A PARENTS' GUIDE TO DRUGS AND SOLVENTS
WHAT THEY ARE AND WHAT THEY DO

When it comes to the subject of drugs some parents can feel out of their depth, and that is understandable. There is a lot of confusing and inaccurate information around, not helped by some highly-charged and emotive news stories.

Schools increasingly are providing drugs education but you can help your children as well by being better informed. Then, if the subject of drugs is raised in your family, you will be better prepared to understand and deal with it.

All children can be tempted to take drugs, no matter where they come from, what school they go to, or how bright they are.

The aim of this guide is to give you the basic facts so that you can talk to your children about drugs in a more informed way. Having said that, it is impossible to provide hard and fast rules, because so many factors are involved. Much depends on the individual taking drugs, their state of mind at the time, the drugs themselves, the amount taken, and the surroundings in which the drugs are taken.

What can be said with certainty is that all drugs are potentially dangerous in one way or another and most are illegal.

This guide also offers suggestions to help you feel more comfortable talking about drugs with your children once you have the basic facts. At the back there is a list of numbers if you need more advice.

Taking drugs can involve risks. Most have side-effects that users often ignore or don’t know about. Mixing drugs is particularly dangerous.

Although rare among young people, injecting drugs opens up a different
category of risk – which includes the risk of infections like HIV, which can lead to AIDS, and from a number of strains of viral Hepatitis by the use of shared needles and syringes, risk of overdosing from delivering the drug directly into the bloodstream, risk of gangrene from hitting an artery instead of a vein and risk of abscesses caused by injecting non-injectable substances like crushed tablets or substances contaminated with infectious agents such as bacteria.

There are many different drugs. The factfiles in this booklet give you the key points about each of the main drugs.

With all the inherent dangers you might well wonder why anyone would be tempted to take drugs in the first place. There is no easy answer to that. Children and young people may take drugs for a number of reasons:
- curiosity. Some people just want to try any new experience and feel the “high” that drugs can give
- pressure from friends to join in
- it’s fashionable and the thing to do
- boredom
- the “buzz” of doing something dangerous
- parental disapproval
- an escape from problems at home or at school
- a way to acquire self-esteem and confidence
- it’s there so why not try it? Drugs are usually bought from friends or dealers in clubs, pubs or even on the street
- some drugs are cheap
- it’s illegal and therefore may seem exciting.

TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN

It’s not easy to be always available for your children. So it’s important to talk and listen to them when you are available.
If they feel that you are interested in their views and in their problems, they’ll be much more likely to confide in you. You might then be able to influence whether or not they experiment with drugs, or help them stop if they’ve already started, and at least make sure they are well informed.

However reluctant you may be, it’s far better to talk about the problem with your child.

- Talk with them about their feelings on drugs.
- Get them to think about how they might refuse to try drugs.
- Listen and take your children seriously. Take time to find out their views and feelings, without arguing with them.
- Be firm without being aggressive. Make sure your views and feelings are known and that you want your child to respect them.
- Set an example. The way you use alcohol, tobacco and medicines is an example to your children. It gives them signals about how you regard drugs.
- Make sure that you know and meet your children’s friends – even if they are not the ones you would have chosen for them. Invite them home and let them have somewhere they can be together. That way, you can still have some influence over what they do.
- Show – and say – you care. Children need to feel valued and cared for even when they have done something that they know you will disapprove of. “I may not like what you have done, but I still love you” is the message that they need to hear and believe.

There are a few pitfalls to avoid:

- Don’t bully your children.
- Don’t lecture – remember how it felt to be lectured at.
- Don’t preach – being “holier than thou” does not help a child.
- Don’t try to scare your children with shock horror stories. It doesn’t work – and to someone who uses drugs and has experienced their effects, it will be unbelievable.
HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOUR CHILD IS USING DRUGS?

It is often very difficult to tell, particularly when a child first takes drugs or only takes them occasionally. Signs can include:

- sudden changes of mood from happy to alert to sullen and moody
- unusual irritability or aggression
- loss of appetite
- loss of interest in hobbies, sport, school work or friends
- bouts of drowsiness or sleepiness
- increased evidence of telling lies or furtive behaviour
- unexplained loss of money or belongings from the home
- unusual smells, stains or marks on the body or clothes, or around the house.

However, many of these signs are easily confused with those of normal growing up. Be sure of your facts before you do anything. It is important not to jump to the wrong conclusions.

If you do find out your child is using drugs or solvents, stay calm and don't panic.

If it was a one-off you may need simply to talk to them. Be firm, consistent and caring, but disapproving. Give your child some reasons for rejecting drugs:

- that it's illegal and could lead to trouble with the police
- that drug taking could affect their health now and in the future.

Try and discover why your child has used drugs. If your child's health or behaviour shows that they are taking drugs regularly you should take further action.

- Your support for your child is vital whatever the circumstances. You can build your relationship with them and show that you love and care for them.
- Your child may need more help than you can provide. Think about people you know who might be able to help.
- There are many agencies and groups who will also be willing
and able to support you (some are detailed in the back of this booklet). Look after yourself as well.

You will need support if you are to be able to give the best you can to your child. Ask for help from family and friends, and professionals if necessary.

* If your child is taking drugs regularly they are not likely to stop suddenly. Any improvement may be gradual, with perhaps, some slip ups on the way. So you will need to be realistic.

* Don’t blame yourself. Young people don’t always take drugs because they have deep personal problems or to show how they reject your way of life. It is usually a passing phase.

Just as it is difficult to tell whether your child is using drugs, it is also hard to measure accurately the extent of drug use among young people. A recent national survey* found that 45% of 11 – 35 year olds said they had ever taken at least one drug (even if it was a long time ago). But 15% said they had taken a drug in the last three months.

Recent use was highest among 16-22 year olds with about a quarter of this age group saying they had used drugs in the last three months. In the last month 11% of all respondents had taken cannabis, 2% had taken amphetamines and fewer still had used Ecstasy or other drugs.

*HEA/BMRB International 1996

WHAT ABOUT THE LAW?

The two main laws about drugs are the Medicines Act and the Misuse of Drugs Act.

The Medicines Act controls the way medicines are made and supplied.

The Misuse of Drugs Act bans the non-medical use of certain drugs.

The Misuse of Drugs Act places banned drugs in different classes – A, B and C. The penalties for offences involving a drug depend on the class it is in and will also vary according to individual circumstances.
Class A drugs carry the highest penalty, class C the lowest. First offenders who are charged with possessing drugs for their own use can be cautioned or fined. Regular offenders, people selling drugs, or drug smugglers, can be sentenced to life imprisonment for trafficking. In England and Wales children from 10-17 years old are usually dealt with by a Youth Court. This court has a number of options open to it, such as fining parents or putting the offender in a Young Offenders Institution (but not prison).

It is an offence to allow anyone on your premises to produce, give away or sell illegal drugs. It's an offence even to offer to supply the drug free of charge. So if a parent knows that their child is sharing drugs with a friend in their house and does nothing to stop it, the parent has committed an offence. Allowing the smoking of cannabis in your home is also an offence. To stop someone committing an offence with a drug, you can either destroy it or hand it over to the police.

WHAT TO DO IN AN EMERGENCY

It is vitally important that you know what to do should the worst happen and you find your child drowsy or unconscious. It could save their life. Whatever you do, don't panic.

First make sure they've got plenty of fresh air.

Then turn them on to their side. Try not to leave them alone because if they are sick, they could inhale vomit.

Dial 999 and ask for an ambulance.

Collect up anything that seems to have been used in the drug taking – tablets, powders, solvents etc – and give them to a member of the ambulance crew.