

Commentary

FROM FREEDOM INSTITUTE

Not That Question!

What to Say When Your Adolescent Asks About Your Past Alcohol/Drug Use

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“So, Dad, how much pot did you smoke when you were my age?” “Did you ever get drunk, Mom? I bet you and your friends were big stoners when you were in high school.” “Have you ever tried cocaine?” Ah, the dreaded questions parents must face! As Counselors providing substance abuse prevention workshops to students, parents and faculty in over 50 NYC independent schools, we are often asked by parents for suggestions on how to communicate with their children and teens about their past alcohol and drug use.

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Bottom line: less is more. It is NOT helpful for a child or adolescent to hear about their parents’ past alcohol or other drug experiences—negative or positive. Stories about past parental alcohol/drug abuse leave kids feeling vulnerable with peers and confused about what their parents expect of them.

Children up to 5th grade: Young children look to their parents for limits and safety in a scary and often chaotic world. Reinforce healthy choices: “Drinking too much alcohol makes people really sick. It’s very unhealthy for the body—the brain and liver especially. That’s why it’s illegal for anyone under 21 years old to use alcohol.” In some situations you may decide to make a clear statement about not having used drugs. For example, “You know honey, I didn’t use drugs or get drunk. And your Dad and I want and expect you to make healthy choices for your body

Freedom Institute, founded by Mona Mansell in 1976, is a resource center for individuals and families affected by alcohol and drug dependence, providing assessment, intervention, treatment and care. In addition, the Institute provides a comprehensive prevention and education program for young people through their work in independent schools.

too.” Many parents feel comfortable making this clear statement to young children even if that wasn’t their experience! When the kids are older, different conversations can ensue.

Middle and Upper School: If and when teens ask about your experience with alcohol/other drugs, they are likely indicating that drugs are on their mind and perhaps the issue is becoming stressful. They are looking for clear guidelines and they want to know your expectations—is it okay for them to get drunk/high? This is a good opportunity for you to explain where you stand. Our favorite response to this question is something like: “You might not like my answer, but, you know honey, knowing whether I did or did not use drugs isn’t really going to help you make a good choice. If I did smoke pot, you might think it’s okay for YOU to smoke because I turned out okay, and if I never even tried pot, you might think I’m not a good resource to come to with questions. It’s called a Catch-22.”

It is important to remember that adolescents cannot integrate your negative experiences into their world. Hearing that you used drugs “but learned the hard way that they were bad” gives teens more of a permission slip to use substances than a warning not to. Years ago, we had a tenth grader tell us that it “weirded her out” when her mother told her that she smoked pot in high school. The student went on to say that she felt “less guilty” when she started smoking pot with her friends.

NOT THAT QUESTION CONTINUED

Your teen may question you persistently. Another response to consider: “I don’t feel comfortable talking about whether I did or did not use. My choices are not going to help you now.” It is important to turn the focus back to your teen and his present needs. Teens ask this question because THEY are feeling pressure and likely are in the process of making some difficult choices about drug and alcohol use. They are looking to you to set limits for them.

Some possible conversation starters:

- a. When you are with your friends, do you feel there’s pressure to drink or use other drugs? People rarely force someone to do something they don’t want to do, but what do you think peer pressure REALLY looks like among people your age? Kids often pressure their peers because they are feeling insecure. Kids sometimes try to feel better by putting others down or making you feel uncomfortable.
- b. It sounds like you have some questions about whether or not it’s okay to drink or use drugs.
- c. Are you curious about any particular drugs?
- d. The truth is that my choices have little to do with whatever you are facing. You may find yourself in situations where you have to decide whether to accept the drink (or other drug) or not. I want to do everything I can to support you to NOT take the drink (or drug).
- e. Your Mom and I want you to be clear-headed and in control. We don’t want you to have to have alcohol or other drugs in your system. People make really bad decisions under the influence, from sharing a secret you promised you wouldn’t tell, to cheating on a girlfriend/boyfriend, to getting into a fight or doing something you weren’t ready for sexually. Your body is still developing, and you can actually get addicted to a drug quicker than an adult. Your body is better able to handle alcohol when you’re older.

Parents in recovery: For those who are sober or are in a recovery program, it is important that your children know the family history and its genetic risks. Use “teachable moments” from TV, movies, news articles or the Internet to educate children about alcoholism/addiction. For young children, liken alcohol to an allergy for certain family members: “Alcohol makes Mommy feel sick. It’s not good for my body so I don’t drink it.” As children get older, discuss the genetic vulnerability of all family members to alcohol/other substances: “Our family needs to be extra careful about what we put into our bodies. Our bodies are more at risk than most people for becoming dependent on alcohol or other drugs. The risk of addiction to alcohol or other drugs runs in our family like high blood pressure or diabetes runs in other families.” Explain to your teen, “You have to be even more careful than some of your friends because of our family history.”

In the end, it is helpful for your teen to know that she can always call you in a given situation and you will be there to help. You’re not being permissive or a pushover if you express your love and concern when your child is in trouble, even if he has made a bad choice. Your rules and your empathetic response work together. That’s what healthy discipline is about. What starts out as a stressful question could turn into a fruitful, timely discussion that validates your teen’s feelings and clearly establishes your expectations. ●