

## Talking to the Looked After Child about Drugs

**Talking about Drugs:** Discussing issues around drugs isn't always easy, but children and young people who talk openly about drugs and alcohol are able to make more informed choices with regard to their use. Research has shown that Looked After Children are more likely to come into contact with drugs and unless they are known to use drugs, they may not get the chance to talk about them. As a carer, you can give young people in your care the opportunity to do this and help them to get sound advice from a trusted source. Talking about drugs doesn't always stop young people from taking them, but it will help them make more informed choices and reduce the risks associated with drug use. Talking about drugs can help Looked After Children to feel more independent and in control of their lives, as well as helping them to get further support and treatment if they need it. One thing is for certain – talking about drugs won't encourage a child or young person to try or take more drugs.



Your knowledge about the individual circumstances of the children in your care may help you to understand their experiences of and attitudes towards drugs. For example, young people who have been in your care for a long time are more likely to trust you and may be willing to talk freely about drugs. You may already know if they, their friends or members of their family use drugs, which can help you to start a conversation. Those who are only staying with you for a short time may not trust you yet. Children who have moved a lot may have talked to other foster carers about drugs; but this does not necessarily mean that they will immediately feel comfortable talking to you about drugs. Parental drug use will affect how young people think about drugs. Although they may have seen the negative effects of drugs, they may have grown up thinking that drug taking is the norm and that they know all there is to know about drugs. You should take their experiences into account when you talk to them about drugs. Young people whose parents use drugs may also worry that their own drug use is inevitable. You can reassure them that they can control their choices but they may need some support to help them do this. If they are worried about the drug use of a friend or a member of their family then encourage them to talk to a responsible adult that they trust. This may be you, a teacher, doctor or social worker.

There is no set age to start to talk to children about drugs, so it is important that age appropriate information is available for them. For children and young people in care, this is even more important as they are likely to start experimenting with drugs at an earlier age than their peers. You will need to take a different approach when talking with children and young people of different ages. With teenagers, you can be more direct and can assume at least some knowledge of drugs even if they have never used them. With younger children, you may just want to ask them if they can name any drugs in order to find out the extent of their knowledge and experience. Even if the young people in your care may have experience

of using drugs this does not mean they will necessarily be aware of all the facts about drugs. The nature of this age group is that they will often want to know the more practical facts around drugs e.g. the long and short term effects of certain drugs.

While it is important to encourage dialogue around drugs, there are limits to what you might achieve, so don't feel that you have failed if a child or young person refuses to talk to you. The best things that you can do is to (1) listen, (2) answer questions, (3) provide a comfortable and 'safe' environment in which to talk, (4) help them to make informed decisions and (5) direct them to specialist advice or support if needed. Don't single out the Looked After Child in your home from your own children. Talk to your whole family and make sure that information about where they can get help is available for everyone. This might help to build young people's trust and shows that you are including them as part of your family. Use opportunities to try to talk. Stories in the media or on TV can help to start a conversation. Real life stories and celebrities can often make what is a potentially intimidating and exposing subject into a more relaxed affair. Don't make it taboo. Explain that they can say anything they want to. Make them feel that you are not there to pass judgement or immediately report them. Listen with respect and sensitivity to what they have to say and don't get angry if you disagree with what they are saying. Accept that you may have different opinions about drugs, but that you may be able to offer information on local services and more practical facts. For example, the child of a drug user may view a certain level of drug use as 'normal'. Don't lie about your own drug use. And you don't need to pretend to know more than you do. If you don't know the answer to a question, then help them think about where they could get reliable information. If they don't want to talk to you then encourage them to talk to someone else. This could be a friend or a confidential drug advice line like FRANK ([www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com)). Pick a good time to talk when you won't be distracted or interrupted. If you think they are using drugs don't confront them when they might have recently taken them. Let them know that you're there for them. They can come and talk to you another day if they want. Help them with denial. Some children and young people will think that they know all there is to know about drugs or will not recognise that their drug use is problematic. You can explain that all drug and alcohol use has some risk attached and that the more they know about the effects of drugs, the more likely they are to reduce these risks. They have nothing to lose by finding out more for themselves.