

Whether you're the parent of a teen who is a freshmen in college, or a child who will someday go away to college, now is the time to start the conversation about keeping them safe. These nine tips from pediatrician Dr. Cara Natterson and teen mentor Vanessa Van Petten can help you get the ball rolling and empower your kids to make right choices.

WHEN TO HAVE THE TALK

Vanessa Van Petten: I personally think this talk should come in stages, as kids are exposed to drugs and alcohol. From the research I conducted while writing my book, I took special interest in the kids who used drugs and alcohol regularly versus the kids who did not -- and what their parents did differently. Below is a summary of some of the findings for the kids who decided not to use drugs and alcohol.

* 4-8 years old: Start very young when a child wants to know the difference between your wine or beer and their milk. This is the first talk -- when you simply want to explain what the substance is. Once you explain what something is thoroughly, it is also important to explain that this is something that only adults are allowed to do. Lastly, I think it is important to talk about some of the negative effects at this age, even if briefly. This usually is brought up by the kids themselves because once you explain it is only for adults, kids often ask "why?" It's the perfect opportunity to talk about how smoke is not good for your lungs and that alcohol can make you think differently if you drink too much of it.

* 9-13 years old: This is the very experimental stage when rumors fly on AIM and on the playground about drugs and alcohol. This is when the talk becomes much more real. I think it is important to address the fact that they might encounter drugs and alcohol head-on. Talk about what they should do if someone offers it to them, what would happen if they got caught and about the health consequences. You want this to be a dialogue, because they are still young enough to listen.

* 13 years old and up: Usually, by this time, it is difficult to have a discussion

about anything. This is also when the talk really differs for each child. You know your child -- if you think they need to hear about your past experiences, tell them. If they do not seem interested in this culture, then you do not need many follow-up talks. I always think this is the stage where parents need to address some of the more serious issues, like driving under the influence and date rape that can also be associated with drugs and alcohol.

HOW TO TALK TO KIDS OF DIFFERENT AGES

Dr. Cara Natterson: It's obviously going to be different talking to an eight-year-old than talking to a 14-year-old.

* Younger kids need specific answers to specific questions. A seven or eight-year-old may ask why someone who is drinking is stumbling or slurring his speech. Answer the question that you are asked. As your kids get older -- certainly by middle school -- kids will bring up the subject with a simple question, but they often want you to push it farther. So if your 11-year-old asks about smoking, you might want to answer the question and then follow it up with one of your own, like, "Do you know anyone who smokes?" (Asking "do you know anyone ..." questions is a good, non-judgmental way of asking the question; if you ask specifically about one friend, your child may lie to protect the friend.)

* By the teen years, I believe in pushing kids to the point of embarrassment. What I mean by that is the conversation should go on until you child says "Mom!!" in a shocked way -- then you know you have pushed it a little too far. Every teenager I have ever met (and I have met a lot of them) tells me that they wish their parents asked more. Some want limits; some want to be found out. Very few want to keep their behavior secret, but they still take it as a sign of love when their parents push the issue. With teenagers, I recommend being straightforward and having the conversation over and over again. Your child may not tell you something the first time you ask, but if they realize you are going to keep on asking, then the likelihood of disclosure is higher.

HOW TO MAKE CONVERSATIONS WITH ANY AGED CHILD EASIER FOR THEM

Vanessa Van Petten: Make sure and remember that they are just as nervous as you are, and to tell them you are nervous and uncomfortable. Commiserate in the awkwardness of the moment together and to try to avoid stories -- those tend to be really nerve racking in the end.

* No Stories: I am usually a huge supporter of telling stories to relate, and often find them helpful when trying to understand a new concept or trying to explain one.

But, I think no matter what, any kind of story you want to bring up when talking to your kids about this tough subject will lead to full-fledged blushing and uncomfortable feelings.

* **Use Correct Words:** Thank goodness my parents didn't try to replace penis and vagina with the words like garden hose and flowerbed when they were discussing sex with me. If you are talking to teens, I always think it is better to use the real words for body parts, sexual acts and STD's. There are two reasons for this: first, they might not know the word you are using and get confused with words they have heard at school. Second, when and if they finally have to talk about these issues in class or with a significant other, they should be comfortable using the real words.

* **Keep It Brief:** This one is pretty simple, and I think that most anyone would completely agree. There is no need to drag it out ... be direct and tell them the facts and what you think, but please, please, please do not make it longer than it needs to be. If you know you are a talker when you get nervous (I blabber when I am the most anxious) then practice beforehand or keep a little piece of paper with bullets.

* **Warn Them It's Coming:** I always tend to do better when I know that my parents and I are about to have a 'talk,' whether it is about money, sex, school, job or general seriousness. I always get really defensive and closed-up when it is sprung upon me in a car or before a movie -- and I think most teens feel this way. So if you want to have a talk with them, casually mention it: "Hey son, after dinner I hope we can go grab ice cream to talk about some stuff" or "honey, this weekend you and dad and I are going to talk, just wanted to let you know." This way they can brace themselves, and be on super good behavior until then.

* **Leave the Door Open:** This actually was our household rule: When a boy was over, if you are in your room, the door stays open. But in this sense I mean that at the end of the conversation, tell them they can always, anytime, come back to you for more questions. Most likely, your teen will want to end the conversation as quickly as possible and will ask minimal questions, but it is important for them to know that they can always come back to you for any later questions.

* **It's OK to Laugh No Matter What:** This will be an awkward conversation -- and it's ok to say at the beginning of the talk that it is as uncomfortable for you as it is for them. They might actually appreciate this. And sometimes, if it gets really uncomfortable or there is a piercing silence, it's ok to just laugh about the situation, take a deep breath, and try to start again.

IS IT EVER TOO LATE TO HAVE THE CONVERSATION?

Dr. Cara Natterson: It is probably the rare parent who hasn't had any conversation at all by the time their kids are getting ready to leave for college. In fact, many parents think they have had serious and important conversations but when you ask the child, they disagree. That may be because there have only been one or two conversations and though they were significant for the parents, they didn't really register for the kids.

* Be blunt. Tell your child exactly what you are worried about -- that intoxicated, they can make a decision that can cause them harm or even kill them.

* Most teenagers know (or know of) at least one teen in the community who has died because of alcohol or drugs. Remind your child of this. And then remember that this can be the first of many conversations.

* Just because your child is going off to college doesn't mean that you won't speak often. This topic really has to be part of the regular dialogue.

SIGNS YOUR CHILD IS DOING DANGEROUS THINGS

Vanessa Van Petten: Overall you want to watch out for:

* Large differences in behavior and or mood swings.

* Suspicious behavior when they get home from being with friends (this includes Saturday afternoon as well).

* A lot less money or possessing more money than usual.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU FIND OUT YOUR CHILD IS PARTYING TOO MUCH OR DANGEROUSLY

Vanessa Van Petten: It is important to take away stimuli. Try to find out what is causing them to do this. Is it a wild friend, a house down the street, vacation time, not enough work, too much work? Removing the stimuli or removing teens from the situation is the best way to get them to take a step back from their own actions. This might mean a camp far away, staying at a family member's house or joining new activities.

TALKING TO A SECRETIVE OR SHUT-OFF CHILD

Dr. Cara Natterson: I always tell parents to just keep on trying. Don't let a day go by without telling your child you love him and you want to know what is going on. But it doesn't work all of the time, and kids need to share with someone. If your child is unwilling to open up to you, involve a therapist or guidance counselor. If you let your child rely upon her friends to counsel her, you are leaving her emotional well-being in the hands of another teenager. It is important to have a reliable adult -- even if it isn't you -- in the picture.

HOW TO HANDLE A SUSPECTED PROBLEM

Vanessa Van Petten: This is very difficult. When I was in college, there were a number of kids who were on a downward spiral and their parents either had no idea or had an idea but could not do anything.

- * Do NOT try to talk to their friends or significant others behind their backs.
- * Do NOT sneak up for a surprise visit, (it never ends well and could damage your relationship).
- * You can talk to Resident Directors or RAs of the floor, they must remain confidential and can give you some insight.
- * Talking to your child's academic advisor or school dean is also a good way of checking in.

HOW TO TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN NORMAL EXPERIMENTING AND DANGEROUS ACTIVITIES

Dr. Cara Natterson: This is very difficult. I think each parent will have a different answer. But if your child is failing in school or losing weight or not sleeping -- or if there is something else outwardly going on, it's not normal. Even if your child is "just experimenting," it is important for him or her to realize that it can get out of control. These conversations need to continue.

See Also:

- * Wasted Youth: This is Freshman Year
- * Wasted Youth: Freshmen Girls Beware
- * Spring Break Confessions: Part 1
- * Spring Break Confessions: Part 2
- * Spring Break Confessions: Part 3