

Not My Kids

the family scene, spend more hours at the office, make more trips out of town. Such avoidance doesn't work, of course, and the child eventually will cause enough trouble to force the family to face his drug use.

Q. Would you recognize drugs or drug paraphernalia if you saw them?

A. Many parents don't know what a roach clip looks like - or black beauties, rainbows, yellow jackets. For your own protection you should find out what drugs look like, what their effects are, how they smell, what their street names are, and how to spot their use. Most communities have organized parent groups who are informed and happy to share their knowledge of drugs and drug paraphernalia. Or ask your local police or health departments for guidance.

Q. Would you be alarmed if your child showed changes in attitudes, grades, friends or interests?

A. Investigate immediately if your child suddenly seems "different," if his values have changed, if his old friends don't come around anymore and you wish the new friends wouldn't, if his grades have slipped, or if he has suddenly lost all interest in favorite hobbies or projects. Youngsters who use drugs regularly can exhibit any or all of these signs.

Q. Would you believe your child if he or she admitted to trying marijuana once but that's all?

A. A youngster who admits to having tried drugs once is more likely to be "using" drugs regularly. His admission is a means of minimizing his involvement to himself as well as to you. A child who truly did try drugs only once or twice out of curiosity is not likely to admit it at all because he thinks he has done something "bad" and fears the consequences. To learn the real truth, you will have to monitor your child's friends, activities and behavior.

Q. Does your child have his or her own supply of eye drops?

A. Be suspicious if the answer is yes. Drug abusers often try to hide the red eyes that result from regular use of marijuana or alcohol by constantly applying eye drops. (In an attempt to hide the smell of alcohol on their breath, youngsters also use heavy perfume, chew strong-flavored gum and eat spoonfuls of peanut butter.)

Q. Have objects or money mysteriously disappeared from your home?

A. If they have, you should not ignore this danger signal. Youngsters who first start on drugs usually use their friends' supplies. (One of the ways they deny their drug use to themselves is by believing that if they don't buy drugs, they don't have a drug problem.) However, as their drug use escalates, they soon have to buy their own. Drugs can cost a great deal of money, so the youngster may steal cash from Mom's purse or Dad's wallet or take silver, tools, jewelry or other items that can be easily turned into cash.

Q. Have you noticed behavioral changes in other family members as well as the problem child?

A. Families are something like mobiles: when one part of the structure loses balance, every other part must shift to find a new balance. In a family thrown off balance because one child is a drug user, the other children may suddenly adopt new roles in an effort to rebalance the family structure. A child may become supergood in order to make up for the drug user's bad behavior. Another child might compensate by constantly getting into scrapes himself to distract the family from the problem and attract attention to himself. A child may become extremely passive in an attempt to escape from the family turmoil or may clown constantly in a desperate effort to get the family to laugh again, in some cases a sibling will imitate the drug-using child and take up the habit too.

Q. Does anyone in your family use over-the-counter drugs to wake-up, go to sleep, lose weight or relax?

A. A parent who routinely says, "What a day I had. I could sure use a stiff drink!" or "It's only

a couple Valiums and they make me feel much better," is not setting a good example for children. The message children get from parental reliance on pills and alcohol is that everyday stresses and strains are unnatural and that it is perfectly okay to seek relief from them - not the sort of message children should receive from their parents.

Q. If your child is going to smoke pot or drink alcohol, would you rather he do it alone?

A. Many parents fall into the trap of trying to be understanding and "modern" about substance use. However, allowing children to use alcohol and other drugs at home (or trying drugs along with parents) is a way of giving the drugs parental approval. Parents should make sure every family member knows exactly what the family attitude about alcohol and other drugs use is, what the rules are concerning these substances and what the consequences are for violating the rules. Parents should never let a child convince them that they're "old fogies" if they don't allow youngsters to indulge in "recreational" drugs.

Q. Have you been told by a counselor that "trying drugs" is a normal phase of growing up for a youngster?

A. If you have, don't believe it! If you send your youngster to a therapist or professional counselor, make sure that person is informed about the dangers of adolescent drug use and does not consider it a "normal" part of growing up.