Many parents worry about their child becoming involved with drugs. They feel that they don't know enough about drugs to help prevent their child from coming to harm.

On the other hand, many parents think that getting drunk is just a normal part of growing up. But this attitude can be dangerous because there are serious risks associated with drunkenness, particularly for young people. You and your child need to be aware of these risks.

Although there are many stories in the media about drugs leading to addiction, crime and death, it is important to remember that:

* for most young people illegal drug taking is not a part of normal life;
* most people who do try drugs do not continue using them.

Those who try illegal drugs do not usually suffer any long-term harm to their health. However, there are serious risks associated with drug use. These are outlined on the next page and in the 'Facts about drugs' section of this booklet starting on page 18.

Studies show that more young people experience problems caused by drinking too much alcohol than from drug use.

### Why do some young people want to use drugs?

Many parents don't understand why young people might want to try drugs and think that young people only use drugs if they are having problems at home or at school, for example. This is not always true. They may be attracted to drugs for similar reasons as they are to alcohol, perhaps because:

* they enjoy the short-term effects
* their friends use them
* they want the same kind of experience that they get from drinking a lot of alcohol
* they are curious about the effects
* the drugs are easily available
* as part of growing up, they might just want to 'break the rules'.

* Source: HEA/BNPS National Drug Campaign Survey 1996.
Important information for your child

...about drugs

All drugs carry risks. The information on pages 18 to 23 outlines the health risks involved in taking a range of different drugs. The following are risks involved in using any illegal drug.

- The user can never be sure of exactly what they are taking.
- What is bought is unlikely to be pure, and they won’t know what it has been mixed with.
- Not knowing the strength of what has been bought could lead to accidental overdose.
- They can’t be sure what effect a drug will have, even if they have taken it before.
- It is often very dangerous to mix different drugs, and this includes taking a drug and drinking alcohol.
- If needles, syringes or other injecting equipment are shared there is a serious risk of dangerous infections being spread such as HIV and hepatitis B or C. Injecting can also damage veins.

In addition, unlawful possession of a controlled drug is a criminal offence. A drugs conviction can cause problems obtaining a travel visa to enter some countries. It can also affect job prospects. An employer may check if an applicant has a criminal record or any past convictions.

Important information for your child

...about alcohol

Young people see alcohol on sale all around them, in supermarkets, off-licences, pubs and restaurants. They might also see their parents drinking alcohol. This can make it difficult for them to understand that misusing alcohol is dangerous. It is important for your child to be aware of the following risks.

- Drinking large amounts of alcohol over a short period to get drunk quickly is called bingeing. This is especially risky for young people because their bodies are not mature and so alcohol will have more of an effect on them.
- Mixing drinks can be risky at any age.
- Some types of drink preferred by young people are much stronger than average, for example strong beers and ciders. There can be as much alcohol in a 330ml bottle of ‘alco-pop’ as a generous shot of whisky.
- 1000 young people under the age of 15 are admitted to hospital each year with alcohol poisoning. All need emergency treatment.
- Drinking alcohol and taking some drugs is very dangerous. For example, alcohol increases the risk of a serious drug overdose.
- After drinking alcohol young people are far more likely to have an accident, and some are more likely to become involved in a fight.
- Long-term heavy use of alcohol can lead to many problems including liver, heart and stomach conditions.
People use drugs in different ways

People use drugs for different reasons in different situations. The following explanations may be helpful in understanding the ways in which people use drugs.

Some people take a drug because they are curious about what the effects feel like. Using drugs in this way is often called experimentation.

You may have heard of ‘recreational drugs’. When people use this term, they are talking about drugs that are taken for pleasure, or for social reasons – when going to a club or a party for example. Most young people who take drugs use them in this way. They may not suffer any major harmful effects to their health.

Problem drug use has a harmful effect on a person’s life. They may need to take a drug just to feel able to cope with normal life. Their drug use is likely to affect their health and they may suffer from mental health problems, lose their friends, have money problems or get into trouble with the law. Only a very small proportion of people who ever take drugs will become ‘problem users’. If you think your child is using drugs in this way, contact the agencies listed on the back cover. They can give you advice, information and support.

These terms can also apply to the way people use alcohol. Children can be confused by the difference between what you say to them about drugs and alcohol, and what they see the adults around them doing. The way we use alcohol can affect our children’s views and their attitudes towards both drugs and alcohol.

Talking with young people about drugs and alcohol

“There’s only a 20-odd year age gap between me and my kids, but that’s like a lifetime to them. It’s very difficult to talk about something that I’m not involved in.”

Although many parents may feel comfortable talking to their children about alcohol, they may feel that they don’t know enough about drugs to tackle the subject properly. Also, they may be concerned that raising the subject of drugs will lead to their child experimenting with them, but there is no evidence to support this. When parents are worried that their child is taking drugs or drinking a lot of alcohol, they are often unsure about how to react. Conversations can turn into lectures, accusations or rows.

Some children may not feel comfortable talking to their parents about drugs because of the ‘generation gap’. For example, they may worry that showing they know something about drugs will make their parents suspicious. If they admit to trying drugs, they may think they’ll be punished. Sometimes, children can feel that they have nothing to gain from discussing this subject with their parents.

There’s no doubt that talking with young people about drugs and alcohol can be a challenge. Often parents avoid the subject, or try to get the message across by telling their children shock-horror stories. However, parents and children can both gain from having calm discussions. Although this might not be easy, it is important to try to understand each other’s views. This approach will help you to deal with difficult situations if they arise.

Discussions will be easier if you:

- show that your main concern is for their health, safety and well-being;
- listen carefully to their views and feelings;
- try to explain your feelings. This will help them understand your point of view;
- talk with them, rather than to, or at them.

The guidance in this booklet on how to talk about drugs and alcohol with your child is very general. Every family is different, and the way you relate to your child is special to you. Think about the suggestions given, and consider how you could use them to help you talk about drugs and alcohol with your child.
Discussing drugs and alcohol with primary school age children

"You want to protect your child. You don’t think they should know these things yet, but they have to nowadays, don’t they...?"

To many parents, it seems too early to talk with 7 and 8 year olds about drugs and alcohol, but the benefits for the future are clear:

- you can make sure the information they have is accurate;
- they will know what your views are and will understand why you hold them;
- if an opportunity arises to try drugs or drink alcohol, they will be more likely to come to you to talk about it;
- if they get into difficulties, they are more likely to tell you about it.

Before children leave primary school they are likely to be familiar with the subject of drugs because they become aware of stories in the media. At this age, children are less likely to question authority and will probably share their thoughts with you. They are likely to be against the use of drugs, but may well have tried alcohol, perhaps at a family party.

Here are some suggestions for bringing up the subject with your child.

Discussing drugs:

- when you give your child some medicine or take some yourself, make sure they know that they should only take medicine if it is given to them by a responsible adult such as their teacher or the family GP;
- if the subject of drugs is mentioned on TV or in the newspaper, use the opportunity to have a discussion. Ask them what they know about drugs and explain why drugs can be dangerous.

Discussing alcohol:

- if your child is curious about alcohol, talk about it. Tell them about the negative side of drinking too much as well as the social side. Try not to make it sound too glamorous;
- talk about your experiences. If you drink alcohol, tell them about the times you restricted the amount you drank (because of driving for example).

Find out what drug and alcohol education is provided in your child’s school and show interest in their work.

Moving on to secondary school

"For all his moods, he still thinks Mum and Dad are right most of the time."

Starting secondary school is a big change. Some children find it difficult and this can make them vulnerable. Although many children will not become interested in trying drugs, some may start to drink enough alcohol to get drunk, and some are now more likely to try gases, glues and aerosols.

If possible, try to build on the open and supportive approach suggested for younger children. If you can keep discussion going, it will help you later on when your child reaches adolescence.

- It’s not always easy, but it will help if you can make time to talk. Encouraging your child to talk about their day, and chatting with them about yours, will be helping to strengthen your relationship as well as making it easier to tackle more difficult subjects.
- Treat your child’s anxieties seriously – even if they seem minor to you, they could be very important to them.
- Ask them what the school rules are about drugs and alcohol, and what they have covered in drug education lessons.
- Remind them of your views and explain why you hold them. Discuss home rules about drugs and alcohol and make sure they understand the reasons for these rules.
- It is important that they know that you will always be there to support and help them.