

Drug Safety Some Thoughts by Paul Hazelden

Parents want to know: how do I keep my children safe from drugs?

The honest answer is: you can't – not entirely. Things can go wrong in even the best, most loving of families. There is no certainty – but there are things you can do that significantly improve your chances, and there are ways to make a bad outcome much more likely.

If you want to protect your children, you have to understand what you are protecting them from, and the best way to do it; you have to understand both the dangers and the costs of protecting against those dangers. You can't understand every danger, you can't be there to protect your children all the time, and you can't protect them for ever – nor should you want to. A vital part of growing up is learning how to manage risk, and if you don't teach them to manage risk, they will figure it out as best they can without your help.

We teach our children to cross the road, and we generally do it very effectively. First we carry them, then hold their hand as they walk, then have them walk beside us as we decide when to cross, then have them tell us when they think it is safe to cross, then we allow them to cross quiet roads on their own, and finally they cross busy roads on their own.

But with traffic, the danger is obvious, and the consequences are immediate. With drugs, the dangers are not obvious and the consequences of bad decisions are rarely immediately obvious.

Children are very aware that the Government is, in its own language, waging a 'war on drugs'. And they are very familiar with the advice about drugs they are being given by the Government, by teachers and by parents alike: 'just say no'. But what they hear can be very different from the intended message.

Firstly, talking about a 'war on drugs' is very problematic. It is not at all clear what this means – and most of the things it could mean are very unhelpful.

Everyone knows that the drugs this war is fought against are only the illegal ones – not the alcohol or aspirin or chocolate we happily buy in shops. But as soon as you ask why some drugs are legal and some illegal, the story gets incredibly messy and inconsistent. Some illegal drugs are harmful, but some are far safer than most of the legal things we use.

Children ask: why? They want to know why some drugs are legal and some illegal, and they know that most of what they are told by the adults – on the few occasions the adults try to answer the question – can't be trusted.

Children do not only get their information about illegal drugs from their parents and Home Office leaflets: most of what they know comes from television and their friends and the Internet. Most children, by the time they reach Secondary School, know more about drugs than their parents. We can't helpfully talk with our children about illegal drugs if they know we don't know what we are talking about.

Telling children about the risks of taking drugs usually backfires in at least two ways.

Firstly, we over-state the risk. It is counter-productive to warn them that “Ecstasy kills people” when they know that, even if they don’t touch the stuff, many of their friends use Ecstasy several times every weekend, have done so for years, and nobody they know of has ever been harmed by it. Your warning may be technically true, but actual harm is incredibly rare, and by misleading them you are only confirming that you don’t know anything about drugs and can’t be trusted.

Secondly, we parents are very risk-averse concerning our children. We want to keep them safe, so “Don’t do that – it’s dangerous!” is a powerful message for us. But the teenage brain is wired to seek risk. We say: “It’s dangerous!” and they think: “Oh, good! Where can I find it?” Most of the time, the warnings we give about drugs only serve to make them seem more attractive.

Teenagers are generally engaged in a power struggle with their parents: they think we want to control them (we do, of course, but only ‘for their own sake’), and they want to be free of our control. So even if we take the attraction of risk out of the picture, ‘just say no’ is still an attempt to control, and they will instinctively rebel against it.

People who use the language of a ‘war on drugs’ mainly do so with the aim of getting more resources to fight the war. Talking about a war makes it sound like victory is possible, and we are generally willing to invest a great deal and sacrifice a lot to win the victory. But there is no victory possible in a war against drugs, any more than you could gain the victory in a war against dishonesty. The very language of a ‘war on drugs’ is itself a form of dishonesty.

So what can work?

Firstly, the most important issue is not drugs, but the relationship between the parents and the child. They are far more likely to be harmed by that relationship going bad than they are by drugs.

Secondly, the most important thing you can do to protect your child from problematic drug use is to help them build a good, happy life. Happy people rarely become addicts: drugs are either an escape from pains and problems, or they are a way of seeking the fun and fulfilment which is missing. If your life is happy and fulfilled, the drugs can’t offer anything better than you already have. So help your children to build a good life, and to develop strong relationships with good people.

Thirdly, if you want to help your children navigate a world that is full of drugs and pitfalls of all kinds, they must be able to trust you, which means you must be honest with them, and preferably more knowledgeable: understand the details, not just the headlines. More importantly, if you want them to trust you, you must give them time and really listen to them.

They know about the world they are living in, and you do not. If you want to help them, you must understand their world, so you must keep listening even when you dislike what you are being told. If they don’t know you have heard them, they will not be able to hear you.

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Last updated: 23:44 on 12 July 2019, revision: 8
Location: /home/paul/C/Reflections/Drug_Safety.odt