

Drugs and your child: guidance for parents of primary school children

So what are drugs?

Just walking around a supermarket, our children see shelves of vitamins and painkilling tablets, cough medicines, aisles of alcohol in colourful bottles and behind the counter where lottery tickets are sold, dozens of different brands of cigarettes.

- Some drugs are clearly sold as 'medicines', whilst others such as alcohol are presented as a food product.
- Some drugs are legal, (caffeine in many drinks); purchasing some is 'restricted' by age (alcohol and tobacco) whilst the possession or supply of others is illegal.
- Some drugs are lifesavers and many people are only able to enjoy a good quality of life thanks to their medication.
- Using some drugs carries an immediate risk to our health. Some increase our chances of having an accident or making poor and perhaps dangerous decisions, whilst others gradually damage our health and lifestyle over a long period of time.
- A drug that can be a lifesaver in one situation can be life threatening in another.

Children know a surprising amount about drugs but often are confused by the conflicting images and messages they receive.

What is the role of schools?

Schools have a legal responsibility *to promote young people's wellbeing* and promote children's health and safety. Understanding about the safe and appropriate use of drugs is an essential part of our children's education.

Don't we just tell children that drugs are dangerous?

- Many people use drugs 'recreationally', to 'change their mood or feelings' and some drugs such as tobacco and alcohol are frequently used in social settings.
- Understanding the possible health or legal risks and consequences of using drugs is important, but children also need a lot of skills and self-confidence to say 'no' to cigarettes, alcohol or other substances especially if the offer comes from a friend.
- Children may experience conflicting emotions. Curiosity or fear of 'losing face' or their friends' approval might be encouraging them to say 'yes', while fear of harm, getting caught or upsetting a parent or carer might be encouraging them to say 'no'.
- Having made their decision they need the language, skills and self-confidence to turn their decision into action.
- Helping children to develop and rehearse these skills takes time. All of the skills needed in 'drug education' cannot be taught in a single lesson or one off 'event'.
- These skills are gradually built through a comprehensive personal, social, health and economic education programme (PSHE education).

What do children learn about drugs in primary schools?

- From the early years PSHE education in schools can teach children a respect for medicines, household substances and drugs such as alcohol and tobacco that can be found in many homes.

In primary schools examples of questions drug education might explore can include:

- *What goes onto my body? Who tells me to put it on my body? What is it for? How does it feel?*
- *What goes into my body? How does it get in? Who tells me to put it there? Do I like it? What is the difference between safe, not so safe, dangerous, legal and illegal? What do I do if I don't like something, it hurts or it worries me? When should I say "No, don't", "I'll ask someone" or "I'll tell".*
- *Who needs medicines and why? When did I have to take medicines? Who told me to take the medicine? Was it a safe person? Who gave it to me? Was this a safe person? How do I know who to trust? Where did we keep the medicine? Was it a safe place? How can we help to keep medicines safe?*
- *Where might medicine and other dangerous things be found? What can I say if someone tries to make me touch or taste something I think might be risky or dangerous? What can I do and who can I tell? Who are the people I can ask, tell or talk to when I am feeling worried?*
- *What should I do/not do and who should I tell if I see something dirty or sharp like a syringe?*

This gradually builds to exploring:

- *Whose responsibility is it to decide what goes in my body? When is it safe for me to decide and when should I ask someone else? Just because I like someone and they like me can I trust them to tell me what I can put in my body? What facts do I need to know to help me decide about the drugs people use such as tobacco and alcohol?*

- *What does it mean to be 'hooked' or dependent on drugs? Can children become dependent on drugs (such as cigarettes)?*
- PSHE education lessons will also gradually teach the understanding and skills essential not only for drug education but also skills needed for managing our feelings, assessing risk, and understanding that our actions have consequences.
- Work in primary schools will lay the essential foundations for more explicit drug education in secondary schools which will broaden to include a deeper understanding about use and misuse of medicinal, recreational, legal and illegal drugs. It also gives children a chance to practise their decision making, risk assessment and interpersonal skills.

Some people will say that children and young people should simply be told to *'just say no'* to drugs. Simply telling children to *'just say no'* is not enough, they need the knowledge and skills to do so safely and with confidence.

If you have concerns about drug education or are worried about your child speak to their teacher.

Further advice about drugs can be obtained at FRANK <http://www.talktofrank.com>

This guide has been endorsed by:

Parentchannel.tv: www.parentchannel.tv is an online service designed to support and encourage parents and carers of children aged 5-19 with a collection of videos addressing day-to-day questions and concerns spanning wellbeing, behaviour and learning. Relevant videos include: Dealing with Addictions / My child is smoking / Alcohol – don't delay talking about it

Mumsnet works with the PSHE Association to engage parents in issues covered by their children's personal, social health and economic education. Visit the Mumsnet Campaigns page (<http://www.mumsnet.com/campaigns>) for more information.

Sue Atkins is the founder of 'Positive Parents' and author of publications such as 'Raising Happy Children for Dummies'. <http://sueatkinsparentingcoach.com/>