

Prevention Tips for Families

by Stephen R. Andrew, LCSW, LADC

Parents, be conscious. Nearly all children must make decisions about nicotine, alcohol, and other drug use and form attitudes about them in their formative years, generally ages 10 through 13. You can establish a supportive environment in which your children may develop the self-esteem needed to effectively deal with these decisions and influence how your children will handle this decision-making process on their own when the time comes. The following is a list of tips compiled to help you through the challenging years of your adolescent's development.

- ♥ The biggest mistake that parents make is believing that children will never use. They ignore all warning signs then are shocked when they receive a phone call from the school, the police, or another parent.
- ♥ Become educated and informed about nicotine, alcohol, and other drugs and their effects. Be a credible source of information for your child. Do not exaggerate the effects of a given drug, this only widens the credibility gap. If you tell your child that he/she will go crazy if marijuana is used, then if he or she tries it and does not go crazy, the child will not heed any of your information, or that provided by others, in the future.
- ♥ Avoid preaching, and ask your child what he or she feels and what she/he thinks. Be curious!
- ♥ Be aware of the do-drug messages that enter into the lives of your children through television and the media. Follow up on these messages and discuss the information and your feelings with your child.
- ♥ Take a firm anti-drug stand with young people and young adults. Let everyone know that your children are not allowed to use drugs including nicotine and alcohol. Back up the no-drug rule with a clear, consistent set of behavioral rules that you are willing and prepared to enforce.
- ♥ Take positive steps to strengthen the family unit and your communication through positive affirmations. Often parents only communicate with their children to tell them to make the bed, feed the dog, or take out the trash.
- ♥ Statistics have shown that juvenile delinquency and drug/alcohol using behaviors decrease by 33% when regular weekly family meetings are planned and followed through. Once a week plan a family activity which excludes non-family members. Each person should take turns planning the activity, with no put downs, evaluations, etc. Your attitude about the planned activity must be one of enjoyment; it will become exciting, sharing, and trusting when you adopt an attitude of gratitude.
- ♥ Take your child one-on-one for an ice cream or lunch once a month and ask him or her the five most important things that have happened in the last month. *Really listen.* Do not evaluate or judge, just listen. Then, share back with the five most important things in your month and don't try to make them all positive. Don't paint yourself as a "perfect, macho" person who never feels bad and who has everything under control.

Accept your children as they are so they may grow into the unique people that they are. Don't tell them what they should think or how they should feel.

- ♥ Don't adopt an attitude of "so what's wrong with a few drugs?" or "I raised a little Cain when I was young." This attitude is negative and dangerous. If and when a young person who has had this type of influence starts and then stops using drugs, he/she may be ill equipped to deal with adult problems.
- ♥ Set as few rules as possible, but stick to them. Avoid getting into battles over trivial issues. Each nagging word weakens your position until you reach a point where what you say is meaningless to you child and you are tuned out. So save your discipline for the things that are important.
- ♥ Expect rules to be tested. Each child tests the boundaries of acceptable behavior as part of their development. Bear in mind that this period of testing is a positive one even though it may be upsetting for you as a parent. It is a time for the young person to develop their values, come to understand healthy boundaries, and continue to detach from the parental influence.
- ♥ Respect your child's privacy.
- ♥ As young people set their own standards for behavior, they may say things that astound you. Listen.
- ♥ Nothing turns them off faster than hearing you preach to them, particularly when you repeat the same message over and over.
- ♥ Always try to listen attentively. It hurts a child's (or anyone's, for that matter) feelings if you are too busy to listen. Young people need responsive feedback from their parents, and the best way to give it is to truly listen when they talk.
- ♥ If you must break a promise, try to provide a reason that is valid in your teenager's eyes, then make plans to make it up to him/her sometime in the concrete future.
- ♥ Let your teenagers work out their own lifestyles. Learn to accept their individuality just as you may accept the individuality of other adults.
- ♥ Enlist the help of older children in understanding the younger ones. If you have two children in, or approaching, adolescence, ask the older one for advice and insight regarding the younger one. Brothers and sisters know things about each other that you won't.
- ♥ Don't be afraid to admit that you can make mistakes. Show your teenagers that you are not inflexible or dictatorial.
- ♥ Let your child know he or she means something to you. If your child accomplishes something that you're proud of, give praise freely. All young people need love and respect, so give it to them freely.
- ♥ Your child needs to know that she/he is loved, no matter what happens. Separate behavior from the person. Remember, we learn more from a model than from a critic.
- ♥ Five necessary components can be used to reinforce the child and to help determine his or her success: affection, discipline, attention, affirmation, and a sense of responsibility.

- ♥ Six rules for young people's success are:
 1. Children should be raised to see themselves as capable and to pattern themselves after capable people. Instead of telling them what to do, help them see what to do. Above all, prepare them with good role models at home.
 2. Believe in them and treat them with respect.
 3. Allow, even insist, that children be contributing members of the family. In good times and in bad, they must feel really needed. If the children have felt needed before the age of thirteen, they can resist the peer pressure in secondary school.
 4. Successful children have no strong faith in miracle solutions. they do not subscribe to instant gratification, and the realize that their lives are a result of their own decisions.
 5. All children need interpersonal skill development, they need to be able to understand and express feelings.
 6. Children need interpersonal skill development; they need to listen to others and feel and hear what they say. TV is no help at all in this area because it is completely a passive involvement. Developing listening skills and really hearing are closely connected to self-esteem.
- ♥ Central to the adolescent are some very challenging developmental tasks, all of which occur within a period of ten years. The adolescent is attempting to deal with and resolve these tasks. There are major changes and stresses occurring in their lives which are complicated and tend to make adolescents more self-aware and self-centered. Some of these developmental tasks are:
 - accepting their own physique and sexual roles
 - establishing new peer relationships
 - obtaining emotional independence from parents
 - achieving assurance of economic independence
 - developing intellectual skills and concepts necessary for a role in the community
 - acquiring socially responsible behavior patterns
 - building values that are harmonious with one's community
 - perhaps preparing for marriage and family life
- ♥ Recognize that it is difficult being an adult in the changing family structure with adolescents. This is the period in which adolescents emotionally grow the fastest and sometimes this emotional roller coaster is very difficult for parents.

We encourage you to be involved in parent support groups in your community. If there is not one, we suggest you start one. The support of others with similar interests is incredibly important as we struggle through the challenging and delightful years of adolescence.

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