Helping your kids make good choices about drugs and alcohol

One of parents' most pressing concerns is how to help their children make healthy life choices, especially with respect to drugs and alcohol. Although parents cannot control their child's behaviour, there are a few guidelines that might help you to reduce the risk that your children could become addicted to drugs or alcohol.



How it begins

In today's society, drug use is a relatively common phenomenon. If you think about it, most of us rely on some drug to deal with some aspect of our lives: a cup of coffee in the morning to wake up; a glass of wine in the evening to relax; a pill to fight a cold or insomnia. With this kind of implicit message that drug use is acceptable, at least some of the time, its little surprise that most kids will try drugs or alcohol at some point.

Most young people experiment with drugs or alcohol simply because they are curious or because their friends do it and fitting in is important to young people. They may continue using them because, at least for a short time, these substances make them feel good. Other reasons can include:

- to quell loneliness and/or boredom
- to defy authority
- to test limits as they move through various developmental stages
- to gain self-confidence, and
- to appear more mature

Helping your kids make healthy choices

Though most children will try drugs or alcohol, it is important to keep in mind that experimentation is very different from addiction. The following three steps can help you keep your children out of the clutches of drug or alcohol addiction:

Understand your kids. Remember your own childhood and adolescence. Were there ways in which you tried out different avenues wanting to be your own person and/or look for acceptance from others? Your children will most likely learn the same way you learned—that is, by making mistakes. It may frighten you as a parent, but it is an essential part of growing up.

Communication. This is perhaps the most important element in preventing several types of problems, including addictions. In general terms, show your concern and interest; and express your fears and other emotions as clearly as possible without blaming your child for them. If your child has not yet talked to you about drugs or alcohol, ask where they’re at. Avoid giving orders or long lectures, and allow your kids time to clarify and express their feelings. Do your best to understand their point of view. Listen, listen, and listen some more.

Guidance and supervision. Simply put, children need clear rules about what is and is not acceptable behaviour. By setting rules and having high expectations of your child's behaviour, you show that you believe your kids are worthy and capable of achieving these standards. This is the foundation of developing the positive self-esteem that kids will use to resist peer pressure and develop their own set of values and principles.

If you believe your child is using drugs or alcohol, start by observing him or her. Pay close attention to what is going on in your child's life, who they socialize with, and any significant changes in their behaviour.

In working on understanding your kids, parents may also want to take a look at themselves and the example

they are setting with respect to drugs and alcohol. After all, kids learn a lot more by watching adults than by listening to them! For more on helping loved ones with an addiction, search for articles on the topic in this library.

While you cannot make sure that your kids will not use or become addicted to drugs, you can work on maintaining a good relationship with them. You will achieve this by spending time with them, making them feel that they can talk to you about anything, and above all, reinforcing at every step that you will be there for them with your love and an open mind, helping them make the best possible choices for themselves.