

Keeping Watch Over Your Child: The Basics of Monitoring

Monitoring is an effective way you can help your tween or teen stay drug-free, and an important thing to do — even if you don't suspect your teen is using drugs. The idea of "monitoring" your tween or teen may sound sinister, but it's actually a very simple idea that leads to great things: You know where your child is at all times (especially after school), you know his friends, and you know his plans and activities. By staying in-the-know about your child's daily schedule, you're taking an important step in keeping your child drug-free. Kids who are not regularly monitored are four times more likely to use drugs, than kids who are regularly monitored. We won't mince words here: Monitoring is one of the best ways to keep your kids off drugs, but it isn't always easy. "If a child readily talks about what's going on, then monitoring happens naturally during the course of events," says Anthony Biglan, Ph.D., a senior scientist at the Oregon Research Institute. "If it doesn't happen naturally, parents need to make some rules to facilitate monitoring."

Strike a Balance

Because monitoring conflicts with your child's desire to be independent, he is likely to resist your attempts to find out the details of his daily whereabouts. Don't let this deter you from your goal. He may accept the idea more easily if you present it as a means of ensuring safety or interest in who he is and what he likes to do, rather than as a means of control.

The most important time of day to monitor is after school from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. Kids are at the greatest risk for abusing drugs during these hours. Call your child's school to find out about adult-supervised activities he can take part in during these hours. Encourage him to get involved with youth groups, art or music programs, organized sports, community service or academic clubs. Follow up with your child to make sure he is actually going to the program he has chosen.

Monitoring becomes critically important when kids reach middle school, Biglan says. Because kids go from class to class during middle school or junior high, they don't always develop the close relationships they had with other kids during their earlier school years. Also, kids at this age are extremely sensitive to

the beliefs of their classmates, so peer pressure becomes a major contributing factor in their behaviors. Of course, monitoring doesn't mean you have to go through your

child's dresser drawers. "Kids need an increasing amount of privacy as they get older and that's OK," says Biglan. But the balance between monitoring and privacy can shift if signs of drug use show up. "Remember", says Biglan, "when it's time to intervene, kids' privacy issues take a backseat."

Four Core Rules of Monitoring

1. Know where your child or teen is at all times. Make sure he/she knows you're asking out of love, not because of a lack of trust.
2. Get to know all of your teen's friends personally. Know their faces and their voices. Interact with them whenever possible -- without actually forcing them to "hang out" with you.
3. Find out how your teen plans to spend her day. Looking for something to discuss during dinner? This is a great one. "So...what're you up to tomorrow?" Easy. Right?
4. Limit the time your child spends without adult supervision. The after-school hours of 3 to 6 are the most dangerous time for tweens or teens to be on their own. Greater peer pressure or boredom can lead to an after-school alcohol or drug use. If you or another adult you trust can't be home for your teen, find out about after-school programs she can get involved with.