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The Basics of Monitoring

Monitoring is an effective way you can help your tween or teen stay drug-free, and an important thing to do — even if you don't suspect your teen is using drugs.

The idea of “monitoring” your tween or teen may sound sinister, but it's actually a very simple idea that leads to great things: You know where your child is at all times (especially after school), you know his friends, and you know his plans and activities. By staying in-the-know about your child's daily schedule, you're taking an important step in keeping your child drug-free. Kids who are not regularly monitored are four times more likely to use drugs, than kids who are regularly monitored.

We won't mince words here: Monitoring is one of the best ways to keep your kids off drugs, but it isn't always easy. “If a child readily talks about what's going on, then monitoring happens naturally during the course of events,” says Anthony Biglan, Ph.D., a senior scientist at the Oregon Research Institute. “If it doesn't happen naturally, parents need to make some rules to facilitate monitoring.”

Strike a Balance

Because monitoring conflicts with your child's desire to be independent, he is likely to resist your attempts to find out the details of his daily whereabouts. Don't let this deter you from your goal. He may accept the idea more easily if you present it as a means of ensuring safety or interest in who he is and what he likes to do, rather than as a means of control.

The most important time of day to monitor is after school from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. Kids are at the greatest risk for abusing drugs during these hours. Call your child's school to find out about adult-supervised activities he can take part in during these hours. Encourage him to get involved with youth groups, art or music programs, organized sports, community

service or academic clubs. Follow up with your child to make sure he is actually going to the program he has chosen.

Monitoring becomes critically important when kids reach middle school, Biglan says. Because kids go from class to class during middle school or junior high, they don't always develop the close relationships they had with other kids during their earlier school years. Also, kids at this age are extremely sensitive to the beliefs of their classmates, so peer pressure becomes a major contributing factor in their behaviors. Of course, monitoring doesn't mean you have to go through your child's dresser drawers. "Kids need an increasing amount of privacy as they get older and that's OK," says Biglan. But the balance between monitoring and privacy can shift if signs of drug use show up. "Remember", says Biglan, "When it's time to intervene, kids' privacy issues take a backseat."

5 Core Rules of Monitoring

1. Know where your teen is at all times – both physically and virtually. Keep tabs on your kid's Internet use by using web browser tools and software designed to block certain sites. Make sure he/she knows you're asking out of love, not because of a lack of trust.
2. Get to know your kids' friends – both online and off. And, while you're at it, get to know your child's friend's parents, too. Get together with the parents to discuss your children and any recent incidents related to alcohol or drugs in your community.
3. Find out how your teen plans to spend her day. Looking for something to discuss during dinner? This is a great one. "So...what're you up to tomorrow?"
4. Limit the time your child spends without adult supervision. The after-school hours of 3 to 6 are the most dangerous time for tweens or teens to be on their own. Greater peer pressure or boredom can lead to an after-school alcohol or drug use. If you or another adult you trust can't be home for your teen, find out about after-school programs she can get involved with. Limit the time your teen spends online every night, too — and periodically check in on what he or she is looking at online.
5. Learn the technology your teen is using – and use it. Text message, email, instant message and social networking sites are all great ways to check in with your teens to find out where they are, who they're with and what they're up to. 

The Importance of Rules

Rules don't alienate kids; they make children feel loved and secure. Rules about what's acceptable — from obeying curfews to calling in to tell you if plans change to not drinking alcohol before 21 — help teens know what's expected of them. Keep these four tips in mind:

1. When kids break rules, it's important not to overreact with harsh, disproportionate and unenforceable punishment, which undermines the effectiveness of setting limits. Instead, when you first tell your child about a new rule, discuss what the punishment will be and how it will be carried out. Consequences must go hand in hand with limits so that your child understands the cost of breaking the rules. Punishments should be reasonable and related to the violation. For example, if you catch your son and his friends smoking, you might ground him by restricting his social activities for two weeks.
2. Punishments should only involve penalties you discussed before the rule was broken. Also, never issue empty threats. Since we're all more inclined to say things we don't mean when we're upset, it's best to cool off before

discussing consequences.

3. Insist that your teen be in adult-supervised situations after school. Encourage her to get involved with youth groups, arts, music, sports, community service and academic clubs. Research shows that adult supervision of adolescents after school is a key factor in substance abuse prevention. An example of an appropriate consequence for violating the after-school adult-supervision rule is loss of an activity of “freedom,” like a parent-free trip to the movies or mall.
4. Make it clear that you do not ever want your child to use marijuana. By emphasizing your no-tolerance rule for drug use, you reduce the chances for substance abuse now or later in life. Also, if your teen knows she can always blame you, she will have an excuse to fall back on when tempted or urged by friends to make bad decisions.

The key to preventing substance abuse is setting limits for teens when it comes to drugs and alcohol. If they clearly see the consequences for using these substances, and view them as fair, they are more apt to follow the rules that you have created for them.

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