

Children and Smoking: A Message to Parents



**American Heart
Association**



Each year cigarette smoking contributes to the deaths of over 300,000 people in the United States. Almost two-thirds of them die from heart and blood vessel diseases.

Still, there are more than 54 million smokers in the nation and, of those, more than 3 million are teenagers. The most shocking fact is that, for the first time, more girls than boys are smoking cigarettes.

Smoking is a hard habit to break. Last year, of the millions of smokers who tried to quit, only a small percentage actually did quit smoking.

But, as more adults are quitting, children continue to start smoking. To reduce the death and disability from cigarette smoking, smoking among children must be discouraged.

Why Do Children Start to Smoke?

Young people usually begin to face pressures to smoke between the ages of 12 and 14. This is an age when they are moving away from their families and closer to their friends. This is also a time when young people are more likely to rebel against adult authority and are willing to take more risks. Knowing this may help parents understand some of the reasons why children start to smoke.

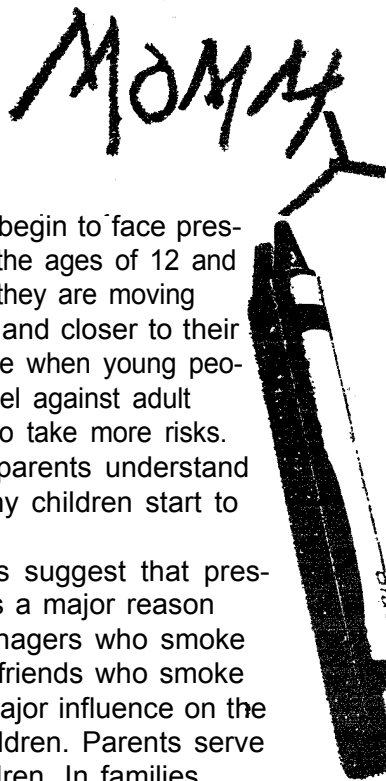
Teenagers themselves suggest that pressure from their friends is a major reason they start smoking. Teenagers who smoke are more likely to have friends who smoke.

The family is also a major influence on the smoking behavior of children. Parents serve as models for their children. In families where one or both parents smoke, a child is more likely to smoke. And in families where older brothers or sisters smoke, there is an even greater chance that the younger child will acquire the habit.

Additionally, young people may be influenced to start smoking by cigarette advertisements, which generally show young and attractive people doing interesting and exciting things.

How Does The Problem Begin?

Children may become aware of smoking during the first few years of their lives when they are exposed to smoking by their parents and other people. Also, smoking materials (cigarettes, lighters, matches and



ashtrays) may be readily available in the home. Children are often allowed to touch and handle these materials. This may lead to imitation while they are young and actual smoking when they are older.

Children are also exposed to smoking in homes where parents may not smoke, but where their parents' friends who visit the home are allowed to smoke. Since smoking is socially acceptable, adults tend to smoke freely in the presence of children.

How Is Adult Smoking Harmful To Children

Studies have shown that children of smoking parents, especially infants, have more lung illnesses (bronchitis and pneumonia) than children of parents who do not smoke. Parents who smoke have a greater tendency to cough, which is more likely to spread germs and expose children to chest illnesses. Also, children are forced to breathe the smoke from their parents' cigarettes in the closed environment of the home.

What Can Be Done In The Family?

Smoking should not be allowed in the home. Parents who need to smoke should not do so in front of children. Nor should smoking materials be available for children to see and handle. Parents should ask other adults who visit the home not to smoke, even if the child in the home is still an infant.

Why Should Teenagers Not Be Allowed To Smoke At Home?

Smoking behavior is only reinforced if teenagers are allowed to smoke at home. It tells the teenagers that parents accept their smoking, and, thus, it is okay for them to smoke.

Younger children will be more likely to smoke later if they see an older brother or sister smoking.

Almost all parents, including those who smoke, do not want their children to smoke. It is very important for parents to be firm in enforcing "no smoking" rules in the home. This emphasizes to children that smoking is harmful, even though the parents themselves may smoke.



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What About Parents Who Have Not Quit?

It would be best if parents do not smoke. However, if parents choose to continue smoking, they should try even harder to discourage their children from smoking. Many smoking parents may be embarrassed about discussing smoking with their children. But, when parents do not say anything about the subject, their children may think smoking is okay for them, too. Or, when children see their parents continue to smoke without showing any immediate bad effects, children may decide smoking is not harmful.

Parents should tell their children how they started smoking: They should explain how sorry they are that they did start and how much they would like to quit, but have been

unable to quit yet. Children need to understand that smoking is not okay, even for adults.

What Else Can Parents Do?

Parents also can try to discourage young people from smoking by supporting school and community efforts. Through the PTA or other organizations, parents can work with schools and community agencies to promote programs to keep children from smoking. Parents should tell school officials they expect better enforcement of “no smoking” rules and that they are not in favor of special areas being set aside as student smoking areas.

Most schools now are required to teach children about the dangers of smoking. Health agencies such as the American Heart Association help educate young people by providing schools with teaching guides and materials on the hazards of smoking.

But the problem cannot be solved in the schools alone. This is the age when many children start experimenting with real cigarettes and are open to pressure from other children. Schools can teach children how to resist peer pressure to smoke. However, this pressure may be especially influential on those youngsters who grew up in homes where smoking was accepted. Therefore, parents must help by providing a good example of not smoking. This example should start during infancy.

Parents may protect their children from the dangers of smoking by telling them about it before it's too late.

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