

John Kunene is at his office working on a deal when the phone rings. ‘I have Themba’s school on the line,’ his secretary says. ‘I hope nothing’s wrong.’

JK: Kunene here, hello.

School: We’re terribly sorry to inform you that Themba has been caught with marijuana in his bag. We were hoping you could come in as soon as possible so that we could discuss what to do....

Mr Kunene slowly puts the phone down. Every parent’s nightmare, he thinks. A picture of a jubilant Themba, taken just after he scored the winning goal for the under-13 cup final match, pops into his head. But wait – that picture has changed. Three years have passed since that match. Themba is no longer playing soccer. Come to think of it, he has not been doing very much lately besides lying in front of the TV looking miserable. Teenage hormones, his granny had said when Mr Kunene mentioned it to her. ‘They all go through a phase of not talking to their parents and sulking.’ But Themba has been unusually withdrawn, opting to stay at home rather than going to movies with his dad or visiting his aunt and cousins. And he did really badly in his term tests: almost a ten percent drop overall.

‘How long has he been into drugs?’ wonders his father. ‘How much is he taking? And with whom? Is he doing anything besides marijuana?’

Mr Kunene groans. Work has been hectic lately, but he has been there for Themba as much as he could. Until recently Themba spoke to him quite freely about things. Raising Themba on his own has not always been easy – but he never thought that it would come to this. Caught with drugs!

‘Themba is not a bad boy,’ he says to himself. ‘What has gone wrong?’



1. It is a well-known fact that drugs are easily accessible to schoolchildren. How do I ensure that my child does not get into the drug scene? – I can’t always be there keeping an eye when he is out with friends.
2. How will I know if my child is taking drugs?
3. What do I do if I find out that he is taking drugs?
4. How can I let my child know that he does not have to give in to peer pressure and that he can say no to drugs?
5. Young people like to experiment so it is not surprising that they should want to experiment with drugs. But surely some drugs are more harmful and addictive than others? Should I even raise this distinction with him?

Discussion



1. Understand that there are various reasons that children get into drugs: low self-esteem, peer pressure, anger, rebellion, ignorance, wanting to fit in, needing an escape, wanting to experiment, wanting to have fun, or relieving stress or boredom. Some teenagers are more ‘angry at the world’, others are inclined to experiment and take risks. Some people have more addictive chemical make-up or personalities than others. Try to understand where your child is at and pitch your discussion at a level that your child can relate to. Realise that the same approach is not going to work for every child.

You may want to give your child books or articles on addiction and drug-taking that you can discuss with him, or let him talk to people who were part of a drug culture and got out of it. Remind him that drugs can very quickly become a lifestyle. Point to good and bad role models and talk about them. Watch TV programmes or movies together and discuss them. Watch what he is watching. See what magazines and books he is reading and use those as a talking point.

Talk openly about drugs. Make sure that you know about the different drugs and what they do to people; whether they are uppers or downers, what the short term and long term effects are. Let your child know that you understand what drugs are about. Try to explain to him that the enjoyment he might derive from taking drugs in the short term is really not worth the risk of getting hooked; that drugs are ultimately harmful and dangerous. Don’t exaggerate the effects, or use unsubstantiated scare tactics, however – he will no doubt see through you.

Education is imparted most effectively by [our] being a constant presence – from Presence by Marcellin Champagnat, founder of Marist schools

Communication is key. Express your concerns. Give good reasons and real-life examples: the kid in his class, the story in the paper. Discuss the effect that drugs can have on an entire family, and perhaps open a discussion about how one could most constructively deal with a drug problem in the family. Have conversations on an ongoing basis and not just when issues arise. Communication is not something

you can turn on and off – it should be ongoing. Similarly, it is far more effective if you have been talking openly to your child from an early age. He is far more likely to be open with you if that is what he is used to. Do activities with your child that you all enjoy, and use the opportunity to talk.

Know where he is and with whom, and what they are doing. Don’t give your child more money than he needs – it will just lead him into temptation.

2. You might notice clear signs, like drug paraphernalia in his room. He might start to steal from you or become violent. Or there might be more subtle changes. If he becomes secretive, uncommunicative, listless or withdrawn, if he starts hanging out with new friends, if he loses weight or gets sick more often, if his marks drop – these are all warning signs that something may be wrong. Make sure you talk to him and get to the bottom of the changes in him so that you don’t confuse them with normal teenage behaviour and mood swings. (See pamphlet on ‘Moodiness’.)
3. Remain calm. Act sooner rather than later. It might help to take him immediately for a test to ascertain what drugs he has taken, and how much. After testing and once he is sober, try to gauge the extent of his drug taking and how serious a problem it has become. Try to get to the bottom of why he is taking drugs. Review the consequences of this drug taking for you as a parent, for the family, and for him. If you have said that there will be consequences if he is caught taking drugs, you have to follow through with appropriate punishment – but be sensitive to his state of mind. Call in help – a trusted family member, teacher or counsellor. If he is on the path to addiction he will need professional help. But never stop talking to him. Let him know that you love him no matter what.

Understand what makes young people act as they do – from Ten attitudes of Marcellin Champagnat, founder of Marist schools

4. Building self-esteem is key to keeping your child out of harm’s way. If he has respect for himself and for his body he is less likely to self-destruct. He may still experiment, but if he is able to have

continued

an informed inner dialogue with himself, he is more able to make wise decisions. Encourage your child to take responsibility for his actions. Tell him – frequently – that you will always be there for him, no matter what.

Make sure that he knows that taking drugs will have consequences for him and for others. Besides the impact on his physical and mental health, you will impose some form of punishment on him. It may help him to be able to tell his friends that he will be grounded/lose pocket money/forfeit privileges, etc. if he is caught taking drugs.

- Some people allow their teenagers to smoke cigarettes; others find nicotine as unacceptable as marijuana and other drugs. Some people allow their children limited alcohol, while others do not. It is important that your child follows your rules when he is out – and it is important that you respect other parents' rules when your child has his friends at your house. Talk to your child about various drugs – alcohol and nicotine included – and about

the potential effects they will have in the short and long term. Try to get him to understand how easy it is to get hooked and that one has to start taking more and more drugs to relive the initial pleasure. Explain that the enjoyment of any drug is usually short-lived. Encourage him to seek out activities that will produce a natural 'high' – exercise, music, spending time with friends, etc.

Conclusion

In the scenario on the previous page, Mr Kunene feels partly responsible, as many of us would. He probably also feels isolated by the problem. It is a great help in these situations if one can turn to supportive friends and a caring, pastoral school community.

(See also the pamphlet 'Parties and Dates'.)

Through determined and disciplined efforts we develop a strong character and a resilient will
– from *Love of Work* by
Marcellin Champagnat,
founder of Marist schools

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Drugs

Useful contact information

Johannesburg Parent and Child Counselling Centre	011 484 1734
Childline	08 000 55555
Famsa: Parktown	011 788 4784
Soweto	011 933 1301
Teddy Bear Clinic	011 484 4554
Lifeline	011 728 1347
DARE (formerly Drugwise)	011 788 0717

Further reading

<http://www.family.samhsa.gov/get/involvement.aspx>
Parenting with Panache by Dereck Jackson, Wordsmiths,
Johannesburg: 2001
Choose Life – A guide to dealing with substance abuse by Mark
Potterton with Colin Northmore, CIE, Johannesburg: 2006
[http://www.alcoholfreechildren.org/en/pubs/html/makeadifference.
htm](http://www.alcoholfreechildren.org/en/pubs/html/makeadifference.htm)

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