

## **Talking To Children about Tobacco, Drugs, and Alcohol**

I recently attended a meeting with the Jericho Wellness Coalition which focused on wellness initiatives throughout the entire Jericho community. Dr. Jeff Reynolds, the Executive Director of the Long Island Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (LICADD) was the guest speaker. He highlighted some alarming statistics of underage drinking and substance abuse. Although this information was discouraging, Dr. Reynolds acknowledged that we are not helpless in preventing alcohol and drug abuse, and there are several proactive things we can do to decrease the chances of addiction in our children. How do we accomplish this? For one thing, we must start the education process early. Besides educating our students with the facts about drugs and alcohol, we also need to give our children the tools to make responsible decisions, cope with stress, and deal with peer pressure. We need to start building up their emotional resiliency and talk to our children as early as elementary school about healthy living, responsible choices, and the dangers of alcohol and drug addiction.

It's not always easy talking to your children about sensitive topics like drugs, and alcohol, no matter how old they are. But if we don't, our children are left solely with the often inaccurate glamorization of drugs and alcohol they get through the media and their peers. The expert consensus is that there should not be one conversation about drugs and alcohol given in the pre-teen years, but rather several discussions over the course of one's lifetime. Many parents don't know when or how to begin. So how do parents get started with these conversations? I would like to suggest that you work in messages about drugs and alcohol whenever you can, at early ages. There are events that lend itself naturally to these conversations which can be found if you actively look for these teachable moments. For example, in the pre-school years, it may be wise to start teaching your child not to drink out of other people's glasses at parties because what looks like juice may contain something dangerous, like alcohol. Also with young children, you can show them how medicine can look like candy and be dangerous if consumed. At Seaman, one of our parents, Mrs. Sejal Patel, presents a workshop to our K-2 students, entitled, "Medicine is Not Candy", where she educates the children on cautiously examining things that they may consume. While taking a trip to the drugstore to get a prescription filled, why not discuss prescription medications and their use and misuse? Highlight how the misuse of prescription medication can lead to addiction and even death, and how important it is to follow doctor's orders with prescriptions. You may not want to start talking to your six year old child about the dangers of heroin. However, you could begin a conversation about the dangers of cigarette smoke and how it causes people to get sick. I'm sure all of you have observed those commercials about the dangers of smoking while watching TV with your children. That is a perfect time to start a conversation about the dangers of tobacco. How many car accidents have you observed while riding in the car with your children? Use this as an opportunity to discuss ways in which people behave carelessly and put themselves and others in danger. You may want to discuss how the driver may have consumed too much alcohol, which may have contributed to the accident. How about mentioning the dangers of alcohol consumption as you pass the liquor aisle in the grocery store? In the news at various times, sports heroes are reported to be abusing drugs or alcohol. Seize this opportunity to point out how lives can fall apart with

dangerous and risky behavior. The point is that one little comment in a conversation added to many other comments over the years will help drive in the important values that you want to instill in your children.

When talking to your children, make sure it is a two way conversation. Lecturing to children will only make them want to tune you out. Ask your child what they're thinking and feeling as you are having these discussions and make sure you ask open ended questions. (For further communication building skills, see my prior postings on "How to Get Your Child to Talk" and "How to Get Your Child to Listen"). Find out what information they already have been exposed to through the media or their peers. Role play situations with your child where they practice saying "no" to peers. However, understand that saying "no" is not always enough, or may not be in your child's capability at certain moments. Therefore, teach and practice using other ways out of difficult situations. For example, if your child is at a friend's house and feels uncomfortable for any reason, they can call you and give you a code word that signals to you that you need to come pick them up. Usually when my children are at play dates I will call the house, and ask to speak to my child after speaking to the parent. During this time, my children know that they can use the code word during our conversation to signal me to come get them. If you're child has their own phone, having the ability to text you an S.O.S, to come get them while not having to explain themselves to their friends is an added benefit. Scenarios change as your child ages, so continue to offer tools that help them out of various sticky situations throughout the years.

Besides conversations with your children, it's also important that you understand some factors that may put your child at risk of making poor decisions as well as make them more likely to turn to drugs and alcohol. Research suggests that some of these risk factors include low self esteem, inability to respond to peer pressure, lack of information, learning difficulties, low grades, unhealthy relationships with parents, and a stressful home environment. How can you minimize these risks and protect your children? One of the single most important factors Dr. Reynolds pointed out was having family dinners, which sustain communication and closeness within a family. Others ways to build protective factors into your family include making sure each of your children get their fair share of your attention by getting one on one time with each of them, and creating a supportive, encouraging environment, with little criticism. Make sure you give your children physical contact to make them feel special, loved, and secure, and show a united front with your spouse. Furthermore, take a good look at your own behaviors. Children are always watching and learning through your modeling. What nonverbal messages are you sending to your children when you grab for a drink to cope with a stressful day? Are there other, healthier ways you can model coping with frustration and disappointments? Also, be sure to re-examine how much alcohol is in your refrigerator and used regularly in your house.

In sum, it is never too early to start conversations with your children about drugs, alcohol, healthy living, and responsible choices. You can work in these messages on a regular basis throughout the years, so that at the critical juncture when your child is offered alcohol or drugs, they are able to make the right choice. Make sure to build

protective factors into your home life and relationships with your children to increase their resiliency. The Wellness Coalition recommended the website <http://underagedrinking.samhsa.gov/action-plan.aspx>. This website explores the “Talk Early Talk Often” project, which stresses the importance of early intervention and frequent conversations with children about tobacco, alcohol, and drugs. On this website, you can create a personalized “action plan” by entering your child’s sex, age, and whether you’ve had any prior conversations on the topic. The website then gives you specific directions on “when to talk, how to talk, and other things you can do”. As a community, we must start the education process early and continually address these issues. I encourage you to visit the aforementioned website, use teachable moments, open up the lines of communication, and build in resiliency factors to protect your children now and in the future.

*Elyssa Crimeni*  
School Psychologist