truth is..., etc;
- **diagnosing** - Your problem is..., You're doing this because..., etc;
- **judging** - You're wrong, You're being stupid, etc;
- **interrogating** - What, Why, Who, How, etc;

The above methods leave little room for the other person to find their own response or solution.

Instead, ask your teenager what they see as potential problems and what they regard as the best thing to do.

Remember that they are young adults and will most likely realise the answers that are most appropriate for them. They may want some guidance but offer it as advice (e.g. 'you will have to make up your own mind but I would...'). Encouraging your teenager to think about the problem and address it themselves will also provide them with greater confidence in dealing with future issues.

Communication methods to consider:

- **Honesty:** let your teenager know what you would like to talk about and why. Discuss any concerns and fears, or any other feelings you may have, openly and calmly. Let them know what it's like to be a parent. If you have not communicated honestly in the past, it may take a while to regain their trust, so give it time. If your teenager sees you as being honest, they will be more likely to respond in the same manner.
- **Consistency:** because your teenager will be aware of any hypocrisy they see, consider your own views on drugs. If you have expressed strong and inflexible views about drugs in the past, it will be difficult for your teenager to discuss the issue or their own situation with you. Examine your own use of drugs, including the legal ones—alcohol and tobacco. This doesn't mean that you have to abstain from them. However, if you acknowledge your relationship to these drugs it will strengthen your credibility and offer a good starting point for discussion.
- **Openness:** be non-judgmental by not evaluating or labelling them or their behaviour, but by being accepting and open to what they have to say. This doesn't mean that you have to agree with them, but it will let them know you respect their right to have their own thoughts, feelings and behaviours. You may want to use examples of your own or another person's drug use in a way that encourages your teenager to explore their own opinion about drugs and the risks of using them, along with potential solutions to the risks. If your teenager makes their own decisions about their behaviour, you won't have to constantly try to enforce your own rules that they may tend to break anyway. Negotiate ground rules together, where you as a parent and your teenager work towards agreement on matters that are acceptable to all parties. Remember that it is important for teenagers to have a sense of control over their own lives and for this to happen you will need to be flexible.
- **Listening:** true listening means that the message of what someone is saying is received and understood. This is vital in any effective communication. Conveying to the other person that you really are interested in what they have to say helps to draw them out. Be aware that your body language too, including facial expression, posture, use of arms, hands etc, conveys to them that you are open to their concerns.