

DEVELOP A FAMILY CONTINGENCY PLAN

Most families have lots of anxieties and fears about what may happen to the drug user. Common fears include:

- **Death by overdose**
- **Contraction of a blood borne virus - HIV or Hepatitis**
- **Drug user arrested, convicted and jailed**
- **Family members leaving home because of drug user**
- **Ill health of drug user or another family member**
- **Conflict escalating out of control with disastrous consequences**
- **Increased mental illness issues**
- **Family falling apart due to problems**
- **Things never getting better**
- **Children being born into uncertain or difficult situations**

There are many other fears similar to those mentioned above. Some things families are fearful about will not occur - some may. Because of daily chaos and trauma they deal with, families very rarely make practical contingency plans to counter some of the possible events. A useful and practical plan is to have a list of easily accessible telephone numbers should it be needed. Having such a list does not mean these things will happen - it is simply being prepared.

The list should contain services available in your local community - phone numbers and addresses eg:

- Local Hospital and other emergency numbers
- Mental Health Crisis Team
- Family Drug Support
- Alcohol and Drug Information Service
- Police
- Neighbours who can intervene quickly in emergency
- Solicitor
- Counsellor
- Friends to talk to
- Needle and syringe services
- Drug user group



Minimising harm a practical guide

What can you do to minimise harm?

BE INFORMED

Parents whose children have died due to drug taking often say in hindsight "If only I'd known then what I know now".

While it may seem that your child gets all their information and values from their peers, research shows that they actually fall back on the values and attitudes of their family and parents more than may appear obvious at first. Don't preach, just try and open a discussion or leave information around the house.

GIVE THEM ACCURATE INFORMATION

Your local Public library with Di@yll (Drug Information @ Your Local Library) in NSW or your Community Health Centre should have a range of information you can use and you can also use the information in the fact sheets in this Kit and from our web-site at www.fds.org.au

Prevention of diseases such as Hepatitis B & C, HIV (AIDS) and other infections are obviously best achieved through safe sex practices and reduction or stopping of risky drug taking behaviour. Information about infection control and risk reduction regarding injecting procedures can be found in the **FACT SHEET** No.9.

TALK TO THEIR FRIENDS (even those whom you may consider a bad influence)

Don't be afraid to talk to their friends. By alienating the peer group they have chosen, no matter how much you disapprove, you will also alienate them. Peer pressure can increase the likelihood of having unprotected sex, drugs and alcohol and exposure to other risky behaviour. The most obvious one is driving and alcohol - most road fatalities have alcohol as a factor.

Getting into fights, stealing or being involved in daring acts like hanging off trains can be common behaviour when drugs are combined eg: alcohol, coke, speed, uppers, dope and prescription drugs. This is especially so with younger teenagers and party drugs such as ecstasy, acid, and prescription drugs, and of course alcohol.

Encourage them to take a phone card linked to your home phone number. Stress the importance of them being able to get home safely either by calling a cab, which you can pay on arrival or that you will collect them and give them a lift home.

Make sure your child's friends are aware of the dangers of drug use, safe drug use procedures and that they recognise overdose symptoms and act quickly.

It is important that if anyone in the group is physically distressed that friends stay with them and care for them while not hesitating to get medical help or an ambulance if necessary.

An untreated overdose or adverse reaction can be fatal if left

MAKE SURE THE GROUP OF FRIENDS ARE AWARE THAT:

- Mixing drugs and especially mixing drugs and alcohol is the MOST dangerous combination
- Signs of a bad reaction to drugs should not be ignored and it is crucial to call an ambulance immediately. Dial 000.
- Police need not always be involved
- Information must be provided as to what has been taken so that treatment can be administered effectively and immediately
- It is better to deal with an unpleasant situation than for someone to suffer brain damage or death

PROMOTE RESPONSIBILITY

- Introduce the idea of one member of the group remaining sober or clean when out partying. Not only can they be the 'voice of reason', but they can also be aware of signs of overdose or reactions to any drugs being used. They will be more likely to be responsible for seeking help and calling an ambulance if necessary.
- Encourage responsible drug and alcohol use. This will ensure that the person looks after their own health and also shows concern for the people around them. For injecting drug users, sterile conditions and correct disposal practices are a must especially if there are younger siblings or children in the home. The same responsibilities apply to leaving pills or powders around which can be lethal, should young curious children come across them.
- Promote safe sex. This may be even more important for drug users than anyone else. Encourage them to ALWAYS use condoms. Loss of inhibition and control can cause people to do things that they would never normally do - including having unprotected sex.
- Promote ways to maintain general health. Drug and alcohol use reduces the body's ability to use vitamins, minerals and often suppresses the appetite. Partying in smoke filled rooms prolonged alcohol use and side effects of other drugs all contribute to overall poorer health. Due to the large financial expenditure on drugs there is often less money to spend on food. People's immunity to disease can be lowered and they may have colds and flu more often, as well as specific problems associated with the way particular drugs are taken eg nasal problems with snorting, vein problems with injecting drug users, chronic constipation with opiate use

A diet that is low in fast food and high in fresh fruit and vegetables will help, as will drinking plenty of water and juice. Whenever you can, encourage your child to have healthy food and take a vitamin or mineral supplement as well as exercise. Going for a walk to the beach or the park every so often can be helpful. Health is obviously crucially important if your drug user is female and pregnant. If your child is living on the streets encourage them to eat freely available good food such as that available at the Hara Krishna Temples and at many soup kitchens.

Listen, listen, listen and listen...

One of the things that parents often tell FDS is that when they reflect as to what happened they only heard what they wanted to hear, rather than what was happening in reality. Our natural instinct is to deny reality. This was a very dangerous instinct that we need to challenge. What we all need is to be listened to. Read the **FACT SHEET No.18 Communicating with your drug user** for some helpful tips and strategies for how to do this.

HELP THEM BE LESS CHAOTIC AND MORE ORGANISED

Provide assistance so that they are able and equipped to deal with the rules of bureaucracy. Being disorganised and under the influence of drugs may impact on their ability to maintain an income, stay out of court or jail, and keep in employment. This may mean doing practical things like:

- Reminding them about dates to see the parole officer, ensuring they check in, in accordance with their bail conditions, reminding them to ring treatment services
- It may also mean giving them a lift or bus and train fares to keep appointments
- It may mean buying them a prepaid phone card so they can contact you, and you them
- Having to live in tattered clothes does nothing for a person's self esteem or for their image when dealing with bureaucratic systems. You may need to buy them some reasonable clothes if their lifestyle is chaotic it is very likely that they will lose clothes or have them stolen
- Spending money on their health eg: dental visits, flu shots, vitamins, skin, hair or foot care