
Is My Child Using Drugs?

In an age when the use of illegal drugs is becoming increasingly common, many parents are faced with the real possibility that their children are using drugs. You may find yourself in a situation when you find something that makes you think your child may be using something. What do you do?

Here are a few thoughts to help you.

1. DON'T PANIC

If you come across something that makes you wonder if your child is using drugs, the first thing to do is take a deep breath. You may well have feelings of anger, panic and shame. You may feel a strong urge to sort it out there and then. If you are feeling strong emotions, you must resist the urge.

You will need to think calmly and rationally if you are going to help your child. If you go in like a bull in a china shop, you may put your child off and lose the opportunity to do something positive, possibly for ever.

Although you may want to give your child "a good talking to", this is not the time to do it. You can only help your child if you maintain your relationship. You will not do this if you argue, criticise, confront, patronise or scream at your child. He or she may not speak to you again.

2. LOOK IN THE MIRROR

As you calm down from the initial shock, you must prepare to talk to your child.

If you wish to comment on his or her drug use, you must be ready for a complaint about your drug use. If you use drugs, how can you complain that your child is? Be clear what you use – including tobacco and alcohol. Your child will not be impressed if you try to say that your drug use is "different". He or she will not accept your concerns about his or her drug use if he or she thinks you are being hypocritical.

3. FIND OUT THE FACTS – a. YOUR CHILD'S DRUG USE

When you have calmed down, tell your child calmly that you would like to talk about their drug use.

You can introduce the conversation by saying that there is something that you would like to talk about. Find a quiet place, where you will not be disturbed (take the phone off the hook if necessary) and sit down together. Say that you have come to wonder whether he or she might be using drugs. If you have found out by illicit means (e.g., reading your child's diary without permission), you must sincerely apologise that you found out that way. Let the child tell you what he or she feels able to tell you at the time.

If your child denies it outright, then simply say that you accept their statement, but that if at some stage in the future they want to talk to you again about drugs, they are welcome to do so.

If your child tells you that they are using drugs, then listen to their account. Listening to your child talk about their drug use does not mean you approve. You must make it clear that while you have concerns about their drug use, you do not reject them. You are allowed to have a difference of opinion. You can tell your child that you are concerned about the risks that you believe drugs can cause and that you want to help, if they feel able to accept it.

4. FIND OUT THE FACTS – b. DRUGS AND THE SERVICES AVAILABLE

Whether or not your child is ready to get help at the time, you can still help yourself by getting to know what services are available. You will find this helpful, so that you are ready to act if your child comes to you later and says that he or she is ready to seek help.

You need to become acquainted with what the drugs are and what they do. You should get a realistic idea of the harm they can do (you will concentrate on this bit), but you need to get it in perspective. There are many drug using situations in which users do not come to harm. You can find out more from the internet, such as our website (www.drugshelp.info) or other public sites such as the BBC's website (www.bbc.co.uk/health).

There are a lot of myths and inaccuracies about drugs. Unless you speak to someone with specialist knowledge, you are likely to be told many incorrect things. There are specialist doctors (addiction psychiatrists, and to a lesser degree, specialist generalist GPs) who are properly informed. Addiction is not part of most doctors' training and you should assume that the average doctor or nurse is ignorant, unless proved otherwise. There are also drug services locally. You can find out what is available in your area by logging onto the website www.nta.nhs.uk, or see our paper *Finding Help for a Problem with Tobacco, Alcohol or Drugs*.

You should also know that there are services not just for drug users but also for their families. You will need help yourself and you should make sure you get it.

5. WORK OUT A JOINT PLAN WITH YOUR CHILD

If your child feels ready to attempt to do something – however small - about their drug use, then you should try to agree the steps together. It may be just to go and see the GP, or visit the local drug treatment centre, or have an assessment. Your child should be encouraged to carry out what they say they feel they can do. He or she should not be badgered into attempting something that is very likely to fail – it is bad for both of your morale.

You should not try and treat your child. Do not talk to your child as though you are an expert – you are not. Do not follow “trends” and think that it is acceptable for your child to continue dangerous drug use. You do not know the way forward any more than your child.

Make your plans slowly and thoughtfully. Do not rush into treatment, especially if it involves spending a large amount of money.

6. SETTING LIMITS

Agreeing to help your child with a drug problem does not mean you approve of the drug use. You should treat your child with respect and you should expect your child to treat you the same way. Drug use is not an excuse for bad behaviour.

You should make it clear to your child that stealing, lying, threats and violence are not acceptable behaviours. If your child cannot refrain from such activities, you must make it clear that you will not be able to help them. If they persist in any of these activities, you do not have to continue to keep them in your house. If you are threatened, it is reasonable to ask the police for help. If you have difficulty enforcing, then you need to talk to an expert in drug addiction who is able to advise you and perhaps also support you in taking action that you might otherwise be reluctant to take.