

Having Conversations About Alcohol and Drug Use Podcast

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0:07 ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Hello, I'm Annmarie McMahonill with the Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University and this is the ParentingMontana.org podcast. In this Parenting Montana.org podcast, we'll be talking about how to have conversations with your child about alcohol and drug use.

DR. ANJALI NANDI

It's incredibly important that we have ongoing conversations with our kids. As parents, we play one of the most important roles in developing their decision making skills and in helping them translate their values into action.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL

I'd like to introduce today's guest, Dr. Anjali Nandil.

Dr. Nandi is an organizational consultant in the human service field. She supports criminal justice agencies, hospitals and medical providers and schools find innovative ways of developing their potential through leadership training, program valuations, skill building, staff wellness and implementation of evidence based practices. She designs and delivers training in the fields of behavior change and addictions throughout the country.

In her clinical work as a bilingual psychotherapist, Dr. Nandi has been the program director of state-licensed out-patient drug and alcohol treatment agencies in Colorado, and for over 20 years has provided individual and group therapies to clients, including adolescents with depression, anxiety, addictions and trauma.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Welcome, Anjali, thanks for being here.

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So having conversations about alcohol, marijuana and other drugs with our children isn't easy. It can be frightening and leave parents feeling overwhelmed and ill equipped. My hope for today is that we can discuss some of the conversations that we should be having with our kids about alcohol and drugs and get specific ideas of what those conversations really sound like. Sometimes we might want one conversation that's as simple as saying, like, "You don't drink or do drugs, do you?" But we know that it really needs to be a lot of conversations. And all of these conversations are seeking to grow skills within our kids. So to begin today, I think, if you want to discuss for a few minutes,

the influence that parents and those in a parenting role have in addressing alcohol and drug use with their kids.

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Yeah, that's so important, because parents plays such an incredibly important role when, uh, growing and maturing their kids. So it's very easy for us as parents to think that we don't matter, that it's really only social media and friends and school, and whatever exposure our kids are getting from the outside world, that that's really where they're learning. And yes, that is true, they are learning from all of these different places, but as parents, we play one of the most important roles in developing their moral compass, in developing their decision making skills, and in helping them translate their values into action.

So it's incredibly important that we have ongoing conversations with our kids, even though sometimes these conversations are incredibly clumsy. I know from personal experience, my conversations are always clumsy with my kiddo, who's a teenager. Uh, and yet, having frequent and ongoing short conversations, with our kids have such an incredible impact on, uh, the decisions that they make, in terms of, uh, drug use in particular, since that's what we're talking about.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I think that it's interesting to think about, you know, coming at it with a bit of a plan, because my conversations too, have been rather clumsy, but I think to have a plan and look for those, for those opportunities, is key. And I think to realize as well, that it's not some other family's issue, like we, it's not about good kids or, or bad kids. It really is conversations for every kind of parent and every kind of child. Is that right?

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Oh, yes, absolutely. And ideally, these conversations are happening, uh, way before they actually need to happen. Meaning, ideally, these conversations are happening, uh, whenever there's a teachable moment. Something shows up on television that's, that sparks this conversation, let's talk with our kids about it. There's something in the media related to, let's say there's a, a DUI incident locally, that makes the news. Let's talk about that. Let's talk, let's use any examples that are just presenting themselves, sort of these teachable moments, let's use those to start these conversations. Because it's, I know this is all so hard to believe, I think as parents, but we have such an influence on our kids because deep down even though our kids will probably not admit this, they don't want to disappoint us.

I mean, occasionally my daughter will even say, you know, "Mom, are you disappointed?" And I'll, I'll say, you know, something like, "Well, you know, I feel really mad about this." And she said to me, and this has happened multiple times, "It's okay if you're mad, I just don't want you to be disappointed with me." So there's something-

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

That's true.

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

... Right? There's something that's really important that we can capitalize about this. But going back to what you said, it is helpful to have some sort of a plan. And by that, I mean, just stems for the conversation, meaning little entry ways into the conversation. So using sort of practiced ways of starting the conversation, and things that we can say to ourselves while the conversation is happening, because these conversations are not easy, and they're triggering for both of us, right? They're triggering for us as parents sometimes, and they're definitely triggering for our kids. So it's really helpful to have a little bit of a plan and to, sort of fundamentally understand, why is it hard, so I can not make it even harder?

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Is there an age when you should start talking? Like, is there an age that's too early, um, for us to really have these conversations with our kids?

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Yeah, I don't think there is an age that's too early. Because whenever kids are getting exposed to this information is when it's, it's time to be talking about it. So if there's somebody who's smoking in the household, for example, then we have that conversation pretty early on. If, there's alcohol in the house, and parties that are happening, it's helpful to have conversations with our kids, particularly when they're asking or they're interested, or before we're having a celebration, it's helpful for both parents to, kind of have a conversation, if there are two parents, to have a conversation about what the expectations are, so that we as parents or guardians are on the same page.

So it's really helpful to have these conversations, no matter what the age, it's just the kind of conversation changes, depending on the age of the kid. So, you know, if, the child is between, let's say, eight and 12, it sounds like a different conversation, versus having a conversation with a teenager versus having a conversation with, you know, a child who's about to drive. So my, my kiddo is almost 16, and she's about to start driving. And our conversations are now a little bit more different, even though we've been having these conversations for years now.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I want to spend today focusing on those conversations, because I think that's the biggest obstacle to get, to really get comfortable with as a parent. But I also want to talk a little bit about the risks. So does the age a person start using alcohol or drugs matter? Like we often say, not until you're 21? But can you speak to that a little bit?

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Absolutely. So I totally geek out on this information. So I apologize in advance if I tell you too much. So the age at which we start using absolutely matters, whether it's drinking or, or using drugs. So, in order to understand why, we have to understand the brain a little bit. And if I oversimplify the brain, our brain is essentially divided into two parts. Uh, we have the, the lizard brain, which technically limbic system, uh, the lizard brain, sort of like our, our gas pedal, this is our impulse, like the center for impulses, risk taking, high emotion, fight, flight, safety, all of that stuff, kind of the reactive part of our brains. We call it the lizard brain.

And then we have the thinking part of our brain, the part of our brain in charge of executive functioning, of decision making, of thinking through the consequences, right, of slowing down. And so that part we call, the wizard, so we have the lizard and the wizard. And interestingly enough, they mature at different times. And by mature, I don't mean that they don't exist before that they absolutely do, it's just their connections are maturing and, and sort of wiring together at different rates. So we tend to wire up our lizard brain, much younger than we wire up our wizard brain.

So our lizard brain is sort of really wired and intact and ready to go, mature around the age of 15. Which means we have a fully functioning gas pedal at the age of 15. But it takes a little longer for our frontal cortex, our wizard brain to fully mature. And our wizard brain fully matures around the age of about 24 to 26.

So we have this period where our brain is maturing at different rates, which means we're prioritizing the maturation of the impulse center of our brain, the gas pedal over them, cognitive sort of slow down, think this through, think through the consequences part of our brain.

So, if we introduce an addition- a substance, right, we introduce alcohol or we introduce drugs, it impacts the development of that brain, such that we prioritize the development of the limbic system, the lizard brain, over the frontal cortex.

So even without drugs and alcohol, our teenagers really have a battle ahead of them, they have a fully functioning gas pedal, but not a fully functioning brake pedal. I don't mean that they're less intelligent in any way, I just mean that their ability to harness the power of problem solving, of thinking through pros and cons, you know, if I do this, what will happen, et cetera, the ability to do that is really, uh, it, it takes several seconds for them to get there, several seconds longer than it takes an adult to get there.

And so, they are more prone to making riskier choices as it is. And then we start to introduce these other substances, which even further impacts the development of the brain, and we end up with sort of this, um, impaired connection between the lizard and the wizard, and, uh, a lesser developed wizard and a more highly developed lizard.

So, um, I know that's sort of a little bit of an oversimplification, but it really matters when you start to introduce substances. So in an ideal world, if somebody were to start using, I would say, let's delay it until 24 or 25, right, so that the frontal cortex has the best shot.

Now I'm not saying that the brain doesn't develop all our lives. I mean, we have a very malleable brain, there's this term called neuroplasticity or malleability of the brain, which really means that we can sort of develop and grow up, continue to grow our brains and

work on them all the way until we die. But this time period is really essential. And so in order to keep our, our kids safe, in order to keep our teens safe, we really try and delay the onset of the use of alcohol or other drugs to keep their brains as healthy and supported as possible.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I love the analogy of a car with a good accelerator and a weak brake. I think that makes a lot of sense to me when I'm thinking about the, the structure of their brains, and answers a lot of questions that I have just generally in parenting, about impulse control. So when we're having like, conversations with our kids, it's, it really can happen just about any time and anywhere. They don't have to be long and serious. I, I remember my parents having, you know, a bit of a talk.

I think the talk I had with me was, you know, "You're not using, are you?" And I was like, "No, I'm not." And they were like, "Okay, good." Um, and so I, I think that when a parent gets started, just what are some things that they need to keep in mind, um, as you start having conversations? Like for me, one of the things I remember is, I need to stop asking questions that have a yes or no answer. Are there any other just tips before we, we even get started?

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Great. Yes. And great learning, Annmarie, right, to, to really avoid those yes, no questions. Because it's a bit of a setup to ask our kids, "You're not using, are you?" Because it's super tough for the kids to say, "Actually, yes, I am." If I phrase it that way. So I need to, to get away from that. And the reason as a parent, I would ask it that way, is because I really want to hear the no answer, right? "Are you, you're not using, are you?" "No." "Phew, my job here is done." Right? That's, as a parent, sometimes that's how I wish the conversation would go. But that's not how it goes. And just to kind of reiterate this point, ideally, these conversations happen regularly on an ongoing basis so they, they don't feel like "the talk", right? It doesn't feel like, oh my gosh. Like sometimes I'll say, uh, to my daughter, can we chat about something? And immediately she'll say, "Oh, my gosh, am I in trouble?" That's her first response, right?

Whereas, if I slide it in, right, just as a matter of course, she tells me all kinds of things. And we have some pretty heavy duty conversations if I'm just q- you know, sneakily sliding it into whatever is going on in the moment. I have to admit a lot of these conversations are in the car because I have, you know, she's captive there with me. We're not staring at each other, we're kind of looking forward. So even if she has an embarrassed face on or she's rolling her eyes or whatever she's doing, right, we, we're not sort of confronting or right in front of each other, which is really helpful, and we have no place to go. I mean, we're both buckled in, here we go.

So, a lot of these conversations for me happen in the car, uh, however, ideally, they happen on an ongoing basis. And ideally, they're precipitated by something happening in our natural world, right? There's some teachable moment that picks up, or, if you do

want to have sort of a serious sit down planned conversation with your child, there are several ways to kind of start that conversation.

And ideally, particularly if they're between the ages of eight and 12, ideally, it starts with some open questions just to find out what they know. So the question might sound like, you know, "There's so much information out there about alcohol and drugs, and you probably know so much more than I do, because you're probably getting so much stuff from school. Tell me what you do know about alcohol and drugs." Or let's say you're just worried about drugs. "Tell me what you do know about drug use." And just start there. Ask the question and wait.

Just be quiet and listen. And don't take their first answer as the answer. So you could follow up with, and what else is there? Or, right, tell me more, or any of those kinds of questions that just gather more info. Because particularly our teens, maybe not so much the eight to 12. But, when they get into their teenage years, their answers tend to be something like, "Well, not much. I don't know. I don't know what you're asking. That's too broad of a question." Right? Those sometimes can be the answers.

So we have to play a little bit with the style of questioning, and you all know your kids best. So the caution I would say is, avoid closed questions, meaning, yes, no questions, and really go for the open question. Be comfortable with the silence and the discomfort and work hard to keep yourself, you as the parent, me as the parent, work hard to keep myself in check. So that I'm not having a reaction.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Let's talk about establishing rules, because that seems to be an important conversation for parents to have. So do parents create alcohol and drug use rules? Or do they get their child's input? So you know, what are, what are important things that parents need to remember here?

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Yeah, both. So, uh, our kids absolutely need clarity around structure and boundaries. Being clear about boundaries and structure helps reduce anxiety, it helps the kid know what they can push up against, that there is something to push up against. And it helps them know what the lines are, which is really helpful. Now it is our child's job to push up against those boundaries. So please don't think that when you set a boundary, your kid is just going to obey. In fact, if they just obey, be worried, something else is going on.

So, they are going to push up against the boundaries. And our job when they push up against it is to be consistent and say, "I hear you, and this is still the boundary." Right?

Now, if you recognize that your boundary was a bit much, like my daughter went out for one of her first parties, I set an 11:00pm curfew, all right. 11:00pm. And she said, "Mom, there's no way, right? I need to, I have to get a ride back, et cetera. You're not picking me up." Because they were all organizing rides. And she said, "How can I tell people that I need to be home at 11:00pm when they're giving me the ride and their curfew was 1:00am?" And I said "Well then in that case, I'm coming to pick you up, right? This is the boundary." And so she said, "Okay." And I went and picked her up and you know,

brought her back, and then in retrospect realized that it would probably have been a good negotiation point for me to have given her a little bit more time.

So if that is the case, right, when we set boundaries, have that conversation out loud with your child about why you are changing the boundary. Don't just change it and not talk to them, because then they will think that your boundaries don't matter. So if you set a boundary A, and they push up against it, and you recognize that it should be B, don't just, you know, scoot to B, without saying anything. Make sure they understand what are the values that are driving that.

So back to your original question, Annmarie, it's both. We do set negotiables and non-negotiables, right? We're clear about what the non-negotiable is, they get input in terms of the negotiables. So an example is, do not get in the car, if the driver is intoxicated or high, right? That is a non-negotiable. The negotiable is, you know, calling me, calling your dad, calling an Uber, right? We can discuss that, we can discuss what that looks like, it's even negotiable that you don't tell me who the friend is who's intoxicated, or, or high, maybe, right? So we can negotiate around those things, but we are clear about what the non-negotiables are. So as parents, we need to be clear about that. And then, you know, help ... Get, get the kid's input into what we can negotiate about.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So you mentioned curfew, which would be negotiable, and the not riding in a car, what are some other examples of rules that parents could have? Reasonable rules that parents could have.

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

So these are so dependent on the family and the family's values. So, I can share with you my suggestions, but it is really important that these be driven, thoughtfully driven by your family and your family's values. Because what you don't want to have happen is you say one thing, but then you behave in a different way, right? Because then you're giving your kid mixed messages, which absolutely destroys your integrity, and it destroys your child's, uh, willingness to follow through with whatever rules you've put in place, because you don't follow those rules, right? So it's really important that we get clear and are willing to follow through and, and sort of give clear messages around what those look like.

It's really important that whatever your rules are, they reflect your family values that you've talked about it, and that you're sharing with your child, why this is so important. Children do not respond well, when we set rules without providing the why. And because I said so, unfortunately, it doesn't work. Right? We have to be able to come up with the, the value that's driving that particular rule. So being able to have conversations, right, with our kids about that is incredibly important.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So what would a conversation about rules sound like?

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Yeah. So, let's say there is an event coming up. Um, you know, your child is going, your teenager is going to a party with her friends, let's just say. And so in anticipation of that, as a parent, I have to think through, "Okay, what are all the rules that I need to come up with?" And I start that conversation by saying, "Okay, tell me about this party. Where are you going? What are you doing? You know, whose house are you going to be in? You know, whose numbers do I have? Whose numbers do I not?"

I mean, for me, one of the rules that I have with my kid is when she's at somebody's house, I have the number of the parent and the kid. And this embarrasses the heck out of my daughter, right? She hates that I do this. But I insist on having telephone numbers.

We also have, and maybe people on this call will think I'm a ridiculous parent. But on our phones, we have an app called Life360. I am not terribly fancy. And so I don't have an iPhone. I believe on iPhones, you have an a- there's like, Find My Friends or something like that, where you can know where other people are. I'm not fancy. So I have this app called Life360. And our rule is, she cannot turn her location permissions off. That's the rule, she turns them off, the phone's gone. Right?

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

That makes sense.

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Another thing about rules is that, if you have a rule, you need to have a consequence that you are willing to follow through with, no matter how much it breaks your heart. There are times it totally breaks my heart to follow through, but we have to follow through so that our kids know that the rules mean something. So if she turns her location permission off, you know, phone's gone, right? And lucky for me, my child does not go anywhere without her phone. Because if it were me, I don't really care about my phone. If I wanted to get away with something, I'd leave my phone somewhere and head, right, and head out.

But lucky for us, they are attached to their phone. So the conversation about rules sounds first, like gathering information. Right?

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Okay.

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

That's the, kind of the first step. So we gather information about whatever the situation is, we then say, "Okay, you know, this is your first party or your third party, or whatever it is, let's talk about curfew." And so we set a curfew rule, we set a rule around, how are you getting there and how are you getting back? All of these conversations, what they

convey to the kid, one, at least to my kid, that I'm a very annoying parent. And I want her to think that, I want her to know that this is important to me, that I am annoying, that I'm involved in her life. Because kids who feel like their parents are involved, try and get away with less than kids who feel like their parents are not involved, right?

So it's sort of something that we're just trying to do. We're asking a lot of these questions, and then we start to put in and negotiate around whatever these rules are.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Sure.

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

And then if the child does not follow through, start by saying, "What happened?" Right? Even if their excuse is brilliant, you still have to follow through with whatever the, the, uh, the consequence is that you all talked about, but do pay attention to asking what happened. Because it's important for us as parents to understand our child's way of thinking, right? What is going through their brains? How are they thinking, it's such a beautiful window into what they're missing. So it allows us as parents to kind of target some of our conversations with them when we find out, you know, what, what happened? Sometimes it's, as simple as well, we were late because we stopped to get gas. Right? And so we can brainstorm. So how do we prevent that in the future, et cetera?

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I like that you're always looking for opportunities to build, to build skills.

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Yes.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I think that parents can feel guilty about their own alcohol use, either currently or when they were young. So how would you have a conversation, if your child asked if you drank and, or used drugs? Does it make you a hypocrite if you drank when you were a kid, but you are the annoying parent that has all of these rules and logical consequences now?

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

So, I think different parents will choose different paths around this. My recommendation is always to be honest with as much information as you're willing to share. I mean, our kids don't need to know all the details of what we were involved in. But I would be honest and I would talk about the consequences, I would talk about the impact. And I would say, "I know that maybe there's a part of you that thinks I'm a hypocrite. And here's why I am asking you to do something different than I did. Here's what I'm worried about." Right?

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

What would that sound like?

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

So, you know, let's say that my kid asks, "You know, well, you know, how old were you when you started drinking?" And, and let's say I say, "You know, honestly, I went to a party when I was 16." And I'm, I'm just gonna make up something here.

I went to a party when I was 16 and I got really drunk and I really regretted it. Because I put myself in such a scary situation, I did not know what was going on, I wasn't safe. And a lot of bad stuff could have happened to me. And I'm so lucky that it didn't. And I know I'm sounding like a hypocrite when I say it's not okay for you to drink, even though you are 16 and I drank, because I'm so worried about your safety, and your safety is paramount to me. That is my job. One of my jobs as a parent is to keep you safe. So ask me questions, ask me more questions around it, because I, I want us to be on the same page about this."

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

We've always taken that position to tell the truth as well, within parameters. It's a great place for me to be able to reflect back and, and, and talk to them about the risk or talk to them about things we didn't know or, or didn't come up about our brains and our brain development. And above all, I think, for, to be able to say because I care about you, is always a place that I can start and end with when I have those conversations with my, with my kiddos.

What about, is it valuable to talk about any history of addiction in your family? Is that important? And if so what, what would that sound like?

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Yes, it is very important to talk about family history of addiction for a variety of different reasons. One of the reasons to talk about family history of addiction is because when we have a family history of addiction, it increases, uh, the likelihood, uh, that we might get addicted to substances, if we do use, it doesn't determine it's not a predetermination. So I wanna be really clear about this. If my parents, uh, suffered from addiction, it doesn't mean I'm going to, because I could just decide never to use again, right, and never develop an addiction.

So, there's no determination, it just increases the likelihood, right? It increases the likelihood. And so, what it means is that I just have to be even more careful than the average bear. So this is no different than if, as a family, we had a family history of cardiac issues. So let's say we all had a family history of heart disease, and we had to be pretty careful with our blood pressure, with how we eat, et cetera.

As a family, of course, we're gonna be talking about this right? Nobody would hesitate to say, "Look, you know, grandpa died of a heart attack when he was, you know, 50, and

your uncle died when he was 50. And so around the age of 50 is where, uh, you know, we, we really start to, all of these symptoms come together and, and we essentially lose lives. And so we have to start being so careful, around, you know, whatever it is, exercise, eating, et cetera, managing salt, whatever."

We have no problem having those conversations. And yet, when we start to talk about addiction, suddenly we have all kinds of problems talking about it. And yet, it's so similar, right? Because it increases the likely ... I know there's so much stigma around addiction and which is so unfortunate. And that's a whole other podcast, I think, that we can, we can talk about it in a different time. But it's very important to talk about family history, around addiction, and to not over exaggerate the consequences, either. Because I think our kids can sniff that out, right?

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Yes.

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

The whole, like, "Oh my gosh, this is the worst thing in the world, and it's gonna kill you and all of that." Uh, they, they not only will dismiss that, they'll dismiss everything else that we've said. So, don't over exaggerate the consequences either.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

How might a parent talk about ways to avoid peer pressure when it comes to alcohol or drugs? Like what, what would that conversation sound like?

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Yeah, ideally, we're having that conversation on a regular basis, not just about alcohol and drugs, but about all kinds of things. Because our kids get pressured into sex, into bullying each other, into engaging in behaviors that they normally wouldn't. So peer pressure is a huge place to have conversations. And I do a lot of sneaky role plays with my, with my kid. And by that I mean, she'll say something like, "Oh, uh, you know, such and such person was vaping in the bathroom." All right? "At, at school. Such and such person was vaping in the bathroom at school." And so it gives me a really cool entry point. And I start to think, "Okay, you know, what all can I focus on? Should we talk about vaping? Should we talk about peer pressure?" Like so many things we can talk about.

I know I get overexcited. And so very calmly, like I, I try not to show her that I'm terribly excited. And you know, she's kind of blasé, a typical teen. So, you know, I try that as well. And I say, "Oh, so, you know, did you join, whoever she says?" And she'll look at me and she'd say, "No, of course I didn't." And that's my entry. I say, "So what if the person said, oh, come on, Caitlin, you know, try, just, just try, you know, a little bit. Like, don't, don't be such a wimp, et cetera. What would you say?" And so then she has to work on her response.

And this is important, because the more she can work on the response with me, in practice, what we're doing is, we're laying down neural connections, of saying no, of managing peer pressure. And the more we practice it in a safe environment, the greater the likelihood that she will use it when she's faced with an actual stressful situation.

So what we're doing essentially is teaching pathways in the brain to say no, practicing it a ton. So that it's really easy in a stressful situation. It's the same thing we do with skills, any skills, right, driving or how we respond to, you know, when we, uh, encounter ice on the road, or whatever it is, we try to the best of our ability to practice so that when things are stressful, it comes really naturally. And that's what we're doing. So peer pressure is one of those places that we can practice so, so much.

The other piece around peer pressure is, any time you hear your kid saying no to somebody else, and managing peer pressure, uh, give them a ton of praise. Notice it. "Wow, I just noticed you said no, good work." Or, let's say in the family, somebody is pressuring them to do something right? "Oh, come on, play this game." "No, I don't want to play this game. No, I don't want to." Notice that, "Hey, good job, you know, not succumbing to peer pressure here." Right? So just name the skill, the more we name it, the firmer those neural connections become in our brain. And the greater the likelihood that they're going to use those, those skills.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I love that. I love the continuous practicing with me, especially when she doesn't think that I'm building her skills around alcohol and drug use. That, that is the best parenting victory for me is when I feel like I've won one over on her. And I, I, I got to open the door, walk through the door that she opened, that, those are exciting, exciting times for me. But I approach it very coolly, of course.

So we've talked a little bit about a parent's role, and about some of the risks, and a bit about establishing rules. Is there anything that I have not asked you that I should have?

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Maybe that all of these conversations are tough, right? Whether it's talking about alcohol and drugs, or talking about peer pressure. Ideally, we are constantly creating safe spaces for our kids to have conversations with us. Not just about drugs and alcohol, but about their mental health, about their physical health, about their worries, their anxiety, their fear, whatever's going on, to constantly create safe spaces for conversation. And I think that piece is really critical for them to know that no matter what, they can come and talk to us about whatever is going on.

And in order for us to do that, we need to convey to them that we have the ability to have a non-judgmental response. Which is tough, right? We have to really manage our stuff, in order to kind of be non-judgmental and just listen and not problem solve. I cannot tell you how many times my daughter has said to me, "Don't solve my problem, mom. Just listen." Right? So that we can just be a good listening place. And that we can ask, I frequently will ask, "Are you, you know, do you just want me to listen or do you

want me to help you fix this?" And frequently, she'll say, "Can you just listen?" So I think that piece is incredibly important.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I love that. I agree, there is safe space for conversation in, in so many areas. I, I think I have a difficult time sometimes as a parent being silent. But I think that when you can do that, too, and they start to talk, just, those beautiful doors open, and it's fun to watch that happen when they trust you and they can come with even awkward situations.

So a couple of strategies, like helping them work on peer pressure, and doing the sneaky practicing is, is one strategy too that we can use to make sure that our kids aren't using, but monitoring is another. And so if we could talk a little bit about monitoring our kids' activities. And that it doesn't mean that you don't trust them, or you don't care about them. But what are some ways that parents can effectively monitor their kids?

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Yeah, it's a great question. I mean, Life360 is only scratching the surface, right? In terms of (laughing), in terms of monitoring. So the biggest piece, bigger than anything, is be interested in your kids lives, even when they brush you off. Now, I'm really lucky that my child talks, she talks a lot, especially if I'm quiet, she'll talk a lot. I have hung out with some of her friends who don't, who are not, you know, as willing, as, as forthcoming. And so hang in there with the silence with them, and ask little questions, and do activities with them so their hands are busy, and then continue to ask the questions.

It seems that there are some folks who, when they're walking or when they're doing a puzzle, or when they're cooking, or when they're, you know, engaged in some other thing, they're able to talk a little bit more, they feel a little safer. So, be interested in your child. And by that, I mean, ask. So let's say, you know, I, I keep using this example, but let's say they're gonna go out somewhere, they're gonna go out to watch a game or whatever it is, before they go, ask them where are they going, who they're going with? What are they looking forward to? You know, what time are they gonna be home? Like all of those things.

When they're out, if it's a long period of time, check in with them occasionally, how are things going? That's another rule that my daughter and I have. This is a little bit silly, that when I text her that she needs to text me back, right? That's why she has her phone. And if she were the kind of person who wasn't really phone oriented, it wouldn't be that big of a deal. But my kid checks her phone quite a lot. That's, that's the way she stays in touch with all of her friends. So, I know that she knows, and sometimes I can even see that she's read my message. Right? So then I'm-

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

... hmm, this is interesting, you're not responding to me what's going on, right? So perhaps I sound a little overbearing, so take me with a grain of salt. Check in occasionally, and then when they come back, be interested in what happened. How did it go? If your kid says, "Fine." You say, "Say more about that?" Right? "I don't know, it was okay." "Well, you were excited about blabbity blah, how did that go?" "Fine." "Okay, here's my challenge for you, you get two more fines, and then two, come up with more than one word, right?"

So sometimes you have to play a little, few games with them, and it only takes a few times before they know that you are serious about them sharing this information with you. Also model sharing information with them. So when they ask you, how's your day, don't say, fine. Because then you're conveying a really interesting message. Right? So when my daughter asked me about my day, I tell her about my day, and I share some of it. And then occasionally, she'll sort of respond to parts of my day, and I'll use those as you know, ways to get an insight into her day as well. So sort of prioritizing those conversations. Just be, be interested.

And, avoid making assumptions about what happened or what may have happened, and don't always think you've understood what your kid has told you. So it's really important that when they talk, keep the focus on them, don't shift the focus to you. So that might sound something like, you know, "How did it go?" "Oh, it was great. You know, such and such, uh, team won." You shift the focus by saying, "Oh, yeah, you know, when we played volleyball, we were, you know, our state champs." Right? You've just now shifted the focus to, to, to you.

So keep the focus, "Oh, say more about that. Who played? Who got to, you know, serve? And, uh, what did you think about how so, such and such person played, et cetera?" So you can get involved in that way. So try not to make assumptions about what happened, and then really, you should have, keep the focus on, on them. And then the last piece, and I'm sorry, I go on and on, I get so excited about this stuff.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

And it's great.

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

The last piece is, anytime they're doing something, right, reinforce it, like go nuts. Because it's so important that we affirm or celebrate, maybe is a better word, when they do things right. Our jobs are not to catch them doing things wrong, catch them doing it, right, reinforce it, say, "Oh, my gosh, thank you for coming back on time, right, great job. Look at that." So appreciate it. And I go be- a little beyond that and I say, "This is what helps build trust. So that when you're even older, you know, and you ask for a later curfew, it's these things that allow me to say, yes, then." So you know, it's, these kind of helpful sort of moments to really reinforce values, reinforce rules.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So let's say I'm in a situation where now they're home, and I've asked about the time away, and we've had the opportunity to chat. What if I'm in a situation where I feel like they had been drinking or using drugs? What ... Where do I go here? What do I need to keep in mind? And how do you start that conversation?

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Yeah, so the first thing is, when that happens, don't pretend like it didn't happen, and that it'll just quietly go away. Don't provide any excuses for it. But it's really important, because it's such an opportunity that we stay pretty calm. And so if you need a few minutes before having this conversation, take a few minutes. If you need to chat with your partner before having this conversation, go do it or call somebody, you know, phone a friend. "What do I do, I'm so mad right now?" Do whatever you need to do, because this is an opportunity, and we can blow it, right? We can really blow it if we come in too, too strong.

So lots of ways to start this conversation. Uh, you can start it with things like, "You know, I'm worried that you may have been drinking at this party. And I know that your first response is going to be no. So I want you to just take a minute, and it's okay, we'll talk through it. I want to give you the opportunity to be able to share with me what happened." And stop talking.

And if they respond to you with, I don't know what you're talking about, I didn't drink, you're always thinking that I'm ... right, they escalate, right? You stay calm. And you say, "I totally hear you, it doesn't sound like you're in a place that we can have this conversation. And I completely respect that. When you're ready, we'll come back to this conversation." Or, "Let's come back to this conversation in a couple of hours." Right? And walk away. It's, it's okay. Because what you've conveyed is, I saw it, I noticed it, and I want to talk about it.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

And you can give the space to come, to come back.

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

What, what would be an appropriate logical consequence at that place? So your kid did, now what?

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

It could be so many things. So, when we talk about logical consequences, or consequences in general, ideally, the consequence needs to somehow match what

happened and it needs to be connected to the behavior, it also needs to matter to the person.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

So if it doesn't, I ... A consequence is not a consequence, if I take something away that they didn't really care about, right? Or if I should have, make them do something that feels kind of disconnected. Also, the consequence ideally comes pretty quickly right after the behavior so it's not, you know, a week later or a month later.

So it depends. The consequence could be, "You know, one of the agreements that we had was that you will not drink when you go out, given that you just drank when you went out, it's very hard for me to trust you when you're going out. So you're going to have to rebuild that trust, and therefore, either you can't go out or you go out, but you have a shorter period of time, like a, you know, a shortened curfew, or terribly embarrassing, I come with you, right?" I mean, what, what teenager? I think my daughter would rather lock herself in her room.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Yeah. I agree.

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

So, speaking of which, a consequence that I never provide my teen is, go to your room. Because that for her is not a consequence, that is a gift. Right? She-

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Right.

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

... loves spending time in her room.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Yes.

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

So I never send her to her room, her consequence sometimes is, "You get to hang out in the family room with me, you get to do dishes with me, you get to, you know, whatever it is." But I tend not to use like "go away" as a consequence.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Sometimes I think parents struggle with providing a consequence that ultimately affects them. So, I'm taking the car keys, which now means I have to drive you to school and to practice. Can you speak to that a little bit?

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Yeah, this is where I think our values need to drive whatever our consequence is. So for me, if I said, "I'm taking the car keys, now you have to figure out how you get places." Or, "If I have to drive you places, you have to pay me, just like you would pay an Uber or, you know, you'd have to pay for gas, whatever." That's part of the consequence. So if you're not allowed to drive, and I have to do extra work for you, then you need to pay me and if you don't have the funds to pay me, then you pay me in chores. So you pay me in some additional work that I give you.

I think as parents, we automatically assume that we have to do certain things for our kids, which we may not have to. I mean, here's the, I think it becomes a little difficult. So, let's say the consequence is you are grounded, but you need to go to piano lesson. And the kid hates piano lesson. They're like, "Yes, grounded, don't get to go to piano." Right? So we have to figure those kinds of things out, it needs to be a consequence for them, not so much for me.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

That makes sense. I wanna come back to what we talked about earlier, in that we were talking about, um, we should have many conversations about drugs and alcohol and they should naturally occur. Let's talk about some of those opportunities when that happens. So for example, you had mentioned that a parent could have a conversation about drugs and alcohol and the way that they're portrayed in the media. What, what would that sound like?

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Yeah, so let's say something shows up in the media and you know, there's a picture of, I don't I'm making things up here. There's a picture of somebody who we really look up to engaging in risky behavior. Great opportunity to have a conversation to say something like, "What do you think is going on? What do you think the message is here? What do you think might be happening for them? What's okay about this and what's not okay, right?" You could even say, "Gosh, it really bothers me that they did this. Any guesses about why?" Ask your kid, right? "Why do you think this bothers me?"

And if your kid rolls their eyes and says, "It bothers you, because you think that they're modeling bad behavior." And, you know, kind of gives you a snarky, that's amazing. Yes. If they can articulate what our values are, even though there's a bundle of snark that comes with it, that is okay, right? It's, well, it's still a win.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

It is a win. It is a win that she can say it back to me, I think and I'm smiling through the snark even though that she might not see that on my face. What about, the media

sends a lot of mixed messages that our parents, you know, we have to wade through those. What about conversations about how we use alcohol as adults? How would you have a conversation about our children seeing us use alcohol?

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Yeah, have those conversations. My daughter's asked me before, why is it okay ... We have this conversation about bedtime, or at least we used to. Now I feel like I go to bed before she does. But when she was much younger, she would say, "Why is it that you get to go to bed at blabbity blah time and I have to go, go to bed at 8:00pm, right?" And we would have those conversations. We'd have the conversation about, I, I would never say, "Well, because I'm the adult, right?" That's only part of it. Yes, I'm the adult but what does that mean?

I'm the adult, and therefore, my need for sleep is different, or my brain has developed in a way that me drinking right now has a much less impact on me than it does on, on you. That your brain is so precious. And this is such an important time for us to really sort of support you and keep you safe and all of those things. That for me, a drink, one drink has a big difference than you having one drink at your age, your size, like all of that.

So use those. Whenever your kid pushes back about those, use those as opportunities to have these conversations to be able, to be able to articulate it. Now let's say you do have too many. And you wake up with, you know, you wake up not feeling so good. Or, uh, your partner has too many, and now you're suffering the consequences of your partner behaving in a way that's, you know, really not okay, talk about that. Don't pretend like it didn't happen. Talk about those things, because those, uh, help normalize for kids what's okay and what's not okay.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So we're not asking parents to abstain from alcohol, but rather just being aware of their own attitudes and behaviors and looking for opportunities to have conversations around those?

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Exactly. You know, interestingly enough in the research, it's not parents who abstain from alcohol and drugs whose kids don't use. So, I just want to be clear that that's understood, that as a parent, I don't have to abstain in order to help my kid not drink and drug. What seems to predict them not using or at least not using problematically is if we have ongoing conversations with them, whether or not we use. So that's the key. It doesn't, it matters less if I use or abstain, it matters more that we're having the conversations about why.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

That makes sense. And so, our conversations don't end as our kids get older. I'm thinking about, in my mind as we're talking, a, a lot of what I've been reflecting on is my 13 year old, but my son's 20. And so, you know, next year, it's going to be legal for him

to drink. And I really want to make sure he has the skills to be safe. And hopefully, a lifetime of irritating conversations with his mother has prepared him to do that. But what are your thoughts on conversations and growing skills, as kids are transitioning to adulthood?

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Yeah, so this is such an important year, right? He's going to be 21 soon and having those conversations. Have conversations about that. You will be pressured into going out drinking, when you turn 21. What's that going to look like for you? Just go into the conversation, assuming that he's gonna drink.

And if he doesn't drink, if he says to you, "you know, why are you making that assumption? I'm not gonna, you know, go out drinking." Awesome. But don't start the conversation with, you're not going to go out drinking when you're 21, are you?" Right? You, because you don't wanna sort of goose the conversation the wrong way.

"So you know, you're going to be pressured into drinking, tell me what that's gonna look like for you." "I, I don't know." "Well, frequently, people will, you know, get pretty intoxicated. How do you know ... What's your limit? How do you know that you're hitting your limit? How do you know when enough is enough? When we start drinking, it's really hard to stop. And when we start drinking, one of the first things that gets impaired is our judgment. So, what kinds of things are you going to have around you? What kinds of supports are you going to have around you to make sure you don't get into trouble? What things are you going to do in advance in order to make sure that nobody drives home drunk?" Have all of these conversations way before so that he's prepped going into it.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I love that. And I, I think he would appreciate that. And with a lifetime of conversations, I think he'd be open to that too and to thinking through that.

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

And those conversations continue even when they get older. I mean, just because they turn 21 or, you know, what, whatever the magic age is, it doesn't mean we're no longer the parents. You know, they're 24, and they start drinking, and you know, for whatever reason, alcohol becomes a really important part of their lives, and they develop an addiction, we're absolutely having a conversation, right, even before, during, after. So these conversations don't end. They just, they just continue, they, they morph.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). As they get older. That makes sense. Let's, let's talk a few minutes about, having conversations with other adults in our lives. So we've spent a good portion of time talking about what this sounds like with our kids. Any advice when you and your parenting partner are not on the same page?

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Yeah. So, I mean, the first piece, I would say is, have the conversation with your parenting partner about these issues, and talk about if you're not on the same page. It is okay not to be on the same page, as long as you're agreeing on how that is communicated to your child. It is also okay to say to your child, "Look, me and your whoever it is, your, your mom, your dad, your guardian, whoever, right, your other person, we think differently about this, here's how I think about it." The other partner says, "Here's how I think about it. What we do agree on is that your safety is of utmost importance. And so, you know, here's the narrow window that we're giving you, me from this ends, your, you know, the other person from this other end."

And so we're having those conversations, so that the kiddo knows that you both are not pretending. Because the last thing you want is for the other parenting partner to say, "Well, your mom made that rule." Because as soon as that happens, now we have a triangle, right? You have, you have one person who's holding the boundary, another person who's saying, "No it's that bad person's fault that we're holding the boundary." And you have the kid caught in the middle. So you really don't wanna have that happen.

So it's okay, if you're not on the same page, to talk about why, make sure you can, you have whatever the agreement is underneath. So by that I mean, we frequently disagree about whatever stances that we take, but we do agree about some of the more core issues. So, my parenting partner and I absolutely agree that the safety of our child is important, right? There's no disagreement about that. There might be disagreement about, you know, what age somebody can drink, or whatever it is. So we, we kind of get clear about what we're on the same page about what we're not on the same page about, and communicate that and communicate a clear boundary. We have to agree on whatever the expectations are that we're providing the child. That's where, that's the place of agreement.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I appreciate that. And I love coming to that. Just boiling it down to that spot of, we both want your safety, we both want our child's safety. That makes sense. I have some other questions just about, talking about other adults in our lives. And so, what are some things that a parent could say when another adult felt that teen drinking was a rite of passage? Like they're gonna do it anyway, let kids be kids. What are some things that I can say to another adult in that situation?

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Yeah, that's a great question. So it depends on who the adult is, right? If it's my parenting partner, who also gets to establish rules and consequences in the house, then that conversation is really important to have all the way. So if my parenting partner says something like, "Uh, well, kids will be kids, they're gonna drink anyway." Don't take that at face value, okay? So what does that mean? If they're gonna drink anyway, what do we need to put in place so that they're safe if they do drink? How much is enough?

What is okay? What are we willing to go with? What are we not willing to go with? Where can we compromise and come to, you know, come to some kind of an agreement, so that we're having that conversation?

If it's somebody who's one step removed, maybe it's an aunt or an uncle or a, you know, grandparent or whatever, and they say, "Kids will be kids." Anytime things like that happen, I immediately make eye contact with my kiddo. Sometimes it is completely inappropriate for me to have a conversation about that in the moment for a variety of different reasons, but I make sure that my kid knows that I heard it, and we're going to talk about it. Sometimes she's on to me. Sometimes she like avoid my, avoid me, avoid my eye contact, in which case, I walk around and I tap her on the shoulder or I squeeze her or something, because she knows, "Oh, something's happened."

And it's a way to mark, okay, we are going to talk about this. And then we talk about it. "You know, grandpa said, blabbity, blah, what do you think about that, right? Kids will be kids, blabbity blah, what do you think about that?" Because I want her to, to know that these things don't just pass us by they are opportunities for us as a family to talk.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

What if we hear an adult say that it's better to teach them how to drink before they turn 21? What's a response that a parent could give?

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Yeah, it's a great question. Frequently, people think that if we teach people how to drink, um, that they will be more responsible. And that's like saying, um, that we allow them to engage in pretty risky behavior, before we've actually taught them the rules of the game. So I would say that, let's back up and actually talk way before that. The way we teach people how to drink is by talking about the impact on the brain by talking about what's okay and what's not okay, by talking honestly, about the good stuff, and the not so good stuff, right?

In my conversations, I definitely include why people do engage in drugs and alcohol. I never provide just a one sided conversation, but I also talk about risk. And that's how we prepare people to drink. It's not by them drinking, right?

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Yes.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So thank you so much for taking the time today and, and being here. I appreciate it very much.

DR. ANJALI NANDI:

Oh, it was absolutely my pleasure. Thank you.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I've heard today that parents play a crucial role in their teens' decisions not to use alcohol and drugs. The key to this and many parenting challenges is finding ways to have conversations with your child. These conversations are an investment to build skills your child needs to be successful.

For more information on having conversations about alcohol and drug use, check out some of the tools for the age of your child, specifically “establishing rules about alcohol” and “establishing rules about marijuana” along with multiple resources found within the risky behaviors tab of the I wanna know more section of the website. Thank you for joining us today and keep checking back for additional podcasts, tools and resources being continuously added to Parenting Montana.org.

59:12 VOICEOVER

The ParentingMontana.org podcast is produced by the Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University in collaboration with the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Service and is brought to you by the Offices of Child Care, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and Montana Department of Public Health and Human Service.

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Thanks for listening to the ParentingMontana.org podcast.

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