

The Drug Conversation: How to Talk to Your Child about Drugs

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Introduction

‘Mind your own business. What I do is up to me. You always go on about drugs being bad, but what do you know? You told me you’ve never taken any, right? So how do you know what’s what? You don’t know anything!’ – a 15-year-old’s response to being asked by his mother if he is taking drugs.

I’m sitting with Harry, a bright, articulate 15-year-old who attends a well-known school in London. Harry’s parents are here too, looking anxious and frustrated. This is my second meeting with Harry and he is here because he uses drugs. He mostly uses cannabis but also occasionally ecstasy and, on one occasion, he has taken cocaine. To Harry’s dismay, one of his friends told a teacher that they were worried about him. The head teacher called Harry and his parents to a meeting to discuss his progress and reported drug use.

Harry doesn’t think his drug use is a problem, claiming that all of his friends smoke a joint (of cannabis) ‘now and then’ and that he uses less than some. Despite recently falling grades, Harry knows he is bright and wants to go to university to study journalism, something he has wanted to do for as long as he can remember. He seems relaxed, even confident, as he talks to me about how cannabis helps control his anxiety, improves his sleep and makes him feel relaxed and ‘part of the crowd’. He can’t imagine a life without drugs.

Harry’s parents, on the other hand, are horrified. They can hardly bring themselves to believe that Harry is using drugs and blame his friends for introducing him to them. They think he has fallen in with a ‘bad lot’ and is putting his promising future at risk. At today’s meeting, they ask Harry to stop using drugs immediately, threaten to ban him from seeing his friends

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and insist that he is drug-tested every week. They become frustrated and angry when he says that they are overreacting and accuses them of being out of touch and ignorant about drugs.

Tensions rise further as it becomes clear that Harry has been stealing money from his mother's purse to spend on cannabis. His parents also discover that at weekends he has repeatedly lied about where he is and whom he is with. The conversation becomes increasingly heated and hostile.

This story has unfolded hundreds of times in my office.

Months later, Harry has changed his mind. He found that his drug use started to affect important parts of his life. His academic performance dropped further and cannabis made him increasingly paranoid. With support, he has stopped using drugs completely, although he has not ruled out trying them again in the future. He has needed to change some of his friends but seems happier for this. The paranoia has improved and he is able to study again.

Harry's parents have also been working hard. They now know much more about drugs and what to look out for if Harry starts using again. They have had to learn to trust him again despite feeling anxious about this, but can see that Harry is making progress.

Unfortunately, not all stories end this well.

Why write this book?

I wrote this book for two reasons. The first is that I am a psychiatrist who specialises in drug problems. Over the years, I have met thousands of patients and helped them on their often complex and sometimes painful journey to recovery. As a psychiatrist, I am interested in both the brain systems underpinning drug misuse and the psychological reasons for these problems. I believe my patients and their families deserve clear and up-to-date information to help them make decisions. This book will give you plenty of information to help you understand how drugs affect the brain, what problems they cause and possible solutions.

The second reason for writing this book is that I am a parent. Like many parents, I worry about how I can best look after and

support my children. Other parents clearly feel this too, and all ask me the same questions.

- How do I talk to my child about drugs?
- What should I look out for?
- Can I stop them from trying drugs?
- What should I do if I think they are using drugs?

Drug use arouses difficult feelings – confusion, anger, helplessness and condemnation. These feelings are understandable, but can sometimes make the situation worse.

In my experience, it is unhelpful to judge someone as ‘bad’ because they use drugs. It’s far better to try to understand their reasons for using drugs. So, in this book I steer clear of moral judgements about drug use. There will always be people who want to experiment with drugs, but some people are damaged by these experiments. What I most want to do is to help people avoid this damage and to help those who have begun to experience harm, and their families, to find a better way to manage their lives.

Why read this book?

Most parents assume that their child will be taught about drugs by the school they attend. Many schools do a good job, but standards can vary. I always suggest that parents take an active role in educating their child about drugs, and don’t rely entirely on schools.

Parents might worry about talking to their children about this subject and feel they don’t have enough information to start a conversation about drugs. These concerns are understandable – the drug market is also very different now from when parents were growing up. There are now more drugs than ever, both illegal and legal. The internet is increasingly used to market and sell drugs.

This book will address all of these issues in a clear, practical way, focusing on what you need to know. Using the latest science, this book will help you feel more informed about drugs, more confident in talking to your child, more able to avoid problems developing and more prepared to tackle problems with drugs if they arise.

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How to use this book

This book can be read in different ways. If you don't know much about drugs, then reading the chapters in order will give you the best introduction. However, all the chapters have been written to stand on their own, so you can go straight to the one that you need. So, if you have a particular question, such as 'How can I drug-test my child?' or 'I've just found drugs in their room, what should I do?' then you can skip to the relevant section. At the end of each section, there is a summary of the key points covered.

There are case studies from my clinical practice throughout the book that illustrate different points. All these patients consented to their stories being used, but names and other details have been changed to ensure anonymity.