GUIDELINES FOR TALKING WITH YOUR CHILD ABOUT ALCOHOL, TOBACCO AND OTHER DRUGS (ATOD)

Alcohol or other drug use, particularly when it may involve a member of your family, is a very emotionally loaded issue. Thus, it is quite natural that many parents are at a loss to know how to begin to handle this problem within the family. The following guidelines were prepared by counselors trained in working with young people to provide parents with some basic ideas for use in dealing with the issue.

1. Become informed about alcohol and other drugs and their effects. Be a credible source of information for your child.
2. Make your position on alcohol and other drug use clear to your child so that he knows where you stand, even if you have no indication he is involved.
3. Husband and wife should try to reach agreement with each other over handling the issue of alcohol and drug use. There should be consistency and actual support in your communications with your child on this subject.
4. Be aware that the behavior you are expecting from your child may be different from that of his peers and that peer acceptance is of paramount importance to him. Work with him so that he understands the reasons for your expectations. Strengthen his feeling of self-confidence and independence.
5. If you suspect alcohol or other drug use, avoid unproductive accusations. These often result in denial. Sit down with your child and discuss calmly any suspicions you have. Talk about your personal concern for him, as well as his wrongdoing. Try to keep discussions on a rational level. Overly emotional, angry outbursts frequently serve only to cut off parent-child communication prematurely.
6. If you see evidence of alcohol or drug use (ex. Physical or psychological symptoms or drug paraphernalia in his possession), restate your position and make it clear the consequences you are prepared to enact. Make sure you are prepared to follow through with the consequences you set. Empty threats are meaningless to a child.
7. Avoid “labeling” or name-calling. You are not dealing with your child’s character but his behavior. Try to remain calm and avoid saying things that tend to further alienate you from your child. The goal of communication is to help him understand that, although you are concerned about and disapprove of his behavior, you still love him.
8. Try to maintain good communication with your child’s teachers. Let them know you are interested in his progress in school and would be appreciative of feedback from them regarding his academic and social behavior. Make your child aware of this so that he realizes there exists a “parent-teacher coalition”.
9. Make it your business to get to know your child’s friends, who their parents are, where and with whom he is socializing, whether or not parties will be chaperoned by adults, and so on. Don’t be afraid to communicate with parents of your child’s friends. Introduce yourself to them in person. Parents have the best interest of their children in common and need to reach out and support each other. Make sure that your child is aware you are establishing communication with his friends’ parents -- being secretive only breeds mistrust.
10. Don’t be afraid to seek professional help. Counselors trained in working with children and adolescents can help by reopening communication between parent and child, providing a neutral ground for expression of feelings, and serving to “de-fuse” the climate of tension within families which sometimes develops over issues such as alcohol.

Resources

National Council of Alcoholism and Drug Dependence of Michigan, Inc.: 800-344-3400; website: www.ncaddm.org

Michigan Department of Community Health: (517) 373-3500; Web sites: www.mdc.state.mi.us or www.hpclearinghouse.org

Michigan Resource Center: For additional prevention information, call 800-626-4636; for treatment referral, call 1-888-736-0253; web site: www.michiganresourcecenter.org

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI): 800-729-6686; web site: www.health.org

National PTA Common Sense: web site: www.pta.org/commonsense/