

Raising Drug Free Kids

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As recent headlines have shown, drug abuse continues to be a widespread problem in our communities. Parents cannot expect to isolate their children from exposure to it. However, parents can take specific steps to reduce the likelihood of contact with drugs and build their child's immunity to using them.

Research now shows that having actively engaged parents can trump environmental and genetic impediments in determining whether a child develops drug problems during their adolescent years. According to Nora D. Volkow, M.D., director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, research has shown that children who are genetically predisposed to addiction rarely suffer from drug problems if they have parents who are actively involved in their lives. However, those who have both genetic vulnerability and absent or uninvolved parents have a "very significant increase in drug addiction" according to Volkow.

Studies of prevention programs demonstrate that parents, families and communities can create an environment that is protective against youth drug abuse. Researchers have found that interventions can actually improve dopamine levels in the brain. "In childhood the brain is particularly 'plastic,'" said Volkow. "It is open to stimuli much more than as an adult, and these stimuli affect brain formation both physically and chemically."

Listed below are Tips for Parents (Focus on the Family, 2000)

1. **Start:** Building protective factors, such as letting your child know you care, with even the youngest children, plays an important role in protecting them from drugs.
2. **Connect:** Build lines of communication and do things as a family. Spend time together--eat dinner, read together, play a game, attend religious services. Show that fun doesn't require drugs. Research has shown that families that have dinners together several nights per week have children who are more successful in school.
3. **Listen:** Take an active interest in what is going on in your child's life. Listen to their cares and concerns. Be a nosy parent. Know what they are up to--where they are and who they're with. Get to know their friends.
4. **Educate:** Spend at least 30 minutes explaining the simple facts to your kids about how drugs can hurt them. Because experimentation with drugs and alcohol commonly begins during the grade-school years, start

appropriate countermeasures in very young children. A 5-year-old boy may not be ready for a lecture about the physiology of cocaine addiction, but you should be ready to offer commentary when you and your child see someone smoking or drinking, whether in real life or a movie.

5. **Care:** Spend at least a few minutes each day telling and showing your children that you care. Make sure they know you care that they are drug-free. Explain to your child that you are always there for them--no matter what happens. Make sure that they know to come to you first for help or information. The extended family plays a major role in influencing a child's life.
6. **Learn:** Children today are sophisticated. In order to educate your child about the danger of drugs, you need to educate yourself first. In many cases, you and your child can learn side-by-side. Sit down together and learn about the risks drugs pose.
7. **Set Limits:** By setting limits on what is acceptable behavior, you show your children you care and you help guide them to a safer future. Declare limits — this family doesn't do drugs, this family doesn't hang around people who do drugs. Enforce these limits and lead by example. Be consistent.
8. **Get Involved:** Effective prevention extends beyond the home into the community. Get involved in your community. Ensure that your community's streets, playgrounds and schools are safe and drug-free. Become active in the PTA and other community organizations.
9. **Model:** Young people are as much aware of what you do as what you say. Don't just say the right things; do the right things. Set a good example. If you are stressed, upset or uncomfortable, are drugs the way you spell relief? Have you accumulated prescription narcotics and tranquilizers that you use freely when the going gets tough? Kids aren't blind. If they see the adults around them frequently taking "legitimate" drugs to dull their pain, why won't they use their own drugs of choice to do the same?