

The goal of education is to get children—no matter what their age—talking and sharing their thoughts and feelings. To be educated is not to know all the answers. It means having the competencies and confidence to engage on questions in pursuit of understanding. Indeed, education is more about questions than answers.

As teachers, parents or other adults, we have many opportunities to educate children. This includes honestly sharing our thoughts and feelings about psychoactive (mind-altering) drugs. But having honest, open conversations is more useful than telling students what to do or what to think.

Young people are more likely to explore, develop and share their ideas if we are open to the fallibility of our own views. Real discussion involves a curiosity about what the child thinks and feels. Offering a balanced and realistic perspective and demonstrating an openness to dialogue helps young people develop their own skills. In short, we would be wise to focus on inviting and supporting conversation.

Talk when it makes sense

Both school and life in general provide opportunities to have conversations about alcohol or other drugs. Even young children know alcohol is a part of our culture. They see people drinking around them. They are exposed to alcohol on TV and in advertising. In fact, drug use is part of the human experience. From caffeine to cannabis to cocaine, drugs have both helped and hurt people in nearly every society on earth. Teaching provides numerous entry points to a conversation about drugs. Literature, social studies, science and art all afford useful content. Or the subject emerges naturally while discussing life—music, celebrations or current events. Opportunities are everywhere.

Talking with children and youth about alcohol or other drugs helps them critically assess popular assumptions and develop personal views and skills. This provides them with the tools to navigate their world and take control of their lives.

This is not about the “drug talk” or “drugs class.” Since drugs are encountered in so many aspects of life, the conversation is best infused into these other issues. This promotes a richer, more realistic discussion. It provides a way to engage more students with diverse interests. And it provides more opportunities to explore issues and build competencies.

Engage in dialogue

Real dialogue includes students in generating knowledge. The teacher sets an atmosphere that encourages input. She or he participates rather than controls, probes rather than tells. The teacher seeks to create a learning relationship with students and encourages them to build such relationships with others.

To engage in dialogue, we often need to set aside simplistic binary constructs such as good vs. bad. Instead, we explore together how the “good” and “bad” might inter-relate with one another. This more nuanced dialogue opens up new possibilities. The focus moves from debating who is right to exploring complex relationships. The result may be greater mutual understanding. Dialogue offers a way to address complex social issues like substance use where binaries have been unhelpful.

Dialogue allows us to break free of the usual social marketing approach to health education. This traditional approach seeks to “sell” students on a specific behaviour or belief. By contrast, dialogue helps students build the skills to explore and seek to understand and manage the human relationship with drugs.

Things to talk about

Too often we think that simply talking about the negative effects of drugs will discourage young people from using them. The evidence suggests this may not be true. When we talk with children and youth about alcohol or other drugs, it makes sense to explore the reasons people use drugs, ways to manage the risks involved and alternatives to drug use. In other words, to help them understand the phenomenon.

Reasons

People have been using a wide variety of drugs for thousands of years. They are used to celebrate successes and help deal with grief and pain. They mark rites of passage and are used in pursuit of spiritual insight. Indeed, drug use is deeply embedded in our cultural fabric.

The reasons we use alcohol or other drugs influence our pattern of use and the risk of harmful results. People who use out of curiosity tend to use only once in a while. Ongoing motivations, such as relieving a chronic sleep or mental health problem, often lead to more prolonged and intense use. A desire to fit in, have fun or alleviate temporary stress may result in risky behaviour with high potential for acute harm.

Exploring the reasons together leads to useful discoveries. Through such conversations, we can better assess the situation. Furthermore, the student gains insight into their own behaviour or the behaviour of their peers.

Risks

All alcohol or other drug use carries some risk of harm. Sometimes the risk is very low and the benefits may outweigh the risks (e.g., a little may help a lot in an awkward social situation). Other times, the risk may be moderate, high or clearly harmful (e.g., drinking before driving or doing other things that put people's lives on the line). The level of risk is influenced by the amount used, frequency of use, age of the individual, the context in which use takes place, the reasons for use and personal factors including physical and mental health.

Substance use at an early age can affect the physical and mental development of young people. So the safest option for young people is to delay use until at least their late teens. Engaging young people in conversation about these issues allows them to explore reasons for not using.

If young people do use substances, they should at least know basic things about managing risk. This involves much more than knowing the "facts." Helping them *think through* the benefits, risks and mitigating factors is more important. Reflecting on the wisdom of the ages—not too much, not too often, only in the right context—is not a bad place to start.

Safer alternatives

Different cultures (families, social groups, communities or societies) promote different ways of dealing with life issues. This includes different attitudes towards various substances. Exploring these cultural differences opens up new perspectives. It suggests alternative ways of seeing and acting. While we are all influenced by our cultural contexts, we need not be determined by them.



Dialogue provides a safe means to explore different ways of looking at the world and different ways of responding to life challenges. This allows young people to expand the ways in which they can meet their own needs. As we engage young people in this dialogue, they become more able to make healthy choices, to take control of their own health and to support their peers. They become educated.

Think before reacting

Schools are often politically charged environments. This can make it difficult to address topics like drug use in school. When we discover students have been using alcohol or other drugs, we can easily become reactive and punitive. But again, the evidence suggests such reactions are not helpful. They benefit neither the students involved nor their peers.

The most helpful response remains calm and open conversation. The goal is reaching an understanding with the students in which we gain insight into their behaviour and in which they gain insight into the social reality of their school and community. A thoughtful conversation is likely not possible while a teen is intoxicated or high. So address immediate safety needs and wait until later to have a talk. But our immediate actions should seek to preserve, rather than break, the students' social connections to their peers and the school community.

Wise sayings in many cultures point to the biological reality of “two ears, one mouth” to suggest we should listen more than we talk. Ultimately, getting the students to talk and discuss their views is the goal. As they talk, they explore their own ideas about what changes they might make. This is more powerful than telling them what changes we expect.

Conclusion

Good drug education is good education. It is not the teacher's job to impart official knowledge. Educators discipline minds. Students with disciplined minds make discoveries.

Conversation is a powerful tool in the teacher's toolbox. In conversation, students are challenged to reflect on their assumptions. They develop their ideas and consider other alternatives. In the end, we cannot control their decisions. We can, however, help them examine questions and develop useful ways of reflecting on potential answers.

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