3

Having the Drug Conversation with Your Child

Good information is critical in decision-making. If you don't have the right information, how can you weigh the risks and benefits of different choices? The challenge for parents is not just to provide the correct information but to do so in a way that your child will pay attention to it.

For some parents, talking to their child about drugs is relatively easy, but for others it's awkward and embarrassing. I believe that it is a good idea to start talking to children about drugs before they come into contact with them or people who are using them. Having the right information early on will help them weigh the risks and might stop them from even trying drugs. If they do choose to use drugs, good-quality information may help them reduce the risk.

Just as importantly, by talking with your child about drugs, you help them understand that this is a topic you know something about and

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you're happy to speak about. They may even consider you a source of good advice if problems arise.

Do I Really Need to Talk to My Child about Drugs? Won't the School Do It?

Many schools provide information to children about drugs, either from people within the school or by bringing in outside speakers. Since 2020, in the United Kingdom it has been compulsory to teach all schoolchildren about relationships, sex and health education (RSE) with statutory guidance available for teachers (Department for Education, 2021). This guidance has a section on drugs, alcohol and tobacco which includes the following topics (see Box 3.1)

Box 3.1: ***Relationship, Sex and Health Education. Statutory Guidance for Schools (Department of Health, 2021)***

- the facts about legal and illegal drugs and their associated risks, including the link between drug use, and the associated risks, including the link to serious mental health conditions
- the law relating to the supply and possession of illegal substances
- the physical and psychological risks associated with alcohol consumption and what constitutes low-risk alcohol consumption in adulthood
- the physical and psychological consequences of addiction, including alcohol dependency
- awareness of the dangers of drugs which are prescribed but still present serious health risks
- the facts about the harms from smoking tobacco (particularly the link to lung cancer), the benefits of quitting and how to access support to do so

Schools are given flexibility about when is the best time to teach these topics, with the suggestion being that drug use is taught to children when they are between 11 and 16 years old.

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It is important that the information your child hears is accurate and consistent. It will confuse them if what they are being told at school is different from what they are hearing at home. Check with your child's school to see what is being taught about drugs and when.

For some parents, it may seem reasonable to leave drug education to their child's school, particularly if they feel the school is doing a good job and they don't know much about drugs themselves. But there are also good reasons why parents should have the drug conversation with their child.

Why You Should Talk to Your Child about Drugs before They Are Exposed to Them

Parents Matter

As a parent, you are an incredibly important and influential figure in your child's life. Your job is to support and guide them as they make the transition from childhood to adulthood. They have grown up under your care and during that time have taken on and accepted many of your values and beliefs. Children learn from their own experiences but also by observing others, a process known as vicarious learning. They have spent more time with you than anyone and as a result have learnt more from you than from anyone else. Your views on what is acceptable and how you respond to positive and negative experiences will have been closely observed by them throughout their childhood, and much of what you do will be copied by your child as they grow up. This gives parents an opportunity to consistently demonstrate or 'model' good behaviour to their children. Younger children assume that their parents are always right and believe most of what they say. Without knowing much about the outside world, they let their parents fill in the gaps for them.

But during adolescence, when your child is becoming more independent, there is a natural and normal process of testing out and challenging parental values and beliefs. The adolescent begins to make

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their own judgements about the world around them. This is often experienced by parents as rejection or even hostility, particularly when children start questioning accepted truths and family values. For children, this process of challenging and breaking the rules is a critical part of development. You may feel your views have lost their influence, and in part this is true, but that undervalues all your years of nurturing. Whether your adolescent agrees with you or not, what you say still matters.

Andy and Jane's Story

Andy and Jane have made an appointment to see me about their 14-year-old daughter, Abby, but arrive on their own. They are worried about Abby. Over the past 6 months, Abby has become increasingly withdrawn at home and at school. The school is also concerned because Abby's academic performance has slumped. Andy and Jane first thought it was all to do with her boyfriend, John. Although they liked John, they worried that he was 'a bit wild'. The relationship broke up a few weeks ago, and Abby seemed surprisingly unaffected.

Andy and Jane have clear views about drugs and think that any use is unacceptable and dangerous. Neither of them has ever used illegal drugs of any sort. They were shocked when last week they found cannabis in Abby's bedroom, but when they confronted her, she said it was not hers and that she was 'holding it' for a friend. She promised them that she had not touched it but refused to take a drug test that Andy bought online. Abby also refused to come to today's appointment, saying that it was 'a waste of time'.

Both parents feel they have lost their connection with Abby and don't know how to re-engage with her. They feel frightened and out of their depth regarding the cannabis and don't know what to do next. They have never spoken to Abby about drugs before and don't know how to begin a conversation now. All they really want to say to her is that taking drugs is 'stupid and dangerous' and that they are angry and disappointed.

As the session continues, I learn that both parents have a rather distant relationship with Abby. Although they clearly love her very much, they have tended to let her get on with things and have never had a close physical relationship. Cuddles ended early, and both Andy and Jane find talking about

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'emotional things' awkward and embarrassing. They both grew up in families where discussing feelings was frowned upon and seen as something of a weakness. Andy and Jane parented Abby as they had been parented themselves and felt comfortable with this. When Abby began to challenge family rules, it became clear they didn't really understand her emotional world very well but didn't know how to do things differently. They both feel stuck and worried.

Towards the end of the session, we discuss how I might help. They do not think Abby will come to an appointment, so instead we talk about how I can support them in helping her. The challenge for Andy and Jane is to talk to Abby so they can understand what is going on and help Abby through what sounds like a difficult period. We carefully plan a series of conversations for them to have with their daughter.

At home, Andy and Jane are surprised to find Abby is receptive to talking with them and quickly discover that Abby has been unhappy for a long time. She admits using cannabis, saying that it takes away 'horrible thoughts' she has about her weight. Abby also discloses that she has been superficially cutting her arms and that this has both frightened and excited her. Abby is relieved to be able to share her feelings and asks if Andy and Jane can speak to the school about her problems, which they do.

When Andy and Jane first came to see me, they felt overwhelmed and didn't know how to help their daughter. With only very simple guidance, including some role-play, they began talking with Abby. Through these conversations they realised that Abby was feeling isolated and lonely and was desperate to ask them for advice.

With support from the school counsellor and her parents, Abby decided to stop using cannabis. She was referred to a clinical psychologist to talk about her perceived weight problem and to learn better ways to control her feelings than self-harm. She is still in treatment and making good progress.

Many parents, like Andy and Jane, feel ill-equipped to help their child. They feel that they no longer have any influence and don't know what to do. If you feel this way, I encourage you to pause, take stock and remember that what you say still matters, even when communication between you and your child is less than perfect.

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The first step is to put your emotions to one side and listen carefully to what your child is saying. You will probably feel that your child is not listening to you, and in the middle of a heated argument you might be right! However, consistent, clear messages have a way of sinking in, especially if they are coming from someone who has been a reliable presence throughout the child's life.

It's Good to Talk

By raising the subject yourself, you are letting your child know that talking about drugs is acceptable. It is much more difficult to engage your child in a conversation about drugs if the first time you raise the issue is in the middle of a crisis. It is far better for the subject to have already been put on the table, so you can get on with helping them rather than awkwardly trying to figure out what to say.

Developing a genuine dialogue with your child about drugs can be very challenging, and there will be anxiety for both parties about feeling unheard, patronised or punished. However, if problems do develop, as a parent you will be on the front line. Others may be there to support and help you, but most parents feel that they are responsible for sorting things out. Communication then becomes critical and, although the conversations may be very difficult, the more open the communication, the more a parent can help their child.

Information Influences Choice

The decision to use drugs depends on many things including price, perceived benefit, context, peer pressure, desirability, previous experience and potential risk. Having accurate information about the effects and risks of using drugs is important, because this information will be part of making a decision to use or not. For adolescents who are already using drugs, it might help them use more safely, reduce their use or stop altogether. Accurate information will help your child make better decisions.

You may be confident that you already have sufficient knowledge about drugs, but if not, it is worth knowing the best place to find it.

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Remember, there is a huge amount of misinformation available about drugs, particularly on the internet, and that this could be where your child educates themself. Consider directing your child to reliable sources of information, even if they choose to compare this information with other, less accurate sources. See Chapter 4 for a description of how drugs work in the brain, Chapter 5 for a summary of the different types of drugs and the Useful Resources section for a list of reliable online sources.

How to Start the Drug Conversation

When starting the drug conversation, a common worry for parents is that they don't know enough about drugs. They fear that their adolescent will wince with embarrassment, mock their lack of knowledge and refuse to listen to them. Many parents will never have tried a psychoactive drug themselves (excluding alcohol, caffeine and tobacco) and so feel they don't have enough experience to have a meaningful discussion.

On the other hand, some parents will have experimented with drugs at some point in their life and may feel able to speak with great authority. A word of caution for these parents: Drug culture changes quickly, and both the drugs and the way they are used may now be different.

Many of my adolescent patients talk with amusement about the time their parents first spoke to them about drugs. However, they also usually appreciated that their parents were prepared to have the conversation and were often surprised by how well informed the parents were. Unless told otherwise, children generally assume their parents have never even seen a drug, let alone used one.

It's a Conversation, Not a Lecture

The drug conversation should not be a lecture. It is a two-way discussion with the aim of helping your child make good choices and reduce their risk of harm. You want to show your child that this is an important topic, you should be willing and able to talk about.

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Explain your own views on drugs, whatever they might be, ideally in a way that allows for further discussion. Different parents will have different views on drugs, some of it gained from personal experience. Many parents will oppose drug use of any sort. Others may feel that experimentation with 'soft' drugs such as cannabis is acceptable but that 'harder' drugs are to be avoided at all costs.

Whatever your opinion, how you have the conversation is crucial. Saying that you completely disapprove of all drug use is fine, but consider adding some context. You may have had personal experience with a family member or friend having drug-related problems, and this will help your child understand why you have reached this conclusion. It is particularly important to let your child know if there is any family history of drug or alcohol problems, as they may be carrying a genetic vulnerability to drug problems. If your child is weighing up the risk of using drugs, this is crucial information.

You might say you are against drug use because it can be dangerous. If this is your opinion, have some information at hand regarding the risks. Be careful not to exaggerate risks or say anything that is untrue. Telling your child that ecstasy is very likely to kill them could backfire if your child sees friends using the drug without any obvious harm. It is far better to provide them with a realistic and credible summary of the risks.

It is also important to ask your child questions and listen to what they have to say. Do they know anyone who uses drugs? How do they feel about that? You may not have much idea what sort of drugs people are currently using, especially with the number of new drugs constantly increasing. Instead of guessing, try asking your child what drugs they have heard about. Is drug use seen as exciting, glamorous and grown up or dangerous and harmful? Have they ever been offered drugs? If so, did they feel any pressure to accept? Depending on their age and openness, these questions and others may help you understand the drug 'landscape' your child inhabits.

More recently, there has been much discussion in the media about the potential therapeutic value of different illegal drugs, most

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particularly cannabis. This is an important but sometimes confusing area and will be discussed in detail in Chapter 8.

When Is the Best Time to Begin the Drug Conversation?

A conversation about drugs will be more difficult if a child is already using them and experiencing problems. By then, family relationships are often under severe strain, opinions about what should be done become increasingly polarised, and the emotional intensity can become overwhelming. This would not be the ideal situation in which to have a calm, reasoned conversation about drugs.

It is best to talk to your child about drugs earlier rather than later. There is no clear evidence on the best time to do this, but from my experience it would be around the time that they first become aware of drugs. They might hear about drugs from the media or in the playground. It is important to talk to your children before they are actually exposed to drugs or to people who are using drugs.

The timing of the conversation will also depend on the maturity of your child, whether they have older siblings and how common drug use is in your community. Children mature at different rates, but most children will receive some education about drugs from around 11 years of age and may be talking about drugs with their friends well before that. Around 10 or 11 years of age is a reasonable time to have a first conversation for most children.

If you are aware of particular risks, such as a strong family history of drug or alcohol problems, or feel that your child is at greater risk than other children, then you might decide to begin a discussion earlier.

The Do's and Don'ts of Having the Drug Conversation

A conversation between a parent and an adolescent about drug use is rather like the conversation about safe sex. It has the potential for excruciating embarrassment on both sides and tends to be avoided

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because of this. But, however tricky, it is an important conversation to have, even if it is only once and then joked about for years afterwards. So, what should you say? Here are some do's and don'ts to help you approach it.

Don't Feel It All Has to Be Said in One Conversation

The first conversation may be the only one, or it may lead to further conversations. Once the topic has been put on the table, it is much easier to talk about it as need arises.

Do Set the Scene

Find the right moment. This is an important conversation, and you don't want to be interrupted. Alert your child that you want to talk to them about something important but that they're not in trouble. You might want to give them advance notice, explaining that later that day you want to sit down with them to talk about drugs.

Do Think about Whether One Parent or Both Should Be Involved

Depending on your child's age and the nature of your relationship with the other parent, if there is one around, you have to decide whether one or both of you will be involved in the conversation. Talking with both parents might be too intimidating for some children. If only one parent has the conversation, it is important that your child knows that both parents have agreed and that the other parent is aware that this conversation is taking place. This is particularly important if parents are not living together. Depending on the structure of the family, sometimes other family members or even family friends might be better placed than a parent to have the conversation.

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Do Be Clear What the Conversation Is about

From the beginning, be clear as to what you want to talk about and why it is important. It's also important to stick to the topic. You might start the conversation with the best of intentions but, because it is an unfamiliar, awkward topic, quickly move on to discuss something else. One way to avoid this is to be clear what points you want to cover before you start. Although you want to have a two-way conversation, rather than a lecture, sometimes it is helpful to have a checklist of points written down to make sure you don't forget anything.

Do Be Consistent

Consistent messages are key. It can be very confusing for a child if their parents have different opinions on topics such as drugs, and parents can sometimes give different messages without meaning to. It is best for parents to agree on the messages before they speak to their child.

Do Keep Calm and Listen

It is not normal to talk about drugs, and it can be very easy for the conversation to become emotional and the viewpoints of parent and child polarised. Approach the conversation in a calm manner. Your intention should be to have a discussion that helps your child make better choices and opens communication with them on an issue they will inevitably come across at some point. What you say is important, but what they say is even more so. Make sure they have a chance to comment on what you have said and listen carefully to what they say.

Don't Accuse

Your child might be surprised, embarrassed or assume you are talking to them because you think they are using drugs. If you start young

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enough, this is less likely. It might be good to start the conversation by saying that they will come across drugs at some point and that is why it is important that they know something about them. If you think your child has already tried drugs, you might need to approach the conversation differently.

In this situation, it is especially important to avoid accusations if the conversation is to be successful. Chapter 10 will focus on what to do if you think your child is using drugs.

Don't Interrogate

It's easy for a parent to start a well-intentioned conversation but for it to rapidly turn into an interrogation. Try hard to avoid this. No one likes to be put on the spot, and it will reduce, rather than increase, the chance of further honest dialogue. If your child is open to talking about drugs, then start with less personal questions. For example, ask if they know anyone who has used drugs, perhaps an older pupil or someone they have heard about in the media, such as a celebrity. Other good opening questions include asking them how much they know about drugs, what they've been taught in school and where they would look for information if they wanted to know more. Your child may already have strong opinions on drugs, so consider asking them what they think about people who use them.

Don't Claim Ignorance or Pretend to Know Everything

If you say you don't know anything about drugs, your child could reasonably question on what authority you are now speaking to them. But don't pretend to know everything, either. Whatever your own previous experience of drugs, you are having this conversation as a parent, not as a drug expert. Your child might be suspicious or feel alarmed if you show an encyclopaedic knowledge of drugs and their effects. Depending on the age of your child, they may be shocked you even know what drugs are. It is important to say that you don't know everything but that you do know where to get reliable information.

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Do Give Them Information

One of the most helpful things you can do is point your child in the direction of good information. The drug market can change quickly, and new drugs are emerging all the time. Having an easily accessible source of up-to-date information can be very helpful for your child. Some good sources are listed in the Useful Resources section.

Don't Forget Alcohol, Nicotine and Other Behaviours

By far the most commonly used psychoactive drugs are legal and include alcohol and nicotine. There are also concerns about the so-called behavioural addictions such as the harmful use of gaming, gambling and online pornography. Although this book focuses on illegal drugs, Chapter 9 specifically discusses legal drugs, harmful behaviours and what you need to know as a parent.

Do Make Sure You Leave Plenty of Time for Questions

Talking to your child about drugs and directing them to accurate information is important. The conversation is also a chance for your child to ask you questions. They may have heard stories about drugs from their peers, school and the media. Give your child the chance to ask questions about what they've heard as well as any other questions they may have. If you don't know the answer, don't bluff. Say you don't know the answer but will find out and let them know.

Do Be Prepared for Tricky Questions

You are unlikely to have the drug conversation without being asked if you have ever used drugs yourself. Decide what you are going to say about your experience with drugs before you start the conversation. If you have used drugs in the past, then you need to decide whether to disclose this or not. For younger children, it may

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be confusing for them to hear you say that drugs are harmful and then admit to using them yourself. For adolescents, the same may apply, but in some cases a more open conversation can help de-stigmatise the issue. Consider what you are going to say carefully before you speak to your child, as children are alarmingly good at spotting evasion.

Do Leave the Door Open for Further Talks

Whether you think you have covered everything you wanted to say or not, end by offering a further time to discuss this topic. Your child might need time to absorb what's been said. It is good to have a follow-up conversation within a week or so, to see if your child has any more questions or wants to talk about anything further. Make it clear that you are happy to talk again at any point in the future. If the other parent is not present, then explain that they are happy to do this as well (assuming this is possible and is the case).

Do Finish with Praise

However well (or badly) the conversation with your child went, explain that you are pleased that you have been able to talk with them. For younger children in particular, regardless of how much or how little they engaged, praise them for being able to have such a grownup conversation. They will have found it hard work too!

Getting It Wrong

Helen and Mike's Story

Helen and Mike have two children: Ella, who is 14 years old, and Harry, who is 10 years old. Helen is a solicitor, and Mike runs his own business. Neither of them has ever used any illegal drug.

Over the past 6 months, the couple has been increasingly worried about Ella. She has become withdrawn, spending most of her time

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in her bedroom. Two weekends ago, Ella came home from an afternoon with friends smelling of alcohol. When Helen challenged her, she became angry, went to her room and slammed her door. The next morning she apologised, saying that someone had spiked her soft drink with vodka.

Mike reassured Helen that it was common for teenagers to try alcohol and remembered doing the same himself at that age without any problems. He felt Ella's behaviour was just part of normal experimentation. Helen disagreed and was worried that Ella was now withdrawn and hard to talk to. She thought Ella might be using drugs, as another parent at the school had a similar experience with her daughter, who was using cannabis. The couple agreed that it was important to work out how often Ella was drinking and if she was using drugs.

That evening, Helen knocks on Ella's door. Ella is online chatting to friends and looks startled by her mother appearing in her bedroom.

Helen: Hi Ella, listen, I really need to talk to you about something important. Can you switch off your laptop for a second so we can talk?

Ella: What is it? Am I in trouble?

Helen: I want to talk to you about drugs. They're everywhere, and I want to make sure you know about them. So you know how dangerous they are.

Ella: (Rolls her eyes and groans) I don't use drugs, Mum. Is that it?

Helen: Well, yes, OK. I just wanted to check; I am your mother. If you ever think of using them, please speak to me before you do. They are dangerous, and you never know what you are really taking.

Ella: I'm not using drugs. Have you finished? I've got homework to do.

Helen: Yes, OK. I just thought it was important to ask you. Now, what would you like for dinner?

The conversation ends there, and Helen later admits to Mike that she didn't think it had been very helpful.

These conversations are difficult and don't always go to plan. Let's look back over the conversation between Helen and Ella. What went well and what didn't go to plan?

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When Helen spoke to Ella, she sprang the conversation on her without warning. Ella assumed that she was being accused of using drugs and immediately became defensive. Before things even got going, Ella seemed to have made up her mind that she was not going to take part, and the conversation fizzled out after a few brief sentences, instead moving on to the much safer topic of dinner. Helen understandably felt frustrated and that she had not achieved her aim.

What Could Helen and Mike Have Done Differently?

The couple decided to talk to Ella about alcohol and drugs but didn't plan what they wanted to say. Being clear about their goals would have helped structure the conversation. They could, for example, have had three goals: first, asking Ella about her use of alcohol; second, understanding how much Ella knows about drugs; and third, finding out if she knows where to find accurate information. That might have been enough for the initial conversation.

It would also have been better if Helen had alerted Ella beforehand that she was going to speak to her about drugs to give her an opportunity to prepare. If Ella had not felt ambushed, she might have participated in the conversation.

On the positive side, Helen has now spoken to Ella about drugs, and there is the opportunity to revisit the topic with a better-planned conversation in the future. It may be that Mike is more involved next time, either having the conversation himself or with Helen as a couple.

Getting It Right

Angela's Story

Angela is an estate agent who lives with her two children. Isaac is 11 years old, and Julia is 9 years old. Angela was divorced 3 years ago, and

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the children see their father, James, every other weekend. Angela and James remain on reasonable terms and speak most weeks about the children. Angela worries greatly about the impact of the divorce on her children, although both children seem to be happy, are doing well at school and have plenty of friends.

Drugs have played a huge role in Angela's life because her own brother, Jonathan, had drug problems from his teens to his mid-20s. During that time, Jonathan's life was very chaotic. His drug use caused enormous worry and distress for his family, and Angela vividly remembers two occasions when Jonathan accidentally overdosed and she thought he would die. At 26, Jonathan attended a treatment programme and stopped using drugs for good. After his treatment, he told Angela that 'drugs run in our family' and that they had an uncle who was an 'addict'. At the time, Angela promised herself that she would speak to her children about drugs and let them know about the family history.

After discussing it with James, Angela decides it's the right time to speak to her son about drugs. The following day, before Isaac goes to school, she explains that she wants to catch up with him that evening. Angela tells him he hasn't done anything wrong but that there are a few things she wanted to discuss. Isaac looks suspicious but agrees.

That evening, after Julia had gone to bed, Angela sat down with Isaac to watch the television. The conversation went something like this:

Angela: Isaac, you know I said there were a few things I wanted to chat to you about? Do you mind if we turn off the TV for a moment and talk now? It is nothing to worry about and it won't take too long.

Isaac: (Rolls his eyes. Switches off the TV.) Mum, my favourite is on soon. I'm going to miss it!

Angela: This won't take long. Well, I know this is a funny thing to talk about, but I want to talk about drugs. Not medicines, but the type people take for fun.

Isaac: Mum, I know what drugs are, they told us about them in school. It was so boring, Eddie actually fell asleep in the lesson.

Angela: What did they talk to you about?

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Isaac: About how they make you go mad and mess up your brain. They showed us this weird video, I can't remember that much about it. Why are you asking me?

Angela: Well, drugs are important to talk about. You will meet people who use drugs at some point and you may be offered them. I just want you to know enough about them.

Isaac: Mum, I'm not going to take drugs. Why would I?

Angela: Sometimes, if people around you are experimenting with things, it is tempting to try them as well. To be part of the crowd and fit in. Do you know anyone who uses drugs at school?

Isaac: No-one uses in my year, but some of the boys in the year above say they smoke drugs at parties. I don't really know who and I'm not sure if I believe them. Why are you so interested in drugs, Mum?

Angela: There is so much wrong information about drugs, I want to make sure you know where to read something truthful. It's always worth checking what your friends say, to make sure they really know what they are talking about. Where would you find out information about drugs if you wanted to?

Isaac: Don't know. Probably ask Eddie. He seems to know about everything.

Angela: Remember last year when Eddie told you that car sunroofs were solar panels and you couldn't convince him they weren't? Suppose he told you something about drugs, how would you know he hadn't got it wrong?

Isaac: Yeah, I suppose.

Angela: Another reason I want to talk to you about drugs is because of Uncle Jonathan. You remember I told you he was very ill for a while?

Isaac: Yeah, he was sick and went to a hospital. Was that because of drugs?

Angela: Yes, he had a real problem with drugs. They affected him really badly and made him very sick until he got help. It is really important to know, because sometimes if one person from a family has problems with drugs, other people in the family can be more at risk as well.

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Isaac: What do you mean?

Angela: Well, it means that you and Julia, and me, we may all react really badly if we ever took drugs. They might cause us bigger problems than for other people. Like a bad reaction.

Isaac: Have you ever tried drugs, Mum? Even once?

Angela: No. Seeing Uncle Jonathan getting sick convinced me never to even try them.

Isaac: OK, fine. Is Uncle Jonathan OK now?

Angela: Yes, he's fine, but he still has treatment for drugs, even now all these years later. I wonder if I could give you some websites that have good information about drugs? You don't need to look at them unless you want to, but at least you have them if you need them.

Isaac: OK, Mum. Can I watch TV now?

Angela: Yes, I've been really looking forward to this series. Thanks for talking with me about this. It was really important. If you ever want to talk about it again, I'd be really happy to. Now, where's the remote control?

Angela feels relieved to have spoken with Isaac, particularly about her own brother's problems. Isaac, having been prepared that the conversation was forthcoming, didn't feel accused or caught out. He listened to what she had to say, asked questions and was able to share with her some of what he knew. Afterwards she felt much more confident about returning to the conversation in the future if needed.

What Could Angela Have Done Differently?

Angela had planned to tell Isaac that she had spoken to his father and that he knew what they were talking about, but she forgot. It would have been good to mention alcohol as well, although that might have been too much for Isaac this time. Overall, though, Angela did very well, and should return to the subject in a week to check if Isaac has thought of any questions.

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The Drug Conversation Checklist

1. Decide when the right age is to have the drug conversation.
2. Prepare what you are going to say, ideally with the other parent.
3. Set aside time and alert your child.
4. Be calm and consistent.
5. Begin with less personal questions, such as 'What have you learnt at school about drugs?'
6. Tell your child where they can find accurate information.
7. Mention any history of drug or alcohol problems in the family.
8. Discuss alcohol.
9. Take time for questions.
10. Give praise and return to the topic in a week.

You know your child better than anyone and, although these suggestions are a helpful guide, you should think carefully about what approach your child might respond to best.

KEY MESSAGES



- Talking to your child about psychoactive drugs is crucial, preferably before they are exposed to drugs or people who use them.
- As a parent, what you say matters.
- Check with the school to see what your child is being taught about drugs.
- Having the drug conversation can be difficult, but using the checklist provided will make it easier and more successful.

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