

DRUG MYTHS!



a parents guide

Lifeline Booklets for Parents

- ☐ Drug Myths
- ☐ Drug Facts
- ☐ The South Asian Community and Drugs
– *A Guide for Parents*

Myths

About Young People and Drugs

Nobody knows exactly how many young people use drugs. Surveys of school children in Britain tend to show between a quarter and a half have used drugs by their 16th birthday depending upon the area they live in. What is generally true is that by the age of 16 using an illegal drug is no longer confined to a deviant minority. If your child does not grow up using drugs, they will almost certainly know somebody who does. On top of this nearly all children will drink alcohol and many will end up smoking cigarettes.

The Main Drugs Used :

Cannabis — is by far the most widely used illegal drug

LSD, Poppers, Ecstasy, Amphetamines, Solvents, Magic Mushrooms and **Cocaine** — are all used by a sizeable minority

Heroin and **Rock Cocaine** — are still thankfully only used by a small minority of people.

WHAT ARE PARENTS to make of all this? If we believe the TV and newspapers all of our children are being turned into junkies and will end up dead. Many young people see it very differently and talk about enjoying using drugs and say parents exaggerate the dangers involved.

What is the truth about young people's drug use? There is a lot of misinformation and there are so many myths. This booklet will help you learn the facts and avoid the myths. You don't have to be a walking encyclopaedia on drugs but you do need accurate information. Read the pamphlet but remember the best place to start is to *talk and listen* to your youngster about drugs. A bit of honesty and give or take will help you both.

It's a new thing



They're all at it



They're all going to die



It only happens in deprived city areas



Boys use more than girls



Myths

ABOUT PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS

It is a new thing

Drug use is not a new thing. There has been drug use throughout history and there are plenty of examples of drug scares and panics in the past. However, the trend is changing.

They're all at it

As we said before more young people are using drugs. New drugs have come on the scene and drug taking is starting at an earlier age. There are plenty of young people in every secondary school who have used drugs. It is no good pretending that it is not happening but it is also important to keep it in perspective. Not every youngster tries illegal drugs and many who do only use them occasionally.

They're all going to die

Thankfully most who try drugs will not come to any serious harm. Many will either just have an occasional dabble or use more often but carefully, much as many adults limit their drinking. Not everyone who drinks alcohol dies of alcohol poisoning.

It only happens in deprived inner city areas

One clear trend is that drug use is not just in inner city, deprived areas but also common in the leafy, middle class suburbs. Young people and drugs travel easily.

Boys use more than girls

Using drugs used to be much more common among boys than girls but this has also changed. Recent surveys of young people show girls are fast catching up on boys. This might have something to do with the way girls mature quicker than boys and often mix with boys who are older than themselves. It also might have something to do with the fact that young girls can more easily get into pubs and clubs where drugs may be available and used.

There is something wrong with young people who use drugs

Today using drugs is a very normal thing for many young people. It does not mean there is necessarily anything wrong with these young people. They may well see drug use as fun and something that makes them feel good, lowers their inhibitions and is part of a good night out. Young people love testing out new things and it can seem even more attractive if adults tell them not to do it. It is not easy to say exactly why they use. It could be for all sorts of reasons and will vary from person to person.

They do it for the same reasons

Why a young person dabbles or experiments a few times will be very different from why they might use regularly. Some young people use regularly but in a very controlled, what we call recreational way. The reasons why this small minority use so heavily will have something to do with emotional or social problems they face. They will use drugs to try to escape what they see as a harsh world rather than to just have a good time with friends. People use drugs in different ways and for different reasons.

They do it because they are bored

It is not as simple as saying they do it because they are bored. Lots of young people who have active lives also use drugs.

They do it because of peer pressure

They also may be encouraged to do it because of friends or to try to fit in with the crowd but there is also a lot of pressure not to use drugs. Occasionally some young people may be forced or tricked into using drugs but it usually has more to do with choice than pressure. Anyway, what do we mean by peer pressure? We rarely use the term to apply to adults or ourselves.

They do it because they mix with the wrong sort

We often think youngsters use drugs because they get in with the 'wrong sort' but who are 'the wrong sort'? We never like to think our children are the wrong sort. Too often we like to blame drug use on someone else rather than realising that, whether we like it or not, a lot of young people freely choose to use drugs. When you look at the growth in young people's drug use it could include our own children however we have brought them up.

**THERE IS SOMETHING
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**THEY DO IT BECAUSE
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**THEY DO IT BECAUSE
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**THEY DO IT BECAUSE
THEY MIX WITH THE
WRONG SORT**



Mood Swings

Being Tired

Weight Loss

**Spending a
Lot of Money**

**Decline in School
Performance**

Lack of Appetite

**Decline in
Appearance**

**Sores Around
the Mouth**

Spots



Myths

ABOUT SPOTTING DRUG USE

It's easy to tell if someone is using drugs

A number of organisations produce lists of signs and symptoms of drug use with the idea that parents and teachers will be able to spot young people who use drugs. These things could be due to using drugs but they could all be due to other things. In fact they are often normal parts of growing up. The problem is, unless you see your youngster high on drugs you may not see any signs that they are actually using. If you think about it you cannot usually tell who drinks alcohol just by looking at people and the same goes for occasional use of other drugs. We all have stereotypes of what drug users look like but most young people who use drugs do not fit the stereotypes.

It's easy to recognise different drugs

Similarly, parents often think that if they only knew what different drugs looked like they would be able to tell if their youngster was using. You might never actually see the drugs they are using but even if you do the same drug can come in different sizes, shapes, forms and colours. For instance, ecstasy usually comes in a tablet form which can vary in size and shape and look like many other drugs and medicines. Most of the time young people keep their drug use away from their family homes. The important point is that even if we could recognise the signs and symptoms of drug use or what different drugs look like we still would have the question of what we should do if we suspect our child is using drugs. What we need to do is talk to them and listen to what they have to say without going over the top.

Myths

ABOUT HOW YOUNG PEOPLE GET DRUGS



Dealers give them free drugs to get hooked

One common myth is that the ice-cream sellers at the school gates will give free drugs to our innocent young children, get them hooked and force them to come back to buy more at inflated prices. The truth is that most young people get their drugs from friends, acquaintances, older brothers and sisters and small time users/dealers rather than from big time drug dealers. There are plenty of drug dealers around but they do not usually have much direct contact with younger children. That is because younger people make poor customers. They usually do not have that much money and they will tell on dealers too easily. In fact a lot of the time drugs are not pushed on young people at all. Usually they are pulled. Someone gets a small quantity of drugs and their mates

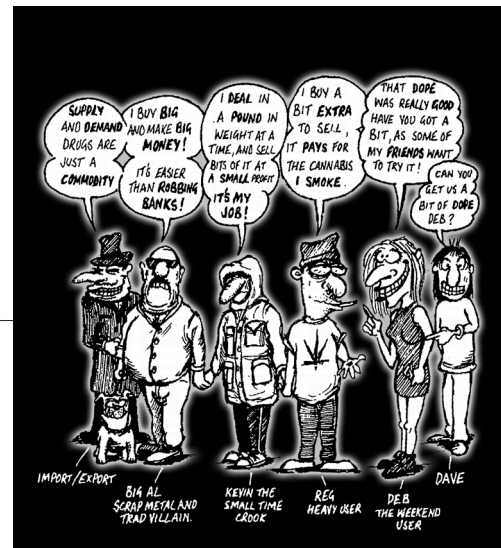
will want to buy some from them. When it comes to drugs our youngsters are not as innocent as we often think and they will seek out drugs or think it a favour if someone provides them.

Nearly all drugs are imported from abroad

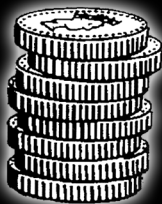
We also have this idea that most drugs are imported from abroad. This is true of drugs like heroin and cocaine. However, cannabis is now sometimes grown in this country ('home grown') and synthetic drugs like amphetamine, ecstasy and LSD are often manufactured here.

Most drug users get into crime to pay for drugs

It is true that a lot of crime is drug related. However, most of it involves people who are regular users of cocaine, crack and heroin. The younger age range does not commonly use these drugs. Most young people who use drugs will not get into crime to fund their 'habit' and the drugs they use may not be that expensive, they are pocket money drugs.



Ecstasy £8
a tablet



Poppers £3-£5
a bottle



Cannabis £7
enough for 3 – 4 joints



LSD £2 – £3
a tab



Amphetamine £5
a wrap



Solvents
FREE or cheap



Magic Mushrooms
FREE

Myths

ABOUT THE COST OF DRUGS

All Drugs are very expensive

It is a myth that drugs are very expensive. although cocaine, crack and heroin are still relatively expensive, many drugs are well within the reach of young people. In fact many drugs are cheaper to buy than 20 cigarettes.

£7 spent on cannabis will provide enough for 3 to 4 joints (cannabis cigarettes). That is enough for a small group to get pretty intoxicated. £5 would also buy enough Amphetamine for one person for a night. £2 to £3 would buy an LSD 'tab'. About £8 an ecstasy pill.

Magic mushrooms grow wild in September/October and are free if you pick your own and Solvents (glues, areosols, gases and nail varnish) are pretty cheap and freely available in many homes.

Myths

ABOUT THE EFFECTS AND DANGERS OF DRUGS

Most people who use drugs come to serious harm

Problems can arise from use of legal or illegal drugs. These include physical and mental health problems, accidents whilst under the influence, accidental or deliberate overdose, relationship problems and getting a criminal record. The real risks of drug use depend on what we call: **DRUG**, **SET** and **SETTING**.

If we took alcohol as our example of our DRUG. The risk of using would depend on what you drank, (vodka is obviously stronger than beer), how much you had drunk and whether you had taken any other drugs as well as alcohol. The SET bit is everything about you. A healthy 12 stone man who was an experienced drinker could probably drink a pint of lager with his lunch and still behave normally. The same could not be said of a five year old girl weighing 3 stone with kidney problems, who had not eaten

Drug

The DRUG bit includes which drug is taken, what else it is mixed with, how much is taken, how often, the method of use etc. Some drugs are more dangerous than others

Set

The SET bit is everything to do with the person especially their physical and mental health, body weight etc.

Setting

The SETTING bit is where the drugs are taken and what the person is doing at the time.

and had never drunk alcohol before. The set is also about the state of the mind. All of us who have drunk alcohol know that it can enhance a happy mood and make a bad mood worse. If someone is depressed they are more likely to get into heavy, chaotic drug use as a way of trying to protect themselves from negative feelings and what seems an unkind world. The SETTING is where you actually take the drug. Drinking alcohol in a pub is an appropriate setting but step out of the pub and into your car and you are in the wrong setting.

What this means is that the same drug can be taken more or less safely and that drugs can affect different people in different ways. Occasional use of drugs in a careful way by someone who is in good physical and mental health will not usually lead to too many problems. However, some young people get into problems with drugs especially if they don't know what they are doing, are doing it in dangerous places or are in bad health, anxious or depressed. Young people who experiment without knowing much about drugs may be more likely to take too much or be unprepared for the effects. A lot of dangers for young people concern where they are and what they are doing at the time. Examples are taking drugs by riverbanks or main roads, being caught with drugs in public places or dancing for very long periods when using ecstasy.

**All drug use is
very dangerous**



**Lots of young people
end up dead**



**Illegal drugs are much
more dangerous**



**One try and
they're hooked**



**They start with
cannabis and end
up on heroin**



All drug use is very dangerous

The fact is most young people who use drugs will come to little or no harm. Thank goodness this is true. If it wasn't we would be in a real mess.

Lots of young people end up dead

Illegal drugs kill about 1000 people a year and solvents (glue and gas) about 50 to 100. All these deaths from illegal drugs and solvents are a tragedy but we need to keep it all in perspective.

Illegal drugs are much more dangerous than alcohol and tobacco

It is also true that 'legal drugs' like alcohol and tobacco cause a lot more deaths than illegal drugs. Alcohol kills 20,000 to 30,000 people a year in this country and cigarette smoking results in over 100,000 premature deaths and a lot of illness and misery.

One try of heroin and cocaine and they are addicted

Very few young people become 'addicts'. It takes time to become addicted to a drug although some drugs like crack cocaine and heroin are easier to become addicted to than others. It also takes time to kick the habit once you are addicted but most people who become addicted eventually give up or control their use. People who become addicted usually have reasons in their life why it happens and this often has to do with painful experiences or situations they have to deal with rather than their personality.

They start on cannabis and end up on heroin

Some people think if young people smoke cannabis they will inevitably go on to other 'harder' drugs. Most heroin users will have tried cannabis but most cannabis users do not go on to try heroin.

Cannabis is addictive

You can't die from a cannabis overdose Cannabis is not physically addictive like heroin or alcohol.

Cannabis is harmless

Some young people seem to think it is not dangerous at all. Not true. Some may become psychologically dependent upon it so they feel they need to be high all the time to face the world. Smoking a lot of cannabis can be expensive and get people into debt and possible crime, result in a criminal record and damage the lungs like tobacco. Also smoking cannabis and driving or operating heavy machinery can be dangerous. Most important of all cannabis is illegal and a criminal record can ruin future job prospects.

If they take ecstasy they will end up dead

Deaths from ecstasy have been in the news a lot. There have been about 100 ecstasy related deaths in this country to date. Most have been due to young people overheating through non-stop dancing in hot, crowded clubs. 'Chilling out' (cooling off), taking a rest and drinking about a pint of water an hour can stop this happening. With any stimulant drug used indiscriminantly there is a risk of heart failure. Ecstasy tablets often contain rubbish put in them so that the dealers make more money, but by and large it is 'pure' ecstasy tablets that have caused the deaths. Nobody knows exactly how many people have taken ecstasy (but it is in the millions), so assessing risk precisely is impossible. The risk of death, although tragic when it happens, is small. It is probably on a par with that of allergic reactions to nuts.

LSD transfers can seep through the skin

Some transfers which children play with can look a bit like LSD blotters. This has led to information circulating about LSD transfers seeping through the skin and resulting in overdose deaths. This is a myth, as it is unlikely to seep through the skin. LSD is swallowed.

The fact is that lots of myths circulate about different drugs and a lot of the time parents assume the worst. A key problem is that because adults often exaggerate the dangers from drugs young people don't listen to us and then think there are no dangers at all. The truth lies somewhere between and the real dangers of drugs are not simply explained. As we said before it is about DRUG, SET and SETTING so the dangers can be different for different people at different times.

**Cannabis is
addictive**



**Cannabis is
harmless**



**If they take
ecstasy they will
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**LSD transfers seep
through the skin**



Myths

ABOUT US AS PARENTS

We were never young

We often forget we were young once and what we got up to. Were we all angels? What drug use — legal and illegal — were we involved with in our own youth? Research has shown that over 2 million people in the UK have used cannabis and a lot of those people are now parents. This shows something about young people's drug use which is important to remember. Most of the young people experimenting with drugs today will also grow out of it. Most of us use drugs today even if it is likely to be legal ones like the caffeine in tea and coffee, alcohol, cigarettes and tranquillisers. We often don't see ourselves as drug takers. A good definition of drugs is 'Drugs are something other people do'. A lot of youngsters today, rightly see alcohol and tobacco as drugs and can't understand why these drugs are legal and openly 'pushed' and drugs like cannabis are illegal. They often think parents are hypocrites and they are possibly right. It means we need to talk to our children and remind them that we were young once and be honest about what we got up to even if we think it is not a good idea for them to do the same.

I know nothing about drugs

Parents also often think they do not know anything about drugs. The truth is we often know more than we think. Our children might know more about the current drug scene than we do but we have things we can tell them and we can also learn from them. Even if you have never used illegal drugs when you were young you can learn a lot by thinking about your own use of alcohol and tobacco. We all have 'drug careers' that change over time. What was your use of alcohol and cigarettes like when you were young? Did it change and if so why? Were some times more dangerous than others and if so why? Young people's use of illegal drugs today may have something in common with our own use of alcohol, cigarettes and other drugs when we were young. How did our parents react to us? Did we listen to them if they were too heavy with us? How does it compare to how we talk to our children about drugs today?

It's our fault if our children use drugs

A lot of parents also think it is their fault if their youngster uses drugs. "Where did we go wrong?". Remember a lot of young people are experimenting with drugs and they come from all classes and areas and all sorts of homes. It is difficult enough being a parent without blaming ourselves. Guilt does not help anyone, least of all our children.

Myths

ABOUT WHAT WE CAN DO

We know how to stop them

There are no magic solutions and if we are honest we do not know how to completely stop young people using drugs. We have tried all sorts of things and they have not worked.

Tougher laws will stop them

Tougher laws seem to send drug use further underground and may even increase related crime and violence.

Being really strict will stop them

Being too strict with them may mean they just go to greater lengths to conceal it from us.

Shocking and scaring them will stop them

Telling young people how terrible and dangerous drug use can be hasn't worked either. They find out it is not as dangerous as is made out and then don't believe a word we say and think we don't know what we are talking about. The real danger here is that they don't listen to anything useful we say and think drugs aren't dangerous at all. Indeed, research in the USA has shown that trying to shock and scare young people about drugs might even encourage some to try drugs.

Giving them the facts will stop them

Young people need the facts and accurate information but that doesn't stop them using altogether although it might make them more careful about what they actually do. Although we may like to think our children will be 'drug free' it is pie in the sky when you consider all the legal and illegal drugs available to them. Very few parents expect their children to never drink alcohol and more and more young people do not see much difference between that and using some illegal drugs. Even if we can't stop them using altogether we can help make sure they know what they are doing and take care about the use of drugs — both legal and illegal. This means they are less likely to get into serious harm.



Myths

ABOUT WHAT WE CAN DO

Giving them other things to do will stop them

We also know that giving young people other things to do and keeping them occupied will not necessarily mean they will not use drugs. Some people have tried giving young people 'alternative highs' like rock climbing, canoeing, abseiling etc. These things can themselves be very dangerous. They do not seem to stop young people using drugs altogether although a young person with a fuller life is probably less likely to get involved in heavy drug use.

If we turn a blind eye it will go away

Turning a blind eye to it or avoiding talking about it is not going to help either.

They are too young to talk about it

We need to talk and listen to our children about drugs but some parents worry about this. The idea that they are too young or that it will put ideas into their heads and encourage drug use is not true. Young people think and hear about drugs from a very early age. The key is to talk to them in a way that is appropriate to their age. We need to put lots of ideas into their heads. That is what getting information and education about drugs is all about.

The experts will sort them out

There is also the myth that experts such as police officers or drug workers can tell young people what it is really like and then they will not use drugs. Or the myth that if our children are using drugs a drugs counselling expert can completely sort them out. There are drug advice agencies in most parts of the country and some very good 'experts' but young people make their own decisions. Use drug agencies, they can really help but they don't have magic wands.

When you think about how much time we spend with our children we are likely to have far more influence than any experts.

WHAT YOU Can DO AS A PARENT

We might not be able to completely stop our children using drugs. We can, however, help them a lot and make sure they know about drugs and have thought carefully about them. We can help keep them as safe as possible and be there for them when they need us. Some of the practical things you can do are:

- ▶▶▶▶ Learn about drugs yourself**
- ▶▶▶▶ Think about your views and your own drug use**
- ▶▶▶▶ Talk and listen to your youngsters**
- ▶▶▶▶ Be realistic about their drug use and what you can do about it**
- ▶▶▶▶ Work out some drug rules together**
- ▶▶▶▶ Help them get a good drugs education**
- ▶▶▶▶ Know where and how to get help if you or they need it**