

HOW TO TELL YOUR KIDS ABOUT DRUGS - WHEN YOU USED THEM YOURSELF

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- Author/Byline: Alison apRoberts Bee Staff Writer
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On a recent Saturday afternoon, the under-age crowd starts showing up at Java City in Loehmann's Plaza. Pierced body parts, pants big enough for two, weird sunglasses and a giddy hormone-fueled exuberance take over. Teenagers who are still feeling their way into their grown-up bodies giggle and ogle and get serious over lattes and cappuccinos

Welcome to the land of peer rule. There are no parents here. Kids are among themselves, talking about boyfriends, girlfriends, music and movies; hammering out their own codes of behavior.

Three eighth-grade girls - two are 13, one is 14 - sit at a table outside the coffee shop. They are at a kind of ground zero, before the really hazardous years hit, when taking risks is the thing to do. Their allegiance to peers is already strong, and they wear the uniform of their age: baggy pants with Doc Martens, Vans or in-line skates. They seem like loyal musketeers, down to their matching metallic star stickers on the right cheek. They are good friends who never tire of talking; the worst punishment, they all agree, is being grounded from the phone.

Today, they're talking about the relative merits of R&B and alternative rock and several boys they know - and how they plan to stay away from drugs. "Taking drugs is stupid. You lose time from your life span," says one. Another says that when she smells marijuana smoke at high school football games, she makes a point of walking away.

For many parents this talk about drugs sets off a real-life flashback. The baby boom generation, more than 75 million Americans ages 31-50, came of age during the '60s and '70s, the just-say-yes years of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. If you've ever been (ital) experienced, (end ital) as Jimi Hendrix put it before drugs killed him, you have to decide: What do you tell your kids about your own drug experiences?

One boomer father, aged 46, is willing to talk about the challenge, as long as his name isn't published and he can talk privately on his car phone as he drives from work to his Sacramento home. He wasn't always so concerned about what people might think before he owned his own firm and became a father of two kids who are now 6 and 8.

His own drug and alcohol education began with trying beer at 14. At 16, he smoked marijuana.

"There are several things that I did in my youth or college years that I hope my children won't do," he said. "I have always told myself I want to be fully honest with my children. If you deny it, then you lied to them, and why shouldn't they lie to you? And you hope you can impart your knowledge, and yet I was one of those who always went there anyway."

What will he tell his kids about his own drug use? "I'll have to cross that road when I get to it."

Some have already traveled that road. One Sacramento mother, now 49 and a computer programmer, told her sons, ages 11 and 14, that she smoked marijuana in college. Does she worry about that sounding like an endorsement? "I guess for me what's more important is I don't want to be an enigma to my kids, like my parents were to me. I want them to know who I am. I kind of expect that they'll be doing it in college like I did."

But she also doesn't like the idea of her kids trying marijuana, the No. 1 illegal drug among teens. She appreciates the zero-tolerance policy at her kids' private school and wants to stress to her sons that drugs are illegal.

"I'm really in the process of redefining how I talk to my kids about stuff," she says.

Victor Strasburger has made a career of helping such parents. The pediatrician and author of "Getting Your Kids To Say 'No' in the '90s When You Said 'Yes' in the '60s," talked by phone from his home in Albuquerque, N.M.

"If your kids ask you, you tell them the truth, but not the whole truth and nothing but the truth. If you were dealing drugs and spent five years in the state pen, you tell them you experimented. When kids ask, they're not prying and snooping, and they don't want a big, long detailed answer."

Strasburger also advises that you talk to your kids sooner rather than later. "My 6-year-old and I have already talked about drugs. And he's said, 'You drink coffee in the morning and you take pills for your knee pain.' This is a discussion that should be ongoing."

But can telling your kids about what you did backfire? Two-thirds of parents who tried drugs in the '60s expect their own children to do the same, according to a survey by the National Center for Addiction and Substance Abuse. Most said they would tell their children of their

own drug use.

Strasburger says that reflects simple realism: "It just means those parents would be less surprised if their kids experimented with drugs, and they may have a more open-minded view of normal adolescent rebellion."

Is there a risk in expecting experimentation? "Even if you believe it's inevitable, you'd hope it would be with beer and not cocaine. There are different kinds of experimentation. One kind may be riding in a car without a seat belt, another kind is playing Russian roulette, and everything in between. I think we can keep kids to the low risk kinds of behavior."

Realism is OK, complacency is not, Strasburger says: "Rule number one is to worry. Rule number two is to worry some more. You should always worry about your kids getting into drugs."

Parents can find plenty of reasons to worry. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recently reported that marijuana use by young people has more than doubled since 1992. A California survey released this summer showed that one-fourth of seventh-graders and one-half of 11th-graders in California used some sort of illicit drug over a six-month period. Of 11th-graders, 75 percent reported using alcohol, and 42.8 percent had used marijuana. However, marijuana use is still well below the level of the late '70s, when nearly two-thirds of high school seniors had tried it.

These findings have spurred calls for stepping up the war on drugs. There have been lots of skirmishes. The FDA's reluctance to approve home drug-testing kits has drawn considerable fire. And Bob Dole has made the increase in teen use a key campaign point, blaming President Clinton for the rise.

Schools must deal with the issue. The El Dorado Union High School District plans to start using drug-sniffing dogs soon. Steve Volmer, director of student services for the district, says he sees it as prevention, not policing: "We want this to be a deterrent program, not a 'gotcha' program."

The primary prevention program at local schools is Red Ribbon Week, which kicks off at noon Monday with a parade and celebration at the Capitol. The rest of the week will see a slew of drug, alcohol and tobacco education activities in local schools.

This is the 11th year the state has observed Red Ribbon Week. Sharon Rose, head of Californians for Drug-Free Youth, which sponsors the event, is quick to say that the program doesn't replace parental input: "The great thing about Red Ribbon Week is that it's an opportunity for you as a parent to talk to your kids. What you tell your kids is every individual's choice. If I had smoked pot, I would talk to my children about the fact that I'm one lucky survivor."

The three eighth-grade girls at Java City are Red Ribbon babies - they remember wearing the campaign's red hospital-like wristbands all the way back to their kindergarten days. They are looking forward to Red Ribbon Week at their middle schools.

"We wear the wristband like the whole week. And we have like a poster contest and an essay contest at our school. I like it," says one of the girls.

The girls report more sibling pressure than parental pressure to stay away from drugs. One says her sister, who is away at college, has promised to give her \$100 if she doesn't take drugs or have sex before high school graduation.

In a few years, the chances are greater than 50/50 that these same girls will have tried drinking and close to 50/50 that they will have tried marijuana. And they may sound a lot more like the two 15-year-old girls hanging out across the street from Java City, where they are waiting to meet their parents for dinner. Both are good students at private schools.

They think Red Ribbon Week is good at informing, but that it doesn't stop anybody from trying drugs.

When asked if experimenting with drugs is inevitable, they give the patented teenage what-planet-are-you-from look and emphatically answer in unison: Yes.

And what do these teenagers think their parents should tell them about their past drug use? One laughs and says, "We don't really care what our parents did."

Your kid's using drugs? Keep your cool

If your child has been trying drugs, you should react but not overreact, says Mari Isaacson, a licensed clinical social worker who has counseled teens and their families through the Family Service Agency in Sacramento.

"If a parent is going to jump on a kid, it may throw the child into denying, so the communication is problematic," Isaacson says. It's better to keep communication open, even if that means waiting so you can bring the subject up without losing your temper. When you do discuss it, she says, be sure to "focus on the behavior that was observed."

Once you've established that your kid was doing drugs, you need to make sure that your rules are clear and have your children tell you

how they plan to respect those rules. This isn't always easy.

"If the parent has a hard time hearing the child, or the child just shuts down, then a counselor can help." Counselors will look at the issues behind the drug use: "There's always more to the drug use than just the drugs."

Where to turn for help

- * People Reaching Out: 971-3300 (provides referrals and paraprofessional counseling)
- * Family Service Agency of Greater Sacramento: 368-3080 (provides short-term counseling and family education programs)
- * Prevention Intervention Program, Sacramento City Unified School District: 264-3094
- * Prevention Intervention Program, San Juan Unified School District: 971-7022

Further reading

* "Not My Kid: A Parent's Guide to * Kids and Drugs," by Beth Polson and Miller Newton (Avon)

* "Getting Your Kids To Say 'No' in the '90s When You Said 'Yes' in the '60s," by Victor Strasburger (Fireside/Simon & Schuster)

AT A GLANCE Red Ribbon Week Parade and celebration noon Monday on the west steps of the Capitol. Actress Anne Archer, Kennedy High School Band and Color Guard, Natomas High School Drill Team and Dance Theater West will be featured. Free. 927-9894

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IF YOUR KID'S USING DRUGS, KEEP YOUR COOL SCRIPPS-MCCLATCHY WESTERN SERVICE

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- Author/Byline: ALISON apROBERTS, Scripps-McClatchy Western Service
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(Alison apRoberts is a reporter for the Sacramento Bee in California.)

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Drugs a hot topic? Stay cool

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For further reading, try [Not My Kid: A Parent's Guide to Kids and Drugs](#), by Beth Polson and Miller Newton, and [Getting Your Kids to Say 'No' in the '90s When You Said 'Yes' in the '60s](#), by Victor Strasburger.

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