

Parent Talking Points

The adolescent years can be a difficult and confusing time for both parents and teens. If you suspect or discover your child is using substances, give yourself time to prepare for a calm and civilized conversation. Often, teens are pushed further away when parents react without preparing a meaningful conversation. Use these helpful suggestions:

Get into the right frame of mind:

- **Know your boundaries & expectations for your child.** Children and youth rely on their parents to keep them safe, and for a sense of security. Having rules and expectations is positive!
- **Keep an open mind.** When a teen is feeling judged or condemned, they are less likely to be receptive to your message.
- **Put yourself in your teen's shoes.** Consider how you would prefer to be addressed when talking about something difficult. How did you feel when you were a teenager?
- **Be clear about your goals** (write them down) so you know what you want to get out of the conversation. Revisit them before and after your conversation to see if they were addressed, you were able to deliver them effectively, or if they need to be addressed at a later date.

Examples:

- Gain insight into the pressures my teen may be facing with drugs
- Express concern and support
- Gauge how my teen feels about alcohol, tobacco (vaping, JUULing, etc.), and marijuana
- Find positive next steps together
- **Be calm and relaxed.** It may be difficult to achieve your goals without having a calm and civilized conversation. If you are anxious about having the conversation, find things to help you relax (take a walk, call a friend, practice deep breathing and mindfulness).
- **Be positive.** Your efforts may be counter-productive if you react with anger, scare tactics, disappointment, or shame. Instead, be attentive, curious, respectful, and understanding.
- **Don't lecture.** Your teen may shut down, tune you out, get angry, or believe you disapprove of them instead of their actions. This can lead to more substance use. Avoid statements like "because I'm your parent and I said so" or "I know what's best."
- **Find a comfortable setting.** Avoid springing a random conversation on them as they are in passing to avoid them leaving the conversation before it's even started.
- **Be aware of body language.** Sit if they sit or ask them to sit down with you. Avoid crossing your arms, pointing fingers, and control your facial expressions.

Try active listening

- **Try asking open-ended questions** that require more than just a "yes" or "no" response. "Tell me more about..."
- **Be positive.** "Thank you for your honesty. I really appreciate it."
- **Let your teen know you hear them.** Reflect back what you hear from your teen. "I'm hearing that you feel overwhelmed, and that smoking pot relaxes you. Is that right?"
- **Sum up and ask questions.** Show you are listening to everything they say and ask for their input. "Did I get everything? Do you have anything more to add?"
- **Ask permission.** Ask to speak with them about their concerns, and ask to offer feedback. "Are you okay with me asking you this? Do you mind if I share some advice?"
- **Offer empathy and compassion.** Insert understanding and show your teen you get it. "I hear that smoking pot helps your anxiety. I'm sorry you're feeling anxious; I know that's a really difficult feeling. Can we think of some other activities that can help you relax?"
- **Problem-solve together.** "Our bottom line is that smoking pot is dangerous and illegal for you. Can we think of other activities that can help you relax?"

“I know, I know. You’ve talked to me about this before.”

You can say:	Here’s why:
“I know we’ve had conversations about drugs before and I’m sorry if you feel like I’m being a nag.”	Taking responsibility and acknowledging a teen’s feelings is an effective way to reduce resistance.
“I want us to be able to discuss topics because I love you and I want to help during these years when you’re faced with a lot of difficult choices.”	This statement shows compassion for what your teen is going through
“My concern is that things are changing quickly with some states legalizing marijuana, and that’s why it’s important that we talk about it. Would that be okay?”	Asking permission is essential in open communication, and makes your teen feel empowered within the dialogue. Be prepared for a possible response of “No, I don’t want to talk.” If this happens, ask why. Then have them suggest a time when they would be willing to talk.

“[nothing]”

You can say:	Here’s why:
“Do kids at your school talk about (drinking, smoking, using marijuana, using drugs)? What do they say?”	If you find it hard to get your teen to start talking, try asking questions about their friends or classmates. It may be easier for them to open up about someone other than themselves. This can lead to sharing their thoughts with you.
“Do you know anyone at school who (drinks, uses drugs)? What do they say about it?”	
“Have you ever been offered (drugs, cigarettes, etc.)?”	If they don’t want to talk, remind them that you are there for them if they ever want to talk.

“I’m only doing it once in a while on weekends, so it’s not a big deal.”

You can say:	Here’s why:
“I’m happy to hear that this is not something you do on a regular basis. The fact is, using any drug can be harmful at your age because your brain is still developing.”	Even though a parent may want their teen to be completely abstinent, it is imperative to point out the positive – that this is not something that has become a daily habit. This allows the teen to feel like they are not a bad person or a disappointment.
“I heard you say that you don’t think it’s a big deal.”	Repeating what you’ve heard is an example of reflective listening.
“What would make it feel like a big deal to you?”	This gets you teen to think about the future and what their boundaries are around drug use. It will give you insight into what is important to them. If use progresses and some of these boundaries are crossed, you can then bring that up at a later date.
“What are some things that keep you from using more often than you already do?”	This is a question that makes you teen think about reasons why they don’t want to use substances more often. It allows them to think about what substance use would interfere with if they did it more regularly.

“Would you rather I drink alcohol? Weed is much safer.”

You can say:	Here’s why:
“What is going on in your life that makes you feel like you want to do either?”	This question can easily throw you off course. If it rattles you, posing a question back to them is a good buffer while you think about your answer. Your response may still be met with “nothing” or another one-word answer, but even the word “nothing” can lead to another supportive statement from you, like “I’m glad to hear there isn’t anything going on in your life that makes you want to drink or smoke, and I also know it’s unrealistic to think that it isn’t going to be offered to you.”
“Honestly, I don’t want you to be doing anything that can harm you – whether that’s smoking pot, cigarettes, drinking, or behaving recklessly. I’m interested in knowing why you think weed is safer than alcohol.”	Reminding your teen that you care deeply about their health and well-being, and expressing genuine curiosity about their thought process, is going to help them open up.

“Marijuana is a plant. It’s natural. How harmful could it be?”

You can say:	Here’s why:
“Not all plants are necessarily healthy or good for you – think about cocaine or heroin or even poison ivy.”	This helps your teen rethink their point.
“I understand that, and I am not suggesting that you’re going to spin out of control, or that your life as you know it is going to be over. I would just like to redirect you to the idea that when a person is high, their judgement is not what it ordinarily is and that can be harmful.”	This statement points out that you are reasonable and are not using scare tactics. It also redirects your teen back to your goal of helping them understand the harmful side effects of marijuana.
“People I know who use alcohol or pot on a regular basis are using it to numb themselves or avoid feelings.”	This brings some personal perspective into the conversation, and lets your teen know that you see the effects of substance use in your own life.
“I would much rather you find healthy ways to cope with difficult feelings than turn to drugs. Can we brainstorm activities?”	Here, you’re showing concern, asking permission and promoting collaboration in thinking through healthy alternatives – like yoga, reading, or sports.

“But it’s legal in some states; why would they make something legal that could hurt me?”

You can say:	Here’s why:
“It’s legal at a certain age, like alcohol. I think that people in these states hope that by 21, they’ve given you enough time to make your own decision around it. But, let’s explore your question in more detail, because it’s a good one. Why would states make something legal that could be harmful?”	Letting your teen know that this is a valid question is important to them being receptive to your answer. Expressing curiosity with an open-ended question keeps the conversation going.
“Let’s look at alcohol; it’s legal, but causes damage, including DUIs, car accidents and other behavior that leads to jail time. Alcohol can also cause major health problems, including liver problems and car accidents.” “Cigarettes are also legal, even though they are highly addictive and proven to cause birth defects and cancer. Just because something is legal and regulated doesn’t make it safe or meant it isn’t harmful.”	Alcohol is a great example of a regulated substance having severely harmful side effects.

“Come on. I only did it once, and I’m totally fine.”

You can say:	Here’s why:
“Okay. Why did you do it only once? Why did you stop, or decide not to do it again?”	Asking your teen why they aren’t doing it more than once can help them explain the reasons for not liking it. They might mention that they were only offered it once.
“Will you tell me about your experience? I’m genuinely curious to know what it was like for you. How did it make you feel?”	This is an example of an open-ended question that helps you uncover what they may or may not have liked about getting high.

“I don’t know what to say when other kids ask me to use.”

You can say:	Here’s why:
“Let’s think of some ways that you can turn down the offer that you would be comfortable saying.”	Instead of telling them what to say or do when they are put in an uncomfortable situation, why not ask them? Brainstorming with your teen on how they may get out of a sticky situation will be more effective than telling them. Help your teen think of ways to turn down offers for their own reasons, like “I’m not into that,” or “I have a big game tomorrow and don’t want to be groggy.”

“But you smoked weed when you were younger.”

You can say:	Here’s why:
If you did smoke weed when you were younger	
“I’m not going to pretend like I didn’t, and that’s why I’m talking to you about this. I will tell you that when I did smoke, my judgment was compromised and the only thing that prevented me from getting into some horrible circumstances was luck.”	You may want to point out some of the negative things that happened to you (or your) friends that you wish didn’t.
“And you may be thinking: Well, you did it, and nothing horrendous happened to you. I just want you to understand that these are chances you may take, and they are just that, chances. A lot of harmful things don’t happen to you because of your ability to make clear decisions. When you are stoned, that ability is very much compromised.”	Here, you’re not only being informative but reminding them that marijuana can impact their judgment.
If you didn’t smoke weed when you were younger	
“You may or may not believe this, but I never smoked weed when I was a kid. It didn’t have a place in my life, and would have interfered with the activities I enjoyed.”	Here, you’re explaining why marijuana didn’t interest you. Your reasoning may have been that you didn’t want it to interfere with the activities you enjoyed; that you didn’t feel you needed to use weed to fit in; that you were turned off by the smell; or any other honest reason that kept you from trying marijuana yourself.

Note to parents if you smoke or drink:

If you use marijuana or drink alcohol — whether in front of your teen or not — you should anticipate that they are going to call you out on this (“But you smoke weed/drink alcohol!”)

Take the time to reflect on, and perhaps reevaluate, your own use — especially if your teen is seeing you use. You may want to consider the effect your behavior has on them. If you come home from a long, stressful day and the first thing you do is smoke a joint or pour yourself a drink, you may want to try modeling another behavior for your child (like working out, reading, or deep breathing). Showing your teen that you use a substance to relieve stress or as a coping skill, can send the wrong message.

Ask yourself why you drink and/or smoke, how often, what time of day and how much you use. These answers are going to affect your credibility with your teen, give you some insight into your own behavior and allow you to evaluate whether your substance use is in any way becoming a harmful and unhealthy coping mechanism.

If you don’t feel comfortable talking about your substance use with your teen, you can put the focus back on them. You can say, “I’m glad you brought this topic up. I think it’s important that we talk about my use as well as yours and, I would like it if we started with your use, why do you feel the need to drink or smoke?” Try asking your teen, “How does my use affect you? I’m curious, because who you are and how you are feeling is important to me.” This invites them to share and ask questions and promotes collaboration. Consider also asking your teen, “How does knowing that I use pot or drink alcohol make you think differently about your own decisions?” Open-ended questions like these show curiosity, respect and understanding. Be sure to express your love and caring about your child’s health, development and well-being.