

# How to talk to your child about the harms of drugs and spot the signs of drug abuse

It's never too early to start a conversation about the harms of drugs



CNB enforcement officer Saifudin Abdul Rahman and social worker aide Raymond Lee share their tips on how to begin a conversation about the harms of drugs with your child. PHOTO: CAROLINE CHIA

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As a social worker aide who has worked with halfway house Teen Challenge for a year, Mr Raymond Lee knows the harms of drug abuse does not discriminate against any age group.

A new report on youth delinquency highlighted how while the drug situation in Singapore remains largely under control, the percentage of youth abusers here remains a concern – 10 per cent of all drug abusers arrested in 2020 were below the age of 20.

Mr Lee, who counsels people of varying ages, says that parents can start to look out for signs of drug abuse in children as young as those in their pre-teens.

“This is the stage when children and teens start to explore their rights on what they can do or cannot do,” the 41-year-old explains.

One of the easiest ways to identify a drug abuser is to look at the eyes.

Says Mr Lee: “The person may be fighting to keep them open.”

But on the other end of the spectrum, a drug abuser may also behave and look unnaturally “high”, appearing excited and smiling excessively even when they are in a “normal environment”, he adds.

He says that families can help to motivate young children and raise their self-worth in keeping them away from drugs. “Empathy, not sympathy, lifting up instead of putting down,” he shares.

Mr Lee himself uses a counselling technique known as Person-Centered Therapy (PCT). Developed in the 1940s, this approach is about identifying each and every one of us as having the desire and capacity for personal growth and change. “I am able to portray myself as their friend. In this way, they will be more open and able to share their inner thoughts.”

When it comes to starting a conversation with young children on the harms of drugs, “an early start is always better”, says Mr Lee. But, of course, parents will know best if their kids are mature enough to have that conversation yet.

## Did you know?

The three most commonly-abused drugs among new abusers arrested in 2020 are methamphetamine or ‘Ice’, new psychoactive substances and cannabis. [Click here](#) to learn about the effects of these drugs.

## Educate children through storytelling





For parents who find it tough to broach the topic of drug abuse with their children, Mr Saifudin recommends starting with storytelling.  
PHOTO: CAROLINE CHIA

For Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB) enforcement officer Saifudin Abdul Rahman, parents can start to chat casually about the dangers of drugs at any time because “age is just a number”. He has two young children aged five and eight.

A 12-year veteran with CNB, Mr Saifudin’s work involves helping ex-drug abusers re-integrate smoothly into society by getting them to share more about the day-to-day problems they encounter.

For parents who find it tough to broach the topic of drug abuse with their children, the 38-year-old recommends starting with storytelling. At home, he shares with his kids stories of personal encounters from his course of work. For instance, he once shared with them the heart-wrenching story of a suspected drug abuser who tried to stab his mother with a knife during a drug raid.

“Drug consumption can affect and alter the state of mind,” Mr Saifudin adds.

## Parental involvement is essential as we are our children’s first teachers and we should remain their best teachers throughout life.

SAIFUDIN ABDUL RAHMAN, 38, enforcement officer, Central Narcotics Bureau

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As he has met teenaged abusers who cite peer pressure as one of their reasons for taking drugs, he believes in having open discussions with kids and knowing their friends.

Besides real-life friends, the online world has also changed the way young people perceive drugs.

They now spend a lot of time online, especially on social media platforms where information about drugs is readily available.

As it is not possible or practical to get young people to stay off the Internet, parents can instead spend time guiding their young ones in managing the overload of information – good, bad and ugly – out there.

### Use “teachable moments” to kickstart the conversation

And to get started, it is as easy as visiting the CNB website where parents can download the Preventive Drug Education Handbook for Parents in four languages for free.

It includes useful tips like finding out more about a child’s hidden talents and encouraging him or her to develop this to fend off boredom, which is one of the key reasons why young people turn to drugs.

It is also always important to help your children feel good about themselves by offering praise and encouragement, engaging them in regular conversations, giving them responsibility to feel valued in the family, and simply being there for them in times of need.



Mr Raymond Lee explains that families can help to motivate young children and raise their self-worth in keeping them away from drugs.  
PHOTO: CAROLINE CHIA

Parents can also use “teachable moments” to kickstart the conversation, like referring to news articles on celebrities who have been arrested for drug abuse, or died of overdose.

And when the conversation has begun, the Preventive Drug Education Handbook for Parents advises that parents keep an open mind and listen to what their kids tell them, without ever being confrontational or judgmental.

At home, you can do your part further in helping your child stay away from drugs by being a role model and creating a trigger-free environment devoid of alcohol and cigarettes.

“We have the greatest impact on our children – the better we are able to connect and be involved in their overall development, the greater the chances they are able to walk the right path and away from drugs,” says Mr Saifudin.

“Parental involvement is essential as we are our children’s first teachers and we should remain their best teachers throughout life.”

# How do I know if my child is abusing drugs?

From teeth clenching to mood swings, these are the tell-tale signs of drug abuse you can look out for\*.

**1. Red, tired eyes**

Drug abusers tend to have constricted or pinpoint pupils that appear small, even in dim lighting.

**2. Teeth clenching or brown teeth**

Some drugs cause involuntary teeth clenching or grinding, and may turn teeth brown with their corrosive chemicals.

**3. Sores and spots around the mouth**

These can be the result of drug and/or inhalant abuse.

**4. Severe and prolonged mood swings**

That your teenager looks sullen and irritable all the time may not be due to hormonal changes. Drug abusers may experience mood swings when they are going through withdrawal or experiencing cravings.

**5. Always asking for more pocket money**

If your child keeps asking for extra money without any valid reason, it could be that he or she is spending on a drug habit.

*Source: Central Narcotics Bureau*

Do you suspect that a loved one or someone around you is abusing drugs? Call the CNB hotline at 1800-3256666.

You can also call the National Addictions Management Service hotline at 6732-6837 or use the anonymous Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association live chat here (Monday to Friday: 2pm – 9pm).

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