Talking to your teens about alcohol, drugs, porn and the future

Alcohol and drugs

Things you need to know
Alcohol is likely to be the biggest challenge your kids face during social events in their teen years. Kids usually do get good education about drugs and alcohol at school - they know facts but, for adolescents, knowledge of the dangers does not always translate into wise decision making.

As you know, alcohol is implicated in a huge number of vehicle accidents, drownings, violence and crime. The majority of young teenagers who have sex do so after they have been drinking. (Not surprisingly, many regret it.) Common factors in drug-free kids and teenagers with good self-control with alcohol are resilience, confidence and social skills. They also tended to be involved in a wide range of activities such as sports, music, cultural and youth groups. (It is bored kids who are most likely to dumb things.)

Kids with good self-esteem are more resistant to the peer pressure which nudges kids towards drinking and drugs. Very importantly, the kids with the best approach to drugs and alcohol are the ones who are keen not to lose their parents’ approval. Therefore, the second most potent way to protect your young person from substance abuse is to nurture a good relationship with them. The most important thing you can do is model a healthy attitude to drugs and alcohol yourself.

Things you need to hear
Kids will not be very forthcoming about telling you about the scenarios where they currently encounter drugs and alcohol. They are not dumb - if they tell you that there is binging and dope smoking at the events they go to, you would probably clip their wings severely. But the past is safe - you can ask them when they first started encountering alcohol at parties.

Ask them what their attitudes are to both drugs and those who use them. (Realise you are giving them a wonderful opportunity to do something all teenagers enjoy - shocking you! Tune your credulity to their sense of humour.

Things you need to get across
A big thing is to get across your own attitudes to drugs and alcohol. (Many parents ‘soberly’ reassess their own ideas and behaviour when they consider how their example will impact their family.)

Experiments are dangerous. Every addiction starts with a ‘first time’ and every first time was an ‘experiment’. ‘Just once’ is enough to get alcohol poisoning, to get raped, to get a criminal record.

If they have been using drugs, especially habitually, you will be absolutely committed to helping them to get clear of them. There will be consequences, but they can count on your loving support. Get to the bottom of why they are doing drugs in the first place - what is the real reason behind your teenager getting drunk or wasted?

How to open the conversation
Again, TV and movies provide lots of opportunities to kick-start a conversation. “What would you do if you were in a car and everyone else started taking pills?”

Ask them to come up with some good lines to get out of sticky social settings and to say ‘No’ without losing face. For example, “I’ve got asthma”. “Sorry mate I’ve got a soccer game tomorrow”. “It kills your brain cells and I haven’t got any to spare.”

Pornography

Things you need to know
It is estimated 80 percent of the images on the internet are of naked women. The vast majority of teenagers are exposed to pornography and it is a strong temptation for nearly all men (young and old). A young brain is like soft wax - initial imprinting has a powerful affect on future perceptions and mental battles. You need to know they already know what you watch, what you read and, probably, what you look at on the internet.
Though the influence of pornography is never good, the harm is counterbalanced by healthy ideas, attitudes and activities from other sources.

**Things you need to get across**

A desire to view pornography is not unnatural - it comes from our natural curiosity and sexuality. If they are accessing porn, they need to know that you disapprove but do it in a way that does not shame them. "It's very human, very natural to be curious about sex. But viewing movies and images gives such a fake idea about sex." Let them know that your disapproval is of the porn, not them.

Viewing pornography can be powerfully addictive, and no one knows beforehand if they will be trapped by the habit. Not only can the images become stuck in your head, so can the attitudes - attitudes to women and sex that cheapen both.

All media in your home should be open to scrutiny, so that means you reserve the right to check their cache and history files. If they are already stuck in a habit, you will compassionately help them to get free, maybe with strict accountability.

**How to open the conversation**

“I'm sick of doing a Google search and all sorts of rubbish coming up. I think we will get a filtered internet provider.”

While watching TV or a music video which is maybe a bit raunchy though not pornographic - “It's hard to know when to switch the TV off. I know there is a lot worse on the internet, but if anything was worse than that then I'd be really offended.”

“I feel so sorry for the people that get sucked into doing pornography. I'm sure most people forget they are real people, people that deserve respect. How would it be in 10, 20 years time and it resurfaces and their own kids or boss or partner sees it? Is that likely?”

**Towards adulthood - who do you want to be?**

**Things you need to know**

Teenagers always want to find out about themselves, but are less willing to believe that they can choose and shape the person they are becoming. Remember - big dreams and huge goals can paralyse teens instead of motivating them. If your teen is 'stuck', start with a mid or short-term goal first.

**Things you need to hear**

- What do they think are their strengths?
- What things do they find challenging?
- Who would they most like to be like?
- If they could change something about themselves, what would it be?
- Something they may not actually put into words, but you may be able to hear between their words - do they like themselves?

**Things you need to get across**

- You believe in them and their potential.
- Life is chapters, some are great, but everyone has bad patches in their life.
- They have immense control over their future.
- When dreams turn into plans and goals, they can become true.
- Feelings aren’t always true - just because they feel lonely, unloved, ugly etc. doesn’t make it so. Sometimes our feelings lie to us!

**How to open the conversation**

Teenagers love to do personality tests like the online one at attitude.org.nz. This can be a good conversation starter. Challenge your teenager to think about what they want to do and how they want to live. And most importantly, ask them, “Is this who you want to be?”

**A final thought**

Your own parents probably didn't understand your adolescent world, and it is preposterous to think that we will be able to fully understand the world our teenage children live in. But, for a little while longer, there are still a few things about their world that you understand better than they do.

Conversation - genuine dialogue - is your best chance of keeping them in sight as they sail off into their life, and to help them steer a safe and happy course.

At The Parenting Place we believe ‘family is everything’ so we’ve created a series of 45 Hot Tips brochures to help you make the most of your parenting journey. They’re grouped into four categories - Early Years, Middle Years, Tweens and Teens, and General Parenting.

**Tweens and Teens topics include -**

- Conversations to have with your teenager - part 1 and 2
- How to talk to your kids about sex
- Motivating your teen
- Online safety
- Planet puberty
- Strategies for communicating with teenagers
- Teaching your teen to drive
- Teen parties
- To snoop or not to snoop