

Feature Story #2

Marijuana: How to Tell Your Kids to Say No, Even if You Didn't

Picture this: You're driving your child home one afternoon and she turns to you and asks, "Mom, did you ever use marijuana when you were a kid?" Or, you're helping your child with homework and he asks, "Dad, did you smoke pot when you were in high school?"

This is a question many parents hope to avoid. Unless the answer is an unequivocal "No," it may be difficult to know what to say.

How honest should you be? Phillippe Cunningham, a family therapist at the Medical University of South Carolina, recommends an honest answer when a child asks about your past. Otherwise, you risk losing credibility with your kids. "This doesn't mean you should recount every detail of your high school or college years," says Dr. Cunningham. "But use it as an opportunity to talk with your child. Kids can learn a lot from their parents' experiences."

What if your child thinks that since you admitted to using marijuana and you've grown up just fine it is okay for her to use marijuana, too? The fact is, we all want what's best for our children. Today's marijuana is not the ditchweed of the 1960s. Marijuana is more potent than it was a generation ago and more kids are using it at a younger age, when their bodies and minds are developing. We also know much more about the real risks of marijuana use, thanks to new research. You can also draw on real-life examples of friends who had trouble as a result of marijuana use, such as a friend who used marijuana for years and lost interest in school, a fellow student who failed to get a scholarship, or the neighbor who caused a car crash while high.

What if you are afraid of sounding like a hypocrite? "Do as I say, not as I do" has never been a good method of parenting. You can emphasize that this discussion is about your child's future, and not about your past. Even if you made mistakes in the past, be clear you do not want your child to repeat them.

Most importantly, remember that when your child asks you about your past, he or she has just opened the door for an ongoing dialogue about drugs. Use this opportunity to talk to them about making good choices. Studies show that parents are the single most powerful influence on their children's decisions about drug use. Research affirms that parents who are involved and talk to their kids about drugs are more likely to keep their kids away from drugs.

For more information, INSERT LOCAL CONTACT. If you would like more tips on communication and parenting, visit www.TheAntiDrug.com, a Web site designed to help parents help kids stay safe and drug-free. The site offers specific information about marijuana and other drugs and a brochure called "Keeping Your Kids Drug-Free: A How-to Guide for Parents and Caregivers," which may also be ordered by phone at 1-800-788-2800.