



Conversation Traps

Conversations on substance use or other unwanted behaviors often grind to a halt as our children become defensive and parents become more determined that substance use and certain behaviors are not okay.

There are several communication traps that can occur. Which ones do you relate to?

Lecturing: This trap is based on the idea that if you could just get one nugget of information across, your child would have an “AHA” moment and agree with what you’re saying. For example, telling your child that 90% of addictions start in the teen years as the brain is developing may make you think twice, but not your child. If you find yourself talking AT your child rather than having a conversation, chances are you’ve gone into lecture mode.

Question & Answer: Often this type of conversation sounds like an interrogation. Are you finished with your homework? Did you go to their house? Did you drink tonight? Did you drink and drive? What time did you get home? Are you stoned? All these questions can be answered with one word, which is okay in some cases, but questions like these don’t lend themselves to a quality discussion.

Scare Tactics: Scare tactics may work with young children, but not with teen and adult children. They will hear what you have to say, but discount it based upon their personal experiences, what their friends report, or the notion that they are immune from something bad happening to them.

Labeling: Using labels in discussion like, “Do you want to be known as a stoner?” can set up conversations about the label, rather than the behavior, as your child responds with, “I’m not a stoner just because I like to get high every now and then”. Or, by labeling your child, “an addict” rather than focusing on their behavior. “My child has a problem with addiction”. Certainly, your child is more than their substance use.

Blaming: This trap often occurs out of frustration and fear placing blame for things that go wrong in the house on your child. For example, “It’s your fault that we had to stay home Friday night/cancel vacation plans to make sure you didn’t do anything stupid.” This can crush your child’s motivation to change behavior.

Silent Treatment or Ignoring: Some children will stand in front of you and “listen” to what you say without saying a word in return. The thinking is along the lines of, “Here they go again...they’ll burn themselves out in 5 minutes and then I can go back to my video game.” In addition to children using this strategy, some parents will give a child the silent treatment when they are angry with them or have experienced difficult conversations in the past and don’t want to “get into it” with their child.

Conversation traps are very common and happen in even the best of situations. So, if you identify with just one or all the examples above, you are in good company!

Why Does this Matter for my Conversations with my Child?

There are many reasons why practicing positive communication strategies are useful:

- They improve your ability to express your feelings in a way that your child can understand more easily.
- They offer a way out of the cycle of negative communication (e.g., arguments, fights, deep freezes).
- Positive communication can be contagious; when you change your style of communication others may begin to mirror it. This helps reduce the friction and sets the stage for more effective discussions around the bigger issues.
- ***It works for you.*** Practicing these skills will help you get more of what you want; better listening, understanding, less defensiveness, and improved collaboration over time.
- ***It works for them.*** Improved conversations will help your child feel heard; open the door for them to believe they can collaborate; help lower their defensiveness, and experience positive interactions with the ones who want to support and be of help.
- ***It helps everywhere.*** These skills can apply to every interaction, which can positively impact the bigger social context of our lives.

Material adapted from: The Workshop for Parents & Caregivers Facilitator Training Guide. Partnership for Drug-Free Kids & CMC: Foundation for Change, September 2018, v1.3