

What parents need to know about drugs

Don't wait until the teen years to learn about drug risks. Read our essential information, produced in association with FRANK.

As a parent, it's important to understand why your child might experiment with drugs and the risks and harms associated with the most commonly-used illegal substances. Understanding the facts about drugs will help you to communicate with your son or daughter to inform them of the risks, and help them to stay safe. It will also help you keep a cool head in a crisis - a supportive family relationship can make all the difference in preventing drug problems from developing.

Staying calm about drugs

When you're talking to your children about drugs, try to put your own feelings to one side. If you think or know that your child has been using drugs, it's natural to feel worried or angry, but losing your temper, threatening or scaremongering is more likely to push them further away from you. While you need to inform them about the risks, it's also important to understand why taking drugs can be seen as appealing. The reasons may include curiosity, boredom, and the desire to take risks, or impress peers and friends, as well as the perceived benefits of different types of illegal drugs.

Set aside your assumptions and pre-conceived ideas and listen to what your child has to say. Remain calm and listen to why they have made the decision to experiment with illegal drugs. They may be taking drugs to relieve stress or boost their confidence. Try to help them to understand that there are other options, and that using drugs is not necessarily the easy option it seems to be.

Stress Busters: Some drugs, such as cannabis, can make users feel relaxed. If your child is feeling stressed about school, has family worries or is having arguments with their friends, cannabis may seem a good way to escape from their fears and bond with others.

Confidence Boosters: Some drugs, such as cocaine, ecstasy or amphetamines, can make users feel happier and more confident in social situations. If your child feels shy or awkward in social situations or parties, then they may think that cocaine or similar drugs will give them the confidence they need to have a good time.

Dependency: Some drugs, such as cocaine and crack, are highly addictive and what might start off as an experimental experience can end up becoming rapidly addictive.

As a parent or carer, it is crucial to educate yourselves on the different types of drugs, pictures of what they look like, paraphernalia of drugs like Rizla papers, foil, wrappers for cocaine, etc. Educate yourselves on spotting the signs and do not be afraid to ask difficult questions when you need to.

Legal highs

Legal highs are substances which mimic the effects of drugs such as cocaine, ecstasy or cannabis. The main difference is that they're not controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act. Despite mimicking the effects of illegal drugs, they're chemically and structurally different enough to avoid being officially classified as illegal substances.

The effects and risks

One of the biggest problems with legal highs is that little or no research has been done into their effects, especially their long-term effects. However, we know that if they produce similar psychological effects as cocaine, ecstasy or cannabis, they are also likely to carry similar risks, and some may have new risks we don't yet know about. So, legal highs are far from harmless. For example, substances with similar health risks to cocaine and ecstasy can increase the chances of seizures and comas, and even carry a risk of death.

In fact, some drugs sold as legal highs have actually been found to contain a controlled substance meaning they aren't legal to possess at all. The Government has now introduced new powers, meaning they can place a temporary ban on any potentially harmful substance, while a decision is made on whether it should be permanently controlled.

Teachers have the powers to search students they believe to be in possession of illegal substances. If a legal high is found, teachers can confiscate and dispose of them, in line with the school's policy.

GBL

The party drug GBL was made illegal in December 2009. It is now classified as a Class C drug under the Misuse of Drugs act 1971. Anyone caught with this drug can get up to two years in prison or an unlimited fine.

The drug, which is particularly popular amongst university students, can be fatal when taken with alcohol. It caused the death of 21 year old student Hester Stewart in Brighton in 2009. Its dangers were highlighted when 22 year old Mikaela Tyhurst revealed how her looks and health had been ravaged after taking GBL over the previous four years. GBL has the same effects as GHB - which is also classified as a Class C drug and known as 'liquid ecstasy'.

Last year, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) advised the government to change the classification of GBL to a Class C drug. In a letter to the Home Secretary, they said that they were concerned about the potentially serious consequences of GBL when taken with drink. There was also no way of knowing its strength, as it could be bought online.

If you suspect your child is taking drugs or need support in talking to your child about drugs, you call our confidential helpline on 0808 800 2222 or visit www.talktofrank.com for more information.

Drugs - what are the signs?

illegal drugs

To avoid making assumptions or worrying unnecessarily, it can be useful to be able to recognise the signs that your child may be taking drugs.

The following changes in behaviour or appearance could be a sign that something is wrong. However - even if you think you've noticed some or all of these signs, it's important not to jump to conclusions. It may not mean that your child is taking drugs - it could just be part of the usual growing up phase as your teenager comes to terms with new hormones, new responsibilities and a new identity.

Your child may start asking you for money, or cash could start going missing with no indication of what has been bought.

You may find unusual equipment lying around the house, such as torn cigarette packets, small sealable bags or empty aerosols.

They may experience a lack of appetite or you could notice sores or rashes around the mouth or nose.

Your child may experience mood swings, start staying out late, or begin socialising with new friends.

They may appear drowsy, lack motivation, and lose interest in their personal appearance.

If you're worried, the best thing to do is have a calm, open talk with your child, making sure to listen to whatever they have to say. Try not to be emotional or judgemental as this could ruin your chance to have an honest conversation.

If you discover that your child is taking drugs

Don't panic: Although you may have a strong emotional reaction, shouting at your child is not going to help. Stay calm and remain open-minded. Don't just fire questions at them - make sure that you're listening to what your child has to say. Being able to communicate with your child will help to prevent and limit the problems caused by drug misuse.

Be supportive: If your child is taking drugs, you need to understand why. They may be being bullied, or feeling stressed about school. Young people who talk openly with their parents are less likely to try drugs than those without this relationship, so make it clear that you're there for them, and are willing to help them with any problems they're having.

Do your homework: There are lots of myths and misconceptions around drugs which may cloud your judgement. Until you're well informed, you'll be unable to offer your child sound advice. FRANK's information on drugs and Adfam's resources on how families can be affected by drugs will help provide you with the tools you need to manage a difficult conversation.

Talking to teens about drugs

Helping parents understand the facts

As a parent, it's a good idea to fully understand the facts about drugs. It can often help to sit down and talk to your teen about drugs and the risks and effects different drugs have. These conversations will help them feel more confident and comfortable about making the right choices both now, and in the future.

Illegal drugs

It's important to talk about drugs

Most teens come into contact with drugs in some form or another at some point in their life. If they do decide to take them - and the majority of teens don't - there are many possible reasons why. For some, it might be a case of rebellion, or a need to fit in; others might use them as a way to relax, get high, and lose their inhibitions; or it could even be as simple as curiosity - a chance to experiment with different drugs and see what it's like.

Young people who can talk openly with their parents are less likely to try drugs than those without this relationship, and they will wait until they are older before deciding whether to experiment with drugs. In addition, families that have experienced drug or alcohol misuse say that being well-informed about substances and their effects would have helped them to either minimise problems caused by drugs, or to identify them at an earlier stage.

Callum Jacobs from FRANK says: "Being able to talk to your children is key to preventing and limiting the potential problems caused by drug misuse, yet many parents feel unable to tackle this subject, partly because they feel ill-informed and afraid that their child will know more about drugs than they do. However, this is too important an issue to be swept under the carpet - every parent needs to find out the facts about drugs so that they can feel confident enough to talk to their children."

How to talk to your teenager about drugs

Here Family Lives, in association with FRANK, give tips on how parents can manage that first conversation:

1. Prepare

Think about why you want to have the talk. Is it because your child has reached a certain age and you think it's about time, or have you noticed some worrying changes in behaviour - for example, your son or daughter is staying in his or her room for hours on end, or going out all the time? Remember, adolescence is often a difficult time and your child's behaviour might in fact be nothing more than their teenage development or adjusting to new feelings and experiences in their life, so try to be open about what might be affecting their behaviour.

The next stage is to do some research. Find out the facts (see www.talktofrank.com) and think through your views on drugs. For example, do you reject all forms of drug taking or do you make a distinction between cannabis and heroin? It's important for you to be clear about your own opinions before you talk to your child.

2. Having the conversation: stay calm and be open

Getting too intense will put pressure on your child, so it's important to stay calm and open-minded. Encourage a relaxed conversation, starting with questions about the 'bigger picture'. Try to find out how things are going outside of home, with their friends, at school, etc. Make sure to ask questions that won't result in one-word answers; this way, the conversation will be much more likely to flow.

Just as importantly, listen to what your child has to say. Write it down if it helps and consider it later. Don't react to bad language or shocking stories. It's also important to see their point of view. Just as you need your ideas to be listened to, your children need to see that you listen to them - and you don't have to compromise your own boundaries to do this.

3. Make sure the dialogue is on-going

If your child feels comfortable after the initial conversation, they will be more likely to come to you with any future questions. Make sure you're available to talk when they do this, but don't feel that you have to wait for them in order to have another chat.

4. Stay calm

If you're sure there's a problem and your child refuses to talk to you, try to stay calm. Remember that there are different reasons why people take drugs. For your child, it may be as simple as, 'to have fun'. The drugs might make your child feel relaxed, sociable and full of energy, and this may be a phase that they are going through. It's important to explain that drugs are illegal and can affect their physical and mental health, and to let them know that while you may not approve, they can always talk to you about any worries they may have.

Alternatively, your child may be using drugs to escape pressure at school or at home, or because they are having difficulty in coping with stressful situations. Again, it's important to talk calmly and get to the root of any problems, so that you can find a way to work through these problems together and help them manage these situations without drugs.

5. Be supportive

FRANK'S Callum Jacobs says: "One of the best things a child can know is that they have a supportive environment. If you've had a conversation where your child has admitted to taking drugs and you've said: 'I'm not condoning what you do, but if you're in trouble, you can always talk about it with us', they're more likely to turn to you if, or when, they get worried." If the conversation is handled well, your child will most likely feel comfortable enough to talk to you about other problems.

6. Don't blame yourself

Remember, you are not to blame; ultimately your child is responsible for their choice to take drugs. Also remember that, although drug use can be worrying, in most cases your child will not develop a drug problem and will stop taking drugs of their own accord. If it turns out your child has been experimenting with drugs, or you've had a conversation with them about drugs and you feel that you need more help, remember that there are support services available for you both. Don't delay in seeking help. Often parents concentrate solely on finding help for

their child, yet getting support for yourself might actually be the best way to help your child.

Callum Jacobs says: "Parents must remember that they also have needs and that they must be able to look after their relationships with other family members throughout this experience. There are many support groups, run by people who have had similar experiences to you and who will understand what you, your child and your whole family are going through".

Research shows that where young people do develop a problem with drugs, the involvement and support of parents and families can make a big difference to the person's health and their ability to deal with their drug habit. Drugs services, counselling services, and self-help groups offer support to your child at any stage, whether or not they are ready to change their behaviour.

For more information on support groups and counselling services, visit www.talktofrank.com or call the FRANK helpline on 0800 77 66 00.

Real life stories

Three brave parents speak about the traumatic experiences they have dealt with since their children started taking drugs.

Living in turmoil

"From a truly delightful child, loving son and brother, he was the most caring and kind son any mother could have wished for; we all adored him. Now our lives are a roller coaster; never knowing what he is up to and never truly trusting him. He doesn't seem to care about anything or anyone, least of all himself. From being healthy, good looking and sociable, he is now thin, spotty and reclusive. It has been the most heart-breaking experience in all my life to see my beloved son gripped by the evils of drugs, not to mention the associated lying and deceitfulness that also came with his habits.

"My guess, in hindsight, is that he started using drugs as young as 15 - he is now 30 - and once again we have become aware that he is using, and not 'just weed' as he has always maintained in order to keep us quiet. A few years ago we found out that he was using crack; I now feel sure he is smoking heroin. The feeling of helplessness is unbearable, I feel sick with worry - I want my son back. I wonder if

any drug user was given their life back again, would they have smoked that first 'harmless' spliff?"

Split personality

"My son takes drugs, cocaine being his favourite. I have done the tough love bit and thrown him out. However, he stops taking it for a while and gives me the false hope that he is ok now. He comes back home and is the model son for weeks. Then it starts again. Little by little the arrogance appears again, chipping away at me. Saturday night he kicked in my front door. I have to, once again, take a deep breath and be strong. I have given him a date for getting his own place and said I will call the police should anything like this happen again.

"The addiction does not just attack the person taking the drug. It whittles away at the people around them who care. I too am at risk of losing all my friends and family who can only take so much of my needing help. You drug addicts leave the ones around you feeling the despair, loneliness and lack of hope your addiction gives you. I mourn the death of the son I once had. I look to the son he was with hope. I am at risk of losing my friends, my family and my home for a drug I don't even take. With regret, I find I have to say enough is enough."

Off the rails

"She hates me, her dad and her brother. She puts her brother down all the time saying he won't do well at school. She upsets her grandparents and she just laughs. I have done everything for her, she has never helped around the house; all her washing and ironing is done for her. We buy everything for her, but she doesn't agree with house rules. She thinks she can stay out all-night without letting us know. She would rather hang round the streets drinking, or in one of her boyfriend's friend's houses, who is a known drug dealer.

My doctor has given me medication to help me. I had a mini stroke last year and part of my face is still not right. Two days ago she slapped me across that side of my face and laughed. I really don't want her to leave but my friends and family have said I must let her go at the end of the day. I really do think she could be either using or taking something. I am so scared for her and I have no idea what to do. We have tried talking to her - she won't listen."