

# A Mother's Guide to Prevention: Ways to Help Your Children Grow Up Drug-Free

Elaine Rapp, B.S.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Graduate Student, Health Education Programs, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

Corresponding author: Elaine Rapp, Health Education Programs, Southern Illinois University, Pulliam 307, MS 4632, Carbondale, IL 62901; phone: 618.453.2777; fax: 618.453.1829; email: [ERAPP@SIU.EDU](mailto:ERAPP@SIU.EDU)

## Introduction

Talking to children about drugs is a hard thing for most parents, especially single parents. Among all the single parents in the world, mothers tend to be the primary caregiver. This paper attempts to provide insight to help single mothers and parents in general to talk to their children about drugs. "Drug addiction can destroy your relationships and family life and can harm or even kill you" (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

Single parent mothering is a difficult task. Many do not realize parents are the most important role models in children's lives. What we do and say about drugs matters a lot when it comes to the choices children make. Mothers need to lay the groundwork so that children know what the consequences will be and where the single mother stands with respect to discipline. Mothers can:

- set a positive example and get involved in our children's lives;
- get involved in their activities, know their friends, know where they're going and what they're doing;
- create clear, consistent expectations and enforce them;
- talk early and often about drugs;
- discuss the consequences of drug use;
- show they care enormously about what choices our children make about drugs.

"Children learn by example" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1995, 1997; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). They adopt values that adults demonstrate through their actions. As children grow up, they are influenced by parents' concern for others, their willingness to offer help and assistance, and their honesty when there is wrongdoing.

What does one say when your child asks: "Did you ever use drugs?" This question is asked the most frequently by single mother parents. Unless the answer is "no," it is hard to know what to say. Almost every single mother parent who used drugs does not want her children to do the same. Many people wonder if this posture is hypocritical, and the answer is "no" because they want the best for their children. Because many parents have "been there and done that," they understand the hazards of drug use. Parents need to use credible examples such as friends who had trouble from drug use, a neighbor who was in a horrible accident, an addicted family member, or the teen who lost interest in school and sports all due to drug use.

Some mothers choose to lie about their drug use while others choose to tell the truth. The experts recommend honesty. Honesty does not necessarily mean all aspects of full disclosure or that the mother should recount every moment of her experience. But, but failing to be truthful, the mother risks losing credibility with their children if they were to ever find out about the mothers past. Some of the benefits of being honest with respect to the issue of previous personal drug use are:

- what attracted them to drugs
- why drugs are dangerous
- why they want their children to avoid making the same mistake

There is no perfect way to get this message across. Just make your family's values clear and choose a particular course of action and how that choice reflects your values. Explore moral issues by posing hypothetical questions at the dinner table or in the car.

Plan for togetherness with children. Have family meetings where there are ground rules. Sometimes, simple incentives are valuable ways to promote openness. Have regular parent-child rituals such as getting ice cream once a week, going to the library, talking on the way home from school or after dinner.

"When it comes to dangerous substances like alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, don't assume that your children know where you stand" (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Making one's position clear is such an important aspect in a child's life. Children and youth may want a parent to talk to them about drugs. Mothers need to state their position clearly. The consequences of "breaking the rules" need to be discussed. Children need to know what the punishment will be and how it will be carried out. Children want parents to show them they care enough to "lay down the law" and to go to the trouble of enforcing it. Rules about drugs give children reasons to fall back on when they may be tempted to make bad decisions. Parents should emphasize the things their children do well and do "right" instead of focusing of what is done "wrong." Finally, parents *do* need to be aware of what their own use of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs, and what this use "says" to children. "Research suggests that the use of alcohol and drugs by other family members plays a strong role in whether children start using drugs" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1995).

Talking with one's kids effectively is something single parents have a hard time doing. Teenagers who say they have learned a lot about the risks of drugs from their mothers are less likely to try marijuana than

those who say they learned nothing from them. Mothers need to realize there are so many teachable moments in a day. If parent and child are walking down the street and encounter a group of teenagers drinking alcohol, an opportunity is provided to talk about the negative effects of drinking alcohol. Newspapers are full of the consequences of alcohol and drug abuse. Many examples can be taken directly from the front page. One can ask children if they heard about the mother who used drugs and was arrested. Did she make a good decision when she used drugs? Whenever an anti-drug commercial is portrayed on television, it can be an opening to talk to children about drugs. When there is a family history of alcoholism or drug abuse, children can be told about this. Children of substance abusers are much more likely to become addicted if they use.

A child's perspective on drug use is something that not all mothers know instinctively. Children choose to use drugs to:

- relieve boredom
- feel good
- forget their troubles and relax
- have fun
- satisfy their curiosity
- take risks
- ease their pain
- feel grown-up
- show their independence
- belong to a specific group
- look cool

“Other risk factors relate to children interacting with other socialization agents outside of the family, specifically the school, peers, and the community” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1997). Single parenting is not easy and a mother needs to be aware of her children's habits and behaviors. Some signs that may signal drug use by children and youth are:

- ▶ withdrawn, depressed, tired, and careless about personal grooming
- ▶ hostile and uncooperative; frequently breaks curfews
- ▶ relationships with family members have deteriorated
- ▶ hanging out with a new group of friends
- ▶ grades have slipped, school attendance is irregular
- ▶ lost interest in hobbies, sports, and other favorite activities
- ▶ eating or sleeping patterns have changed; up at night and sleeps during the day
- ▶ hard time concentrating
- ▶ eyes are re-rimmed and nose is runny
- ▶ household money has been disappearing

Parents should act on their suspicions and voice them openly, avoiding direct accusations. Explain how addiction is a disease and no one begins to use

drugs thinking they will become addicted. Anyone can become addicted especially children of alcoholics, sensation-seekers, children with psychological problems, children with learning disabilities, and children that practice high risk choices.

Lastly, mothers just need to get involved and stay involved in all of their children's activities, friends, hobbies, school, and interests. Parents should know about school policies concerning drug use at school. Parents should become familiar with how drug education is being taught at school as well as when and how to start teaching children about drugs and their effects at home. Single mothers can help other mothers and become familiar with support groups in the area. Finally, making children aware of parental love and caring may be the best early intervention that presents a subsequent problem.

## References

U.S. Department of Education. (1998). Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program. *Growing up Drug-Free*, 1-46.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institute of Health, National Institute on Drug Abuse. (1997). A Research-Based Guide. *Preventing Drug Use Among Children and Adolescents*, 97(4212), 1-18.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1995). *Marijuana: Facts Parents Need to Know*, 95(4036), 1-26.

Copyright © IEJHE 2001