

TALKING TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT

LEGAL HIGHS

&

CLUB DRUGS

A PARENT'S HANDBOOK

ANGELUS FOUNDATION

A Charity dedicated to helping society understand the dangers of 'legal highs' (New Psychoactive Substances), to reduce the harm they cause to young people and their families, and to save lives.



THIS PUBLICATION IS A COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE CHARITIES THE ANGELUS FOUNDATION, ADFAM AND THE CLUB DRUGS CLINIC AT CHELSEA AND WESTMINSTER HOSPITAL.

CLUB DRUG CLINIC

The Club Drug Clinic is an innovative service for adult clubbers and LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transsexual) people who have developed problems with a range of 'club drugs'.

It is a free NHS service provided by Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust (CNWL).

Our highly specialist Club Drug Clinic team includes: specialist addiction doctors and psychologists, nurses, counsellors and peer mentors with lived experience'. The team is based in Chelsea & Westminster Hospital and accepts referrals from anyone who can get to us.

ADFAM INTRO

Adfam has existed since 1984 as an organisation which works to improve the lives of any family member affected by the drug or alcohol use of a loved one.

It carries out good practice projects, work on policy with government and other partners, runs training, and develop toolkits and other resources.

Adfam produces a number of publications for families on many aspects of drug and alcohol use. These are available online and are free for family members.



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MARYON'S INTRODUCTION

Maryon Stewart, Founder of the Angelus Foundation.

As an author and broadcaster with four children I felt that my life was pretty sweet until Sunday morning 26 April 2009. Two policewomen stood on my doorstep asking if they could come in - something inside me knew it couldn't be good news. They had come to tell me something that would change my life forever.

Hester, my 21 year-old daughter, a medical student and cheerleader at Sussex University, had passed away in the night. They didn't know exactly how but thought it was associated with a legal high. She had been given half a dose of a substance known as GBL which was a legal high. Combined with the alcohol she had consumed at an awards dinner, it shut down her respiratory system which sent her to sleep - never to wake up again. I would never have dreamt that a legal substance could have claimed the life of my gorgeous, sweet, bubbly and fun angel.

It was then that I started campaigning and eventually set up the Angelus Foundation in memory of Hester to campaign to raise awareness about the dangers of legal highs. That year there were seven substances detected masquerading as legal highs. Fast-forward four years and there are 73 substances on the market in the UK alone. It has reached epidemic proportions and as a result, our young have never been more at risk.

We set up the first dedicated resource for young people at www.whynotfindout.org and I strongly suggest that you send your children to it so that they understand that legal highs are anything but safe, often are a cocktail of class B drugs and toxic chemicals.

The Angelus Foundation is dedicated to raising awareness about legal highs and club drugs, helping young people to making well-informed choices and parents to have wiser conversations with their children.

If you have found out that your child is using club drugs or legal highs or are concerned they might be, then this booklet is for you. It's been written to help you to cope with the situation and help you think of positive ways to talk to and support your child.

The issue of children and adolescents taking legal highs and club drugs adds an extra dimension of worry for parents, with many unsure of what exactly these substances are, what their effects are and what the legal situation is. There is a serious lack of scientific evidence on their harms and a general lack of information and support for the young people and their families. Naturally young people often believe they are safe because they are legal when in fact they are playing Russian Roulette with their lives.

Maryon Stewart

MARYON & HESTER STEWART



WHAT EXACTLY ARE CLUB DRUGS & LEGAL HIGHS?

1

Drugs are substances, which are consumed to change the way the body works or affect how people think, feel or behave. They do this by affecting chemical changes in the brain. There are many drugs used in our society, from legal ones such as alcohol, tobacco and caffeine to illegal drugs prohibited by law such as heroin, cocaine and MDMA (ecstasy). There are some legal drugs (often known as legal highs) which are not prohibited by law but affect brain function and behaviour just like any other drug. Club drugs are those drugs (legal or illegal), which are typically used in clubs, pubs and at parties.

Many of us think of drugs as substances like cannabis, heroin or cocaine. But in fact a drug can be any psychoactive substance taken that affects the central nervous system and changes how we think, feel or behave. So the caffeine in your morning cup of coffee or tea is a drug, so is the alcohol in that glass of wine you enjoy with your meal or the nicotine you inhale in a cigarette. None of these are illegal. So what is the difference between these and legal highs?

Legal highs are psychoactive (brain altering) compounds often made synthetically in the lab specifically for recreational use. They often contain similar chemicals to those in illegal drugs, such as amphetamines, MDMA (ecstasy) or cannabis. To get around the Misuse of Drugs Act, typically a few molecules are changed in the lab to avoid them being officially classified as illegal.

'Herbal highs' - naturally occurring substances such as herbs, seeds and cacti - are also legal highs. As they are mainly derived from plants and herbs they are generally considered more 'natural' than pills or powders, but this can be misleading distinction to make given their powerful psychoactive effects. All these substances change the way the body works and can affect behaviour.

Club drugs are drugs typically used in pubs, clubs and parties. They are called club drugs to differentiate them from heroin and crack, which are the drugs typically associated with the most problematic and damaging use. Club drugs may be illegal (for instance ketamine, mephedrone, GBL/GHB and, cocaine and MDMA (ecstasy) or legal (some synthetic cannabinoids or research chemicals). They are usually bought through friends, a regular dealer or from someone in a club.

HOW ARE LEGAL HIGHS SOLD?

Although it is not against the law to sell legal highs, they cannot be sold explicitly for human consumption. To get around this retailers have labelled them with various terms such as 'research chemicals', 'herbal incense', 'plant food' or 'bath salts'. This has led to a great deal of confusion for young people, their families as well as the media. Some think wrongly that mephedrone, really is a plant food that coincidentally happens to have strong psychoactive properties. Websites often prominently state 'Not for Human Consumption' so they cannot legally be accused of selling drugs for human use.

It is easy to get hold of legal highs from 'head shops' (shops specialising in legal highs and drug paraphernalia), through friends or easiest of all online. Anyone with a credit or debit card can access a website and buy a product which will be delivered anonymously within a day or two.



WHY YOU MAY BE CONFUSED

The chemical names of these drugs are often long and hard to remember (for example Methoxetamine/3-MeO-2-Oxo-PCE) or may sound similar to another drug (for example mephedrone and methadone).

The names under which they are marketed often bear no relation to the compound. Jokey names like Pink Champagne, China White, Clockwork Orange, Banshee Dust, Toxic Waste and Pineapple Express can disguise the chemical make-up and effects of the drugs. Bear in mind also that two substances with very different names may be the same drug. GoGaine and Pink Panthers for instance often both contain Methiopropamine.

Some drugs may have more than one name - mephedrone has been known as M-cat, drone and meow meow, for example. Sometimes unknown 'white powder' legal highs and club drugs are just called 'bubble'.

HOW DID LEGAL HIGHS BECOME SO POPULAR?

Legal highs have always been around. They were often obscure drugs, such as plant extracts from other countries – for example, the non-addictive hallucinogen Peyote cactus, which a small amount of people experimented with. Although they were powerful psychoactive substances, they were not thought to pose a major social or health problem – and were not deemed as a controlled substance, i.e. banned, under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971.

For many years such substances were sold in high street head shops along with cigarette papers and smoking devices such as pipes and bongs and other cannabis paraphernalia. Then in 2004 imported ‘fresh’ magic mushrooms from the Netherlands appeared on the market. These have powerful psychoactive effects and some people may have taken them thinking that, because they were legal, their effects would be mild. Although their sale was quickly outlawed by legislation under the 2005 Drugs Act their ready availability made it clear that there were weaknesses in the UK drug laws that could potentially be exploited.

At the same time internet use was growing rapidly and the absence of comprehensive legal controls over what could be bought and sold, changed the drugs market beyond recognition. Any person with a credit or debit card and an internet connection could now get hold of new psychoactive substances with minimal effort. Peer reviews of particular drugs also became available on certain websites, which may have influenced the choices of some purchasers.

A whole new industry of legal highs started to grow on the back of this new drug revolution and the limited nature of the Misuse of Drugs Act. New head shops opened in cities and regional towns across the UK and dozens of new websites sprung up, offering new products marketed with silly or catchy names such as Gogaine and Benzo Fury.

Advice to users about safe doses or the dangers of mixing these substances with alcohol or other drugs can not be given alongside these drugs. The reason? This would have acknowledged that these substances were intended for human consumption, which in turn could have made them subject to scrutiny under the Medicines Act.

Unlike established illegal drugs, these drugs are so new that drug experts have not studied their effects in detail and cannot offer guidance on how to reduce their harms.

ALL CHANGE

The Government changed the law in 2010 to allow new drugs to be subject quickly to a TCDO (Temporary Class Drug Order). This outlaws the import and supply of the drug (rather than banning its possession). However, the labs, which manufacture these drugs (often in China), can make small molecular changes and quickly produce a whole new range of new and untested drugs. So, even with this new legislation in place, it is extremely difficult for the authorities to keep up with the many new substances entering the market. It is also difficult for them to take legal action as the drugs are often sold as mixed products with a combination of substances. This combination may make identification harder, or one of the contained substances may be legal while another is not.

NEW KID ON THE BLOCK

In 2008, a new drug mephedrone (also known as M-Cat) became popular on the club scene and at universities. It was easy to get hold of online and could be delivered through the post. People liked the effects of the white-powder drug, which was described as part-cocaine, part-ecstasy and part-amphetamine. It was also purer and cheaper than these three, the purity of which had fallen dramatically. By contrast mephedrone was often 99% pure and cheap at £10 a gram - a quarter the price of cocaine.

No other drug in recent history has become so popular so fast. So in 2010, a law was fast tracked through Parliament making it a Class B drug. The ban on mephedrone changed how it was regarded - perhaps it made it clear to some people that it was a 'proper' drug and potentially as dangerous as amphetamine or cocaine. A great deal of the media coverage at the time was exaggerated, with stories of extreme, bizarre and dangerous behaviour that had allegedly taken place after the consumption of mephedrone.

Despite the publicity, there was no obvious decline in its popularity and prevalence. The British Crime Survey 2011, for example, showed that 4.4% of 16-59 year-olds had taken it at least once in the previous year. Its popularity had risen from zero to the same level as cocaine in just three to four years, making it the UK's third most popular illegal drug.

FIGURING IT OUT

Angelus carried out an Omnibus survey of 1,000 16-24 year olds in October 2012, which demonstrated the alarming prevalence of legal highs in the UK.

58%

of respondents' friends had taken legal highs.

39%

knew where to get them.

45%

had been offered them.

Adfam also conducted an online survey of 173 young people in partnership with Serve Legal. It contained some interesting findings which may influence how and when you talk to your child about legal highs and club drugs: the majority of respondents (nearly 60%) would be very unlikely to ask their parents about club drugs and legal highs.

A very small percentage (7%) would be very or moderately likely to ask their parents.

Less than half of respondents thought that their parents would be even moderately knowledgeable, understanding, confident or calm if they were asked about legal highs and club drugs.

50% of respondents would welcome hearing about the health effects of these drugs from their parents.

The most commonly cited source of information on the topic was peers at school, college or university.

WHAT DO LEGAL HIGHS CONTAIN?

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Legally produced drugs, medicines prescribed by a doctor, undergo rigorous clinical trials to ensure the side effects and risks are known. Illegal drugs and legal highs, however, are obviously not subject to such controls. Many people do not know what these drugs contain, including those who take them, the dealers and retailers.

They are often mixed with inert bulking agents to increase profit margins for dealers, or mild stimulants to add to or mimic the effect of the drug.

NOT WHAT IT SAYS ON THE TIN

A 1g bag of China White may contain Methiopropamine – the active ingredient. However, certain samples have been found to also contain caffeine or one or several other psychoactive drugs, or just bulking agents. Taking such an unpredictable mix of substances is risky as we know so little about the effects of these drugs, and their effects in combination. Even if it were pure Methiopropamine, as some sellers claim, there has been no extensive testing of this drug nor is it easy to determine safe levels.

Police in Strathclyde carried out an extensive range of tests of drugs sold as legal highs and found 19% actually contained illegal drugs, quite often mephedrone.

Drugs, which have moved from legal to illegal, such as mephedrone, have become less pure. For example, the purity of mephedrone has fallen from 99% to around 65% in some areas, but there seems to be little or no consistency.

KNOW YOUR SUBSTANCES

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The wide range of legal highs and club drugs may be purer and cheaper than more familiar drugs, such as cannabis, amphetamine and ecstasy. However, they still carry varying degrees of risk. It's an ever changing picture, but here are some up to date key facts relating to some of the more common substances, both legal and illegal.

SYNTHETIC CANNABINOIDS

What are they?

Synthetic cannabinoids mimic the effects of organic cannabis. They are often in powder or crystal form, which is sprayed onto inert plant material to form a smoking mixture that mimics the appearance of cannabis. This is smoked in a joint/spliff or a pipe and can give an intense high, often stronger than normal organic cannabis. It can give a short hallucinatory trip. It is not always pleasurable and many people can feel ill after smoking it.

Cost:

Around £10-20 a gram from the Internet and head shops.

Legality:

Mixed. Some synthetic cannabinoids, such as the ones in Black Mamba and Spice have been prohibited by law, but many have not.

The effects:

Similar to cannabis, although anecdotally perhaps even stronger. It takes one or two drags (tokes/hits) for effects to be felt. People sometimes laugh hysterically, find it hard to hold a conversation, feel very disorientated and threatened. They may feel dizzy and lose control of their limbs. Some report vomiting and headaches and feelings of paranoia and panic. The peak of the high fades after 20-30 minutes.

Risk factors:

No studies have been carried out on synthetic cannabinoids so their long-term effects are unknown. However, smoking these products involves unknown chemicals entering the lungs, the risk of unknown interactions with or exacerbation of existing mental health problems, disturbing sensations and feelings and the risk of people hurting themselves through accidents.



KNOW YOUR SUBSTANCES

STIMULANTS 6 - APB, ETHYLPHENIDATE

What are they?

White and whiteish granular powders and pills usually taken in lines or orally (known as 'bombing'). They are manufactured in laboratories in various countries. legal high powders are often from China.

Cost:

Around £10-20 a gram.

Legality:

Mixed. A great many have become controlled by other such as Ethylphenidate are still legal.

The effects:

Stimulants work on the central nervous system causing a strong 'rush' of energy, hyperactivity and a racing heart. They also suppress hunger while increasing thirst. A dose of around 100 mgs lasts about four to six hours. The 'come down' can include headache, insomnia, restlessness, fatigue and depression.

Risk factors:

Possible risks include heart palpitations, irregular heartbeat and a racing heart. They can also have a powerful effect on mood causing bouts of paranoia and, if taken with alcohol, aggression and short-term memory loss. Some stimulants increase body temperature, which can be dangerous particularly in a hot environment.



Anyone with high blood pressure or a heart condition who takes stimulants is at an increased risk of a heart attack or stroke.

KNOW YOUR SUBSTANCES

KETAMINE

What are they?

A white, grainy, odourless powder with anaesthetic and hallucinogenic properties. It is usually snorted or swallowed ('bombed'). It is mostly imported from Indian pharmacies. It is a Class C drug.

Cost:

Around £10-20 a gram.

Legality:

It is a class C drug so illegal to supply or possess.

The effects:

Snorting ketamine is the fastest way to get its full effects. These are usually apparent within 5-20 minutes and last for about an hour. It makes people feel relaxed, often euphoric and detached from their body and surroundings. Ketamine is an effective pain blocker. They may feel 'floaty' and find it hard to get up or walk. These sensations can be extremely unpleasant for inexperienced drug users.

Risk factors:

Recent studies show that prolonged use of Ketamine can lead to addiction and other serious health problems, especially damage to the bladder, including erosion resulting in bleeding and even loss of the bladder through irreparable damage. It can also cause memory problems and injuries can be sustained through pain immunity.



KNOW YOUR SUBSTANCES

GBL (GAMMABUTYROLACTONE) SOMETIMES KNOWN AS GHB.

What are they?

A liquid club drug with sedative and anaesthetic properties. It is a solvent with industrial uses. It is now a Class C drug in the UK.

Cost:

Very cheap. A bottle of 100ml will give 50-60 doses and only costs a few pounds.

Legality:

It is a class C drug so illegal to supply or possess.

The effects:

GBL takes 15 to 45 minutes to work, inducing a warm sense of contentment. May make people feel euphoric, uninhibited and eventually sleepy. Effects usually last for three to six hours. Doses have to be measured extremely precisely with a pipette. One survey showed over 20 percent of people taking GBL had passed out in the previous year.

Risk factors:

Even a small dose of 0.5ml can have a powerful sedative effect. Meanwhile, a moderate-to-high dose (1-2ml) mixed with alcohol can, in the inexperienced and unsuspecting person, be extremely dangerous, leading to unconsciousness and even death. Measuring a dose accurately can make it difficult for people to know how much they are taking. This can lead to accidental overdosing. Daily use increases the chances of dependency, which can be severe.



KNOW YOUR SUBSTANCES

MEPHEDRONE (M-CAT)

What are they?

The first high-profile legal high, this is a strong, white powdered stimulant from a family of drugs known as cathinones. It is an amphetamine-like substance with hallucogenic properties. It is made in a laboratory, perhaps in China or Eastern Europe. It is Class B drug.

Cost:

About £10-15 per gram - less than half the cost of cocaine.

Legality:

It is now a Class B drug so illegal to supply or possess.

The effects:

M-Cat increases the heartbeat giving an intense rushing high together with a sense of well-being and contentment. Make people feel alert, exhilarated and talkative. These effects last for an hour or so.

Risk factors:

Depression very often sets in the next day. Regular use can affect normal sleep patterns and cause short term memory loss. The 'high' lessens with regular use and the drug is often taken to prevent the 'low' which can lead to dependency.



Natural legal highs such as Peyote cactus, Fly Agaric mushrooms and Salvia Divinorum usually contain consistent ingredients. However, this does not make them any safer. It is easy to get the dose wrong which can lead to a highly unpleasant experience. People normally don't take these types of drugs regularly and there is little chance of any level of addiction.

LEGAL HIGHS, THE LIMITS OF THE LAW & POLICE ACTION

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Under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 in the UK, illegal drugs are categorised into Class A, B and C which is broadly meant to reflect the drug's potential harm. Legal highs are by definition not prohibited by law - but the rapidly changing legality of these substance makes it difficult to keep up with these emerging substances. It can also be hard to track exactly which drugs are legal and which are illegal given their brand names often bear no relation to their actual chemical make-up.

CLASS

A

Heroin, Cocaine,
MDMA (Ecstasy),
Methamphetamine

CLASS

B

Mephedrone,
Cannabis,
Methoxetamine

CLASS

C

GBL/GHB,
Ketamine,
Valium type drugs
(Benzodiazepines)

The website www.whynotfindout.org is a useful resource for finding out the legal status, chemical constituents as well as the history of legal and illegal drugs. Although there are many legal highs around it is worth remembering that a number of substances once sold as legal highs (including 6 APB (Benzo Fury), Methoxetamine and Mephedone) are now illegal. The changing legal status of some of these substances adds confusion for young people and families as some people, including the media, continue to refer to them as legal highs.

The Home Office provide information on the classes of drugs below to at www.homeoffice.gov.uk/drugs/drug-law.

WHAT YOU CAN DO AS A PARENT

As children enter their teens you need to adapt, for example by changing the way you speak to them and showing respect for their growing independence. Many of the challenges faced by parents who want to talk to their children about drugs stem from a breakdown in communication. Talking to your children regularly about what's going on in their - and your - lives makes it easier to talk honestly and openly about drugs, legal highs and alcohol without it becoming a big deal for everybody. It's vitally important to stress that the contents of legal highs are inconsistent and that they are often a combination of classified and unclassified drugs. Also disabuse them of the idea that they are safe just because they are legal, as that is far from true.

Surprising though it may seem, younger teenagers (11-15) often look to their parents as a source of information on all kinds of topics including drugs. Research indicates that two thirds of young people believe their parents to be a good source of information on drugs (Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use among young people in England 2011).

TALK ABOUT IT

We all want to make sure our children are fully informed about legal highs and the potential dangers and most of all that they understand the importance of talking openly about them. If they perceive this is a forbidden subject they may end up getting misleading or wrong information elsewhere - including from their friends and the media.

If your child is worried about legal highs or club drugs, or is already using them, knowing that they can talk about it with you will make it easier for them to confide in you or seek your support. Good and open communication is a key part of keeping young people safe, which is why it's important to learn how to have wise conversations with your children.

BE MORE OF AN EXPERT

To be able to talk to your child in an informed and calm way about legal highs and club drugs you must be informed yourself. Seek out reliable sources of information - and don't believe everything you see or read in the media where harms and effects are often exaggerated.

If you talk to young people presenting all the facts or in a totally negative way they may think you are using 'scare stories' or don't understand how these so called legal and safe substances really work. This immediately makes your advice less convincing.

To find out more go to the information websites below.

Angelus foundation website www.angelusfoundation.com

The website www.whynotfindout.org is for young people which contains videos as well as information and FAQs about various drugs particularly legal highs and club drugs www.adfam.org.uk for information for families affected by drugs and alcohol.

The Club Drug Clinic <http://clubdrugclinic.cnwl.nhs.uk> help people whose drug habits have started to get out of hand. They can help parents and friends too with understanding the situation and offering support.

The Truth About Drugs - resource for 11-19 year olds www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/documents/digitalasset/dh_126087.pdf

The Independent Scientific Committee on Drugs is a good place to look for objective information on drugs - www.drugscience.org.uk

CASE HISTORY

“When things did all come out in the open, David said that he'd lied because he didn't want to get into trouble and also because he was raging at me for wanting to know 'his business'. He didn't understand that I was worried about legal highs. He just felt that I wanted to feel in control of his every move.”

Mary, 44, from Leeds.

CONSIDER THIS

Horror stories about legal highs use are rarely helpful and can be counter-productive. If someone has used and enjoyed them, or knows someone who has done so without coming to any harm, they will not ring true. If you tell your child that taking legal highs will kill them and they know someone who has taken them, is still alive and had a great time, they aren't going to believe you or you run the risk of undermining everything else you say.

If you feel your child is in with the 'wrong crowd', rather than trying to steer them away from their friends, it is more constructive to be honest about your fears and concerns. Perhaps you can suggest other activities for them and their friends to get involved in.

Be prepared to back up your views. Do you see smoking, drinking or taking an aspirin for a headache in the same way as you see using drugs such as mephedrone, ecstasy and ketamine? If not, how is it different? Can you explain why?

Be prepared to acknowledge that using legal highs is often motivated by pleasure and that their use can lead to enjoyable experiences with friends as well as negative ones.

Think about your own behaviour and example. Knowing the potential dangers of alcohol doesn't stop most of us drinking, and sometimes even overdoing it. Young people often learn from example, so be prepared to talk about your own behaviour and discuss what you do to make sure it doesn't get out of hand.

If you have taken illegal drugs think about telling your children about your experiences, how you avoided dangers and, if it led to problems, why and how you stopped. You could talk about the risks you took and how you feel now. Was it worth it? Would you do it again? Is there anything you know now you wish you'd known then? This will encourage a more open and in-depth discussion.

If you or your friends currently use legal highs or even illegal drugs, think about how best to approach this with your children. Even if you are discreet, there are potential negative consequences involved in breaking the law and unexpected health problems, which are important areas for discussion.

Offer your children advice on staying safe with drugs (including alcohol): encourage them to always look out for one another; drink plenty of water; practice safe sex; and avoid risky situation like busy roads, heights and water when judgement is impaired.

HELP IS AT HAND

If you are concerned that your child or teenager's use of legal highs or club drugs is in danger of becoming problematic then it is better to ask for help rather than waiting until things get out of control. There are drug treatment facilities throughout the UK.

Visit www.talktofrank.com for a directory.

CASE HISTORY

“Billy was a talented 19 year old music student. He began taking legal highs with friends during the summer of 2012 and while his parents were on holiday he spent all his savings on these substances. By the time they returned, he was frightened and felt that he was losing control. Fortunately, he was able to talk to his mum who then approached the Angelus Foundation for help. Billy was referred to the Club Drug Clinic at the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital. Within a few weeks of expert help Billy felt that he could continue with his studies and no longer had the desire to take legal highs as he realised the adverse effect they had on his mental wellbeing.”

Personal Case Study from the Club Drug Clinic.

TALKING CONSEQUENCES

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If your child carries on taking legal highs it is important to make them aware of the possible implications.

Make it clear to your children what you will do if they choose to break the rules. It's vital to do as you say otherwise your children will think you don't really mean it.

HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

Legal highs and club drugs can be extremely dangerous. This does not mean that every time they are taken, they pose a threat but your child should be aware of this.

There have been a number of deaths linked to legal highs, often when mixed with other drugs and/or alcohol.

With such little evidence on the long-term health effects of legal highs, it is vital you stress their potential risks. We simply don't know enough to state for sure that limited use will not lead to problems, potentially further down the line.

Talk about the short and long term health risks associated with drug use.

From a young person's point of view, the negative consequences of using illegal drugs may appear to be few in the short term.

That's why it's important to focus not just on the possible immediate dangers involved in drug use, but also on the potential consequences of long-term use.

Emphasise the link between legal highs and mental health. Some people who have used them, especially when young, have gone on to develop health problems, such as depression or psychosis.

Legal highs can offer bouts of elation and happiness for people who are miserable. But in the longer term, it may become even harder for them to find happiness without the help of drugs, which can lead to dependency.

EDUCATION AND WORK IMPLICATIONS

Many schools exclude students found in possession of legal highs and club drugs. Schools have the power to search students and confiscate items even if they are legal. This means that those found with legal highs may still be dealt with harshly. Teachers are likely to suspect anyone found with a bag of white powder or crystals as being in the possession of drugs, and they will have no way of readily knowing whether a compound is legal or not.

Some employers - including the armed forces, transport companies and some banks - have a policy of random drug testing for all employees. Cannabis users are particularly at risk of testing positive for drugs, as cannabis can stay in the body for some time.

Supplying friends with drugs can be viewed as dealing and could result in having a criminal record. This can limit a person's chances of getting or keeping a job and may even prevent them from travelling to countries like the USA and Australia.

FAST FORWARD

If your child appears not to care about school or work, talking to them about the consequences of throwing it in may not make that much difference. However, talking to them about their aspirations and the kind of life they want may have a bigger impact. Getting them to think about this may help to give them the necessary incentive to continue studying or to stay in their job.

POLICE ACTION

A police officer cannot always tell what a drug is by looking at it. Any young person who is found carrying suspected drugs in the form of powders, crystals, pills or smoking matter will probably be arrested even if they are legal highs.

Under 17s

have to ask a parent or other responsible adult to come to the police station if they are caught in possession of a drug.

Under 18s

caught in possession of any drug will be arrested and taken to a police station. They will have to give a DNA sample (swab from inside of the mouth) and photographed.

If they admit possession, there is a good chance they will receive a reprimand or warning.

18s and over may

may be given a caution (but no fine). This is not the same in law as receiving a warning. It means accepting the offence and getting a criminal record. They will then have to mention this record each time they apply for a job or a travel visa. They may instead get a street warning or a fixed penalty notice, which does not form a criminal record.

Generally it is very rare for someone to be imprisoned for simply possessing a drug.

TALKING TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT LEGAL HIGHS

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The involvement and support of parents and families can make a big difference to someone's health and how they deal with taking legal highs and club drugs. You would probably agree that it can't be right for your child to learn about the subject of legal highs and club drugs from only ill-informed hearsay, drug users, media and movies. Parents can take more responsibility for their children's welfare by learning about the subject and discussing it honestly like you would alcohol or sexual relationships.

Find a time when your child is relaxed and not rushing off somewhere – during or after a family meal, perhaps. It's okay to let your child know that you are concerned about what you have recently learnt about legal highs. Try to encourage an open dialogue so that your child feels comfortable. Remember to let them talk too and even to interrupt you. We hope the following suggestions will help you get started.

Start by saying: "I saw something in the paper recently that worried me. I wanted to discuss it with you to see if you know anything about it. Apparently there are dozens of dangerous substances being sold as 'legal highs'.

Have you heard much about them?

"Apparently many legal highs contain a cocktail of Class B drugs and other chemicals, which were never meant for humans to consume. I've found out that the short term side effects of many of these substances include loss of touch with reality (psychosis), paranoia, depression, suicidal thoughts, panic attacks, palpitations, difficulty breathing and severe nose bleeds.

And it seems no one knows what the long-term health effects are although some can be highly addictive.

How much do you know about the risks of 'legal highs'?"

If your child starts to open up at this point let them talk. You may get a small clue as to whether they have tried them or even an admission so be ready for a frank answer.

Go on to say: "I realise that young people are not going to stop experimenting. But I am worried they don't know what these drugs contain or that they can have serious effects. I know it's easy to feel you have to take something of it's offered to you by a friend. But the truth is they probably don't know what's in it either. Just because something is legal doesn't mean it's safe. Have you ever discussed this at school in drug lessons or with friends?"

Let your teenager answer and tell you what they know. If they look sheepish, it is possible they may already have been experimenting. Try not to appear shocked or angry. Stay calm and let them talk frankly.

TALKING TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT LEGAL HIGHS

Continue along the following lines:

“I also discovered that the contents of each brand often varies from batch to batch so no one really knows what they are taking at any time or the effect that it might have. It must be difficult to say ‘No’ if someone offers you something to try. Some people have even died after taking them or been hospitalised after a night out. But for your own sake and that of your friends – please think twice before trying anything like this. What do you think about the risks?”

Again, give your child time to answer and continue trying to find out what they know and think. If they ask you something to which you don’t know the answer to simply say “That’s a really good question, I hadn’t thought of that”, or tell them you don’t know the answer but will try to find out for them.

Continue: “At this time of your life it’s really not a good idea to experiment with drugs, especially legal highs about which so little is known. Your brain and body are still

developing, which means these substances can be especially dangerous. If you are worried about anything that you are offered please come and talk to me. I really care about you and want you to be safe. I couldn’t bear to lose you or for you to develop mental health problems for what seemed like a bit of harmless fun.”

Give your child time to answer again so that you have an open and frank discussion. Keep it relatively short.

End along the following lines: “I’ll try and find out more about all this so we can talk about it again sometime soon.”

You can also show them the six minute film ‘not what it says on the tin’ which is on the home page of the online resource dedicated to young people www.whynotfindout.org

Based on a script for a ‘wise conversation’ written by the Angelus Foundation Advisory Board and its founder, Maryon Stewart.

STAYING SAFE

10 WAYS TO KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING.

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Make time.

Choose your time carefully and make sure you both have enough time for a relaxed conversation. Make a plan of how you want to start.



Don't preach.

Make sure you don't antagonise your child or sound as if you are simply laying down rules. Your child must feel comfortable about discussing their experiences.



Listen carefully.

Ask open questions, listen to the answers and don't interrupt your child when they are talking. Let them know that you value their opinion.



Make them feel safe.

Make sure you let them know that it is okay to open up to you without being afraid of the consequences. Try to stay calm and relaxed.



Be honest.

Base your conversation on fact and let your child know that you are having these discussions because you care deeply about their wellbeing and that of their friends.



Watch carefully.

Watch their body language -communication is about more than words. If your child looks awkward, they may well be wondering if they have the courage to tell you the truth. Let them know that there are no penalties for doing so.



Be a good role model.

If he/she sees you indulging or drinking to excess it may make them think it's okay to follow your lead. They may also say you are being hypocritical.



Be willing to learn.

Don't assume you know it all - your child may be able to teach you a thing or two about legal highs if approached sensitively.



Make boundaries.

Set guidelines for your child as to how you expect them to behave. And make sure you enforce them so that they know where you draw the line.



Speak to other parents.

If you know your child's friend's parents consider discussing the subject of 'legal highs' so that they are informed too.

DIET
&
EXERCISE
LEGALLY HIGH.

NATURAL WAYS TO GET A HIGH

10

There are lots of ways to help your child feel good naturally. A good diet is vital. Time spent eating, talking and doing things together is important too for creating strong family ties and helping build resilience to drugs.



Give them space.

Encourage your child to do things on their own if they want to, arm them with the knowledge they need and trust that they will stay safe.



Get them moving.

Encourage them to do some sort of regular exercise for perhaps an hour every day. Explain how activity boosts levels of serotonin – the brain's natural happy hormone.



Send them to bed.

Teenagers may not be renowned for early nights but a good night's sleep will give them more energy as well as a better chance of coping positively with the more negative aspects of life.



Eat as a family.

Countless studies show that eating together as a family as much as possible provides stability as well as a forum for discussion and chat.



Talk about diet.

Never stop stressing the importance of a good diet for health. Getting their five a day, eating regularly, not skipping breakfast, keeping sugar and fast foods to a minimum will give them energy and help them stay strong.

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