

Teenagers, Dealing with Addiction, on What Might Have Helped

By Jessica Lahey

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At a recent school event, a mother asked me how she could help her son who had begun drinking and taking drugs. “There must be something I can say that will make him listen,” she implored, hoping I could help her find the magic words that would make her son face his escalating substance abuse problem.

I teach writing at an inpatient drug and alcohol rehabilitation center, so I went to the source for answers. I asked my students to write about the question, “In your most receptive, optimistic and trusting moments, was there anything that anyone could have said to you that would have affected your drug use? If so, who was that person and what could they have said to you?” Here (shared with their permission and the permission of the program) are some of their answers.

D. wrote, “We kids generally don’t want to listen to what our parents or teachers say, but I might have listened to another family member. Maybe if they said that alcohol could take control of you, or that alcohol can make you lose friends, make you push away people who care about you, and make you do things that you would be embarrassed to tell your parents about.”

“If parents don’t have first-hand experience with drugs or alcohol, it’s hard for their kids to connect with them about their addiction. They need someone who knows the sadness, the loneliness, and the darkness,” wrote another.

A., a particularly introspective and perceptive student, wrote that the things the adults in his life told him about drugs and alcohol made him more determined to seek them out, not less. When adults told him drugs were all bad, with no upside, he suspected he wasn't being told the truth. "There must have been some reason they were so addictive, that so many people seemed to love them so much. It seemed like everyone was trying to hide the truth from me, like someone telling you that the chocolate pudding sucks so that they can eat more of the delicious pudding themselves. I was determined to try that pudding, to make up my own mind."

When he did try the pudding (marijuana, in his case), "It made me feel better than I had felt in so, so long. It brought back the happiness I felt before the depression, the anxiety, the panic attacks." That initial positive experience only served to support his hunch that the adults in his life had been lying to him all along.

What might have worked, continued A. in his paper, was the truth. "Show them the black, white, and the gray, otherwise they will find the truth themselves, through experience. Show them both sides of the story, and they'll figure out that drugs aren't worth the consequences."

A., as it turns out, was on to something. David Sheff, author of the books "[Beautiful Boy](#)," the story of his son's addiction, and "[Clean](#)," about treating and preventing drug addiction, wrote in an email, "The research shows that for a conversation to make a difference, it must rely not on scare tactics — dire warnings and exaggerated fears — but facts. The goal is to get kids to think. We must acknowledge that it's confusing and there aren't easy or black-and-white answers. We can use a kind of motivational interviewing and get kids thinking about why they may be tempted to use — the potential benefits versus potential risks."

[Lisa Fredericksen](#), author of "If You Loved Me, You'd Stop! What You Really Need to Know When Your Loved One Drinks Too Much" added in an email that we must also take adolescent brain development into account in our parenting. Until their brains are fully wired for adulthood, they need help balancing their as-yet underdeveloped ability to predict the cause and effect of their actions against their natural tendency toward risk-taking and impulsiveness. "It is our job, then, to structure our teens' lives so they have the kinds of boundaries that will help them thrive until their brains have matured enough to take full control," Ms. Fredericksen explained.

To offer meaningful support and advice to our children, Mr. Sheff wrote, we have to understand why they use drugs in the first place. He points to surveys of teenagers that indicate they don't use drugs because of peer pressure or a desire to get high, but rather to

cope with the stress and anxiety in their lives. Therefore, if we want to keep teenagers from using drugs, we have help them manage that stress.

It's useless to tell a child who's being bullied, or is failing in school, or is traumatized by family turmoil to just say no. It's pointless to tell our children to 'make good choices' about drugs if those drugs offer a reprieve from the darkness they feel, or a connection they so badly crave to other kids. We must work to mitigate rather than add to the stress they experience before drugs present as a solution.

Mr. Sheff's words echo the advice I've heard from experts in [childhood anxiety](#), [self-injury](#), and [trauma](#): Listen to your children, validate their feelings, and help them develop the emotional vocabulary and coping mechanisms they so desperately need in order to navigate their lives, substance free.

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