

Young people, parents and Drugs

Some commonly asked questions



How can I tell if my **child** is using drugs?

It can be extremely difficult to tell if your child is using drugs. There are often no specific physical signs or personality changes that indicate drug use. Many of the often-quoted signs of drug use, such as red eyes, tiredness, excessive bursts of energy or loss of motivation, could also be signs of illness or the result of hormonal changes that occur during adolescence. Sudden changes in behaviour and mood swings are also characteristic of adolescence. For example, the need for privacy, changing friends, rebelliousness, secrecy, uncontrollable giggling or irritability are all characteristic of adolescent behaviour and usually have nothing to do with drug use.

However, if you observe uncharacteristic behaviour over a long period of time, there may be a problem.

If you know your child well, and are in touch with what is happening in his/her life, you will be in a better position to know whether the uncharacteristic changes in behaviour you have noticed are cause for concern.

If you suspect drug use, avoid jumping to conclusions or 'playing detective' to investigate further. This could destroy the trust between you and your child. Instead you may choose to raise the topic with your child in a tactful, non-judgmental way.

How can I **approach** the topic of drugs with my child?

Raising the topic of drugs can be challenging and parents need to be prepared. Before you discuss drugs with your child, clarify your concerns. For example, are you concerned about health risks associated with drug use, the fact that some drugs are illegal, or you fear that drug use will lead to other risky behaviours?

Whatever concerns you may have, they are more likely to be better received and responded to by your child if they are based on facts rather than personal attitudes or judgments.

Becoming informed about drugs may increase your level of confidence to discuss drugs and drug use with your child. Avoid exaggerated stories or myths about drug use as these may damage trust in the relationship.

Initiating conversation about drugs can be difficult. Young people may be reluctant to talk to adults believing that they will be punished, persuaded to stop using drugs, or criticised for their behaviour. Prior to raising the topic, consider how, when, where and what approach is likely to be the most effective within your family. An environment where a child or young person senses trust and genuine interest in their welfare is usually conducive to productive and honest discussion.

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During conversation try to remain open, honest, non-judgmental, calm and listen carefully. If discussion becomes heated, stop and try again later. If you are concerned that your child is using drugs, base your concerns on what you have noticed about their behaviour. Talk about what you know is happening rather than what you think is happening. Be aware of any barriers in communication, as these may result in an abrupt end to the discussion. Avoid lecturing, ordering, diagnosing the problem, interrogating or threatening.

Acknowledge and be honest about your own drug use. If you drink alcohol or smoke cigarettes, but do not wish your child to do the same, you may be seen as hypocritical and lose credibility. 'Do what I say, not what I do' sends conflicting messages to young people.

How can I ensure that my child won't come to harm from drugs?

Australia is a drug-using society and at some point it is likely that your child will come into contact with drugs.

There are a number of things parents can do to reduce the likelihood of their child coming to harm from drugs.

1. Be prepared: Anticipate potentially difficult situations that children may encounter and discuss ways to deal with these. Plan ahead by negotiating rules and expected behaviour and impress that you are most concerned

about their personal safety. Negotiate an agreement that you will come and pick them up if they are unable to get home safely, and that discussions will be held over until the next day.

2. Talk to your child and listen to what they have to say: Establishing and maintaining clear, open channels of communication is the key to building trust in families. Your child may be more willing to talk about their problems if they feel they can trust you. Talking to your child is very different from talking at your child.

3. Get to know your child's friends and their parents: Other parents can provide a great source of support and encouragement.

4. Become well informed about drugs: How your child deals with such experiences may in part depend on how informed and prepared you are about drugs and related issues. Don't believe everything you read about drugs or see on TV. Accurate information is obtainable from a number of reliable community sources, including the Australian Drug Foundation or your local health centre. Many schools and community groups provide drug education programs for parents. Working together as a family to find out more about drugs may enhance communication between parents and children.

5. Model safer or responsible drug use in the home: Avoid using drugs as a means of coping with problems. Ensure that your own use of alcohol and other drugs is within safe and responsible limits. Discuss your own and

others' drug-taking in a way that encourages your child to explore and clarify their own attitudes and values towards drugs.

6. Look for alternatives to drug use: Parents can encourage their children to use other ways to relax or deal with difficulties.

What should I do if I find my child is **using** drugs?

If your child is using drugs, it does not necessarily mean they will experience serious problems.

Most people who experiment with drugs do not go on to become dependent users. Experimenting and risk-taking are part of growing up and it is important to support young people through this time.

1. Don't panic: While easier said than done, overreacting is likely to make the situation worse. Try to remain calm, and show your concern. Talk to your child about how they are feeling and whether they intend to continue using drugs.

2. Choose your moment: Avoid talking with your child when they are intoxicated or when you are angry or upset. Wait until your child is sober or straight, and when you feel calmer.

3. Get the facts: Find out which drug/s is/are being used and how often.

4. Don't blame yourself: If your child is using drugs, it does not mean that you have failed as a parent. Many young people may experiment with drugs and take risks no matter how caring and supportive their parents are towards them.

5. Seek support and information as necessary: Many community agencies and organisations provide confidential support services for parents.

**For information about drugs contact DRUGInfo Clearinghouse on 1300 85 85 84.
Website: druginfo.adf.org.au**

For confidential 24 hour drug and alcohol telephone counselling and/or referral, contact Directline on 1800 888 236 (statewide).

You can also contact Family Drug Help on 1300 660 068.

Note: Information contained in this pamphlet is offered for general purposes and should not be considered a substitute for specific, professional advice.

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