

Prevention's Not-So-Secret Weapon: YOU

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It's [National Drug Facts Week](#), and we're partnering with NIDA and other national organizations to shatter the myths about teen drug abuse. Drug Facts Week is about educating parents and teens alike using just that: the facts.

Recently, *The Today Show* aired the Navy's [dramatic new PSA](#) warning against the synthetic drug "bath salts." My first reaction to the video was, "Whoa!" It shows a user whose hallucinations escalate to the point where he has to be restrained by doctors—and the portrayal hit me on a visceral level. But it also begs the question, "Do scare tactics like this actually work to prevent drug abuse?"

The video's graphic content makes sense when we consider its intended audience: young men in the Navy. We're talking about military personnel who are used to seeing graphic scenes. So, if you want to send them a message, you can't soft-shoe it; you have to give it to them straight up. The PSA dramatically shows how bath salts affect the user's interactions with his girlfriend and roommate. Interestingly, we don't see anyone in uniform. The video appeals to other critical areas of sailors' lives, which may make it more effective.

Still, I had to wonder about about teens who hear about bath salts in the media and may have peers who are using: Would a video like this motivate them to steer clear of the drug? Research has shown that scare tactics produce mixed results among adolescents and young adults. According to [NIDA](#), some teens respond positively to these types of messages; they commit (or re-commit) to staying drug-free. Others dismiss such prevention messages as exaggerated or "over the top." NIDA argues that teens "know when they're being manipulated," and science-based facts about drugs are a stronger motivator than fear.

But regardless of whether scare tactics are valuable, they're certainly not sufficient. As a family therapist who works with teens and adults, I privilege the power of connectedness over any other prevention strategy. Teens are very responsive when adults set boundaries and give clear, unambiguous messages, coupled with being involved their

kids' lives. Caregivers who use relational leverage can have a tremendous impact. However, parents often tell me they don't know how to broach the subject of drugs with their kids. Here are four recommended tactics:

1. **Turn life experiences into teachable moments.** For example, if a teen saw the bath salts PSA on TV, a parent could take the opportunity to say, "That was really extreme. What did you think?"
2. **Be informed.** If you're worried about a particular drug like bath salts, do a little research. Get educated about the risks so you can accurately present them to your kids and answer their questions. [The Partnership at Drugfree.org](#) has some terrific resources for parents.
3. **Emphasize care and concern.** Discuss the [science of brain development](#) and explain why drugs are particularly dangerous for young people.
4. **Make expectations clear.** Be warm and supportive, but set limits. [A large study](#) of over 100,000 students found that when caregivers did not condone drug use and sent unequivocal messages, adolescents were significantly less likely to use illicit substances, get in a fatal drunk-driving accident, or suffer other negative consequences.

Many parents feel powerless to combat the barrage of drug-related images teens see in their daily lives—on TV, in the movies, or in school. But the fact is that media messages, whether positive or negative, influence teen behavior far less than the words of caring adults. The most powerful prevention tool is you.

Kim Sumner-Mayer
Senior Advisor, Center on Addiction and the Family
Phoenix House

If you or a loved one needs help for substance abuse, call us today at 1-800-378-4435 or [send us an email](#).