

How to talk to your teenagers about drugs

October 3 2019, by Emma Maynard



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The UK has seen a sharp increase in teenage drug use in the last few years: the NHS reports that [37%](#) of 15-year-olds have used drugs, and that deaths resulting from drug use are at their highest since records began in 1993. Meanwhile, [thousands of children](#) are being drawn into drug dealing through "county lines": gangs using them to transport drugs and cash from the capital to regional towns.

And so for parents, the stakes have perhaps never felt so high. Negotiating parenthood in such a context is tricky to say the least, and can leave parents unsure of what to do and feeling they have little control.

[Experts](#) in teenage [drug use](#) tell us it's about informed choices. They advise us to accept that as parents we are unlikely to stop our [teenage children](#) doing what they choose, and so, our [best approach](#) is to ensure they have the right information, and that they can discuss issues with us openly. In this way, we can help to reduce harm by ensuring teenagers are aware of the risks, and what to do if they need help.

Though this is indeed excellent advice, it is difficult for many parents to follow. My [ongoing research](#) looks at the experiences of parents whose [children](#) are taking drugs. They value the way practitioners can talk to their teenagers, and understand the value of the advised [harm reduction](#) approach.

Despite this, most parents I've spoken to have said their gut reaction is to respond differently: more zero tolerance than harm reduction. They tend to ground their children and stop their pocket money. Stories are littered with accounts of rows and escalating sanctions in an endless cycle of panic and rebellion.

The actions of parents seemed to echo how things had been before the drugs, when children were younger. They talk about keeping them at home, safe, and without money to buy drugs. These parents speak of yearning for a simpler society; less materialistic, less risky. They feel left in the dark and unable to assess danger.

This is unsurprising. The idea that we can sit down calmly and rationally and explain to our children how they can take drugs safely overlooks a bundle of emotional issues. As parents, we are programmed to protect,

avoiding danger where we can, and to actively encourage behaviour which fits expectations of school and society. But your relationship with your child is what is most important here, so try to set all social expectations aside, and focus on what really matters.

Calm conversations

Speaking to your children about drugs is emotional hard labour. So here are some things to be aware of if you are a parent facing this conundrum. The key thing here is to try to stop focusing on problems by [looking to solutions](#):

1. Talk when you are calm. Knowing your child is taking drugs is a gruelling experience, and expecting to keep calm all the time is an additional pressure you don't need. But choosing when to talk can help. The [parents](#) I spoke to all said the same thing: talk when you are calm, and they are calm. Then you can talk and listen well.
2. Listen for the reason—this is not all about the drugs, it's about the motivation for taking them. That motivation will be the biggest obstacle in changing the pattern, so listen closely to that part of the story.
3. Notice the times when you are not both thinking about the drugs, and the strain it is causing you. Give a little more emphasis to those exceptions, so that positive moments gain at least as much recognition, if not more, than the drugs.
4. Have fun. If this means avoiding the topic for a little while, do it. Do something different and light-hearted. Talk about something other than the drugs and any fall-out, such as poor behaviour or school issues. Having fun together is one of the best things we can do to boost resilience, especially when relationships come under strain. It's also one of the first things we neglect to prioritise.

5. If you think of the last moment you had when things were more positive, when your child spoke to you in a less angry way, or you did the same, you may also be able to recognise the difference this made. Repeat, reflect, and shift the focus to dial down the temperature in those heated conversations. It takes huge effort—but in every strained situation there will be glimmers of hope.
6. Let your child see how much you care, and that your worries and actions are evidence of this. Recognise [drug](#) taking is a far greater issue than informed choice and control. If you can stay in this space, you will be able to keep hold of your continually evolving attachment bonds, providing the protection your child still needs.

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