



Dealing with Drugs: The Most Difficult Behavior in Adolescents

By Kelly Nault, M.A.

Parenting Question

"Kelly, I am a concerned aunt who has heard you on the radio and like your practical and straightforward approach. I have a BIG question. Recently, my 13-year-old niece has become friends with a group who are negatively impacting her life. Once an honor roll student, her grades have plummeted and she is now on the verge of expulsion. Often she does not come home on weekends and is doing drugs. She hasn't taken crystal meth, but it seems that she is on that path. I am scared for her and for my brother who has picked her up now six times from the emergency room after various overdoses. Her punishments don't seem to be working. Yet, how else can we get her to listen? What can parents do to prevent this from happening to their kids?"

--Aunt Who Is Concerned About Difficult Behavior in Adolescents

Positive Parenting Tip from Kelly Nault

Dear Aunt Who Is Concerned About Difficult Behavior in Adolescents:

You are not alone in your concern when it comes to teens and the negative influence drugs can have on their life. The American 2004 Partnership Attitude Tracking Study (PATS) found that:

- Less than 18% of parents believe their teenager has smoked marijuana, yet **39% percent of teens report using this drug.**
- Just 1% of parents today believe their teen has used Ecstasy, yet **9% of teens (approximately 2.1 million) state they have used this drug.**
- Although most parents say they believe it is important to discuss drugs with their kids, less than 35% of teens report learning a lot about the dangers of drugs from home.

When teens do not learn about the risks of drugs from home (other than the glamorized versions of drug addiction depicted on television and in the movies), you can bet they are learning from their friends. This is exactly why education in the home is so important.

Preventing Difficult Behavior in Adolescents

There are simple, powerful ways to help your child be protected from the negative effects of drugs and alcohol. The best drug prevention is doing the following:

1. **Build Your Child's Self-esteem** - All children want to belong and please their parents. Yet, if their sole self-esteem comes from being a "pleaser" who is fed by outside validation alone (rather than by feeling good about themselves), children can be easily

seduced to please their peers with dangerous drug experimentation. Help prevent your child from seeking external validation by focusing on your child's passions at an early age, help them learn from the consequences of their own actions, and use encouragement that feeds their internal validation (all discussed in detail in my book *When You're About To Go Off The Deep End, Don't Take Your Kids With You*).

2. **Teach Them about the REAL Effects of Drugs** - The more children know about the reality of drug addiction and life on the streets, the better off they will be. All children are curious about the world and about "forbidden fruits". The more you hide, the more they will seek. Discuss drugs and alcohol as they come up in your child's life. Talk about the uncle who is an alcoholic, the cousin who is a drug addict and look for movies or experiences (like a visit to a drug rehab center) that illustrate the true detrimental effects of drugs.
3. **Using Consequences that are Directly Related to Misbehavior** - When dealing with difficult behavior in adolescents, avoid punishments such as taking away privileges: they only teach a child to "not get caught" next time. Make certain the consequence is related to your child's misbehavior. For instance, if your child comes home late, taking away TV privileges is not related and will probably be ineffective. Telling them they will need to come home one hour earlier until they prove to you they can be trusted to follow their curfew is related. The more harshly you punish, the more your child will learn how to become a good liar. Keep your consequences firm, but kind. This will help to keep the communication lines open, an essential for keeping your children safe.
4. **Coming Clean with Your Own History about Drugs and Alcohol** - Pretending that you are "holier than thou" when you yourself experimented with drugs and alcohol-and the evidence is overwhelming that you did at least one of these before the legal age limit-only makes you a hypocrite. Your children will see right through you. If you yourself are a substance abuser, take a good hard look in the mirror. Children tend to model exactly what they see. Be honest and forthcoming with your concerns.

Dealing with Adolescent Substance Abuse

If your teen is already doing drugs or alcohol, here are some suggestions:

1. **Steer Clear from Punishments** - Many parents, counselors and other experts speak of a 'zero tolerance' policy and recommend firm punishment. As stated above, if the punishment you're dishing out is not directly related to the misbehavior, you will only be teaching your teen to not get caught next time. You are also not giving them an opportunity to really learn from their experiences. I recently counseled a 16-year-old who attends weekly parties where lots of drugs are present. She simply stated, "When my mom comes down harsh on me, I just want to do it more."
2. **Get Outside Help If Your Teen is Addicted** - Drug addiction is too big a problem to deal with alone-period! Learn the signs and act quickly. When it comes to breaking an addiction, constant and professional supervision is needed. Contact drug and alcohol rehab centers in your area and get help.
3. **Be Open to Hearing the Tough Stuff** - Strive for open and respectful communication between you and your teen. Listen to them and listen well. What is it that they are really needing? If you jump all over your teen when they tell you they would like to know what it's like to be drunk, find out more. The more you can hear, the more they will tell-and the better chance you have of keeping them safe.

4. **Create a Solid Community** - The more extended family members and friends that your teen feels comfortable sharing with, the better. Develop this network and find ways to keep your teen involved in positive and meaningful ways. Encourage and look for ways your teen can make positive contributions to your family, your religious organization, your community, etc.

Experimentation with drugs and alcohol are the most difficult behaviors in adolescents that parents will face-whether they want to or not. There are no quick and simple answers. Although you may want to lock your teen up until they make it safely to age 21, this solution isn't practical or feasible. Improve your chances of keeping your teen safe by keeping the communication lines open, having clearly defined rules, and remaining kind-but firm.

Kelly Nault, MA corporate spokesperson and award winning parenting author of *When You're About To Go Off The Deep End, Don't Take Your Kids With You* inspires moms to put themselves first—for the sake of their children. She shares time-tested tools that motivate children to want to be well behaved, responsible and happy! Sign up for her free online parenting course at www.UltimateParenting.com.

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