

Being proactive, listening can help parents support kids whose peers engage in harmful behavior

You've worked hard to ensure your child is healthy, safe and prepared to make good choices about not using alcohol and other drugs. He's got a good head on his shoulders, and you trust him. And yet, you've learned that one of his longtime friends is drinking. What should you do?

Parents and children both can struggle to negotiate the challenges of growing up. Stephen Grant, who has worked with children and families since 1992 as a therapist, group leader and parent coach, shares his thoughts on ways parents can protect their kids while providing an opportunity to learn, grow and support their peers who may be engaged in harmful behavior.

Q: Hearing news about another child's substance use can be unsettling. What's the best way to verify the information is accurate? Should I share that information with the child's parents?

A: Verifying another child's substance use without concrete evidence can be tricky at best. Evaluating the details of the report will help in deciding what to do. Ask questions about the kinds of substances used, the frequency of use and the amounts. Get information about other risky behavior that takes place while intoxicated or otherwise, i.e. driving, unprotected sex, other illegal activities. Whether the details be extreme, moderate or mild, the question to ask yourself is, "What would I want another parent to do if they knew that *my* child was using?" Most folks answer that they would want to be informed.

There are a number of potential worries associated with telling another parent about their child's use. We worry about how the parents will react. Will they be angry with us? Will the child in question be punished inappropriately? We worry that our own children will no longer trust us with sensitive information. All of these issues can be addressed proactively by building relationships with our children's friends and with their parents before an incident occurs. Having relationships with friends and parents will make communicating about difficult topics all the easier.

Q: Assuming my child's friend *is* drinking or engaged in other harmful behavior, how do I deflect my child's emotions if he becomes defensive and have a positive conversation about the subject? What are some key things I ought to communicate, and how do I go about it?

A: I like that you used the word "deflect" because it speaks to something parents often do that throws a wrench into the hopes for positive conversation. We parents are desperate for our children to receive our wisdom. We want them to really listen to us, thoughtfully considering what we say (no matter how preposterous we sound), using our perspectives to inform their decision-making.

Here's the missing link: The degree to which our children listen to us is directly related to the degree to which we listen to them.

We can almost assume our children will be defensive when they understand their friend may get in trouble because of their own report, or when they feel that we are questioning the integrity of their friendships. When we deflect or dismiss their feelings about this, their defensiveness increases and their ability to listen decreases. Our task in these and other charged situations is to listen to what is underneath our children's defensiveness. By showing compassion for their fears, and by showing respect for their beliefs (no matter how preposterous they sound), we can defuse their defensiveness and prime them to listen to *our* fears and concerns. You may find that your young person shares your concerns, and together you can brainstorm solutions to support the friend in question.

Q: How do I determine which qualities in my child's friends are most important? In other words, if a friend gets good grades, participates in sports and otherwise seems healthy, yet is binge drinking on the weekend, how do I approach this subject with my child?

A: I believe your task is to help your child determine the most important qualities in a friendship on his/her own. Presumably you have been talking with your young person about positive friendships all along. When your young person is faced with friendship challenges, have conversations that help them decide what their expectations are for a friendship and determine whether their friend meets the standard. Ask questions that help guide their thought process: How does so-and-so act when he/she is drunk or high? In what ways are they a friend to you in those moments? How about otherwise? Are they unsafe? Do you worry about them? Are there ways that the consequences of their choices can cause trouble for you? What is your role as a friend when you see someone that you care about being self-destructive? Affirming their knowledge and ability to handle a situation reduces conflict and keeps you in the conversation.

Q: If I hear about an event where teenagers plan to drink or use other drugs, and my child wants to go, how do we discuss it?

A: As much as possible, conversations about drugs and alcohol should be proactive. Your policy should be set and communicated before the situation arises. A young person is less likely to be upset about missing an event if they haven't gotten their hopes up about going. Proactive or reactive, though, a minor should not be allowed to go to such a party for reasons of safety and legality. As you explain your position, remember to listen compassionately for what lies beneath their anger, such as disappointment or concern for status with peers.

Q: How best can I encourage my child to develop friendships with youngsters who don't drink or use drugs?

A: Create opportunities for your child to pursue his/her interests by engaging in positive activities with other motivated children. Developing competencies in certain areas supports positive self-esteem and goal-directed behavior. Young people who feel good about themselves and have goals are less likely to make choices that get in the way of their goals.

Stephen Grant is in private practice in Portland, serving children in kindergarten through 12th grade and their families. He also is a co-author of "BAM! Boys Advocacy and Mentoring: A Leader's Guide to Facilitating Strengths-Based Groups for Boys."

For parenting resources, please contact Oregon Partnership, a statewide nonprofit that provides substance abuse prevention education and treatment referral, at 503-244-5211, or visit www.orpartnership.org or faceitparents.com.