

Back-to-School Time: How to Reduce Stress and Stay Involved in Your Children's Lives

This time of year can be stressful as school starts and new academic pressures kick in. We get advice from two advocates on what parents can do at the start of the year to prevent drug-related tragedies.

By Karen Perry

School is starting up again across the nation. It's an exciting time as kids pick new clothing for the year and see their old friends back in the classroom. But back-to-school time is also stressful as new academic and social pressures kick in. And we know from research that stress can lead to substance abuse.

So we asked Maritsa Yzaguirre, CEO of Peace of Mind in Wellington, Fla. and a licensed Florida mental health counselor, to offer insights on how to overcome stress. We also contacted Regina McClimond, who lost a child to a drug overdose and is very active in the lives of her two other children, to give advice on what parents can do to prevent drug-related tragedies.

Let's start with Maritsa.

How tough is it today to keep youth from experimenting with drugs? In other words, how much peer pressure is there on youth to try drugs?

Maritsa: There has and will always be peer pressure. The key is to empower your children to make healthy choices and be a leader, not a follower. Many kids will try things to fit in. Make sure your kids feel that they are capable and confident in making these decisions by asking them: what would you do?

What tips can you offer to keep the stress level down for youth as the new school starts?

Maritsa: You can't avoid stress. Stress is a part of life. The key is how you react to it. Making sure your children have the right coping mechanisms to handle the situations they may be presented with is the key. It's important as parents that we model this behavior, teaching by showing our children how to appropriately deal with stressful situations.

Practice what you preach communication is 70% body language, 20% tone, and 10% language. Our kids don't need to just hear "relax." They need to be shown how to do so, using healthy stress reduction techniques, like going for a walk, breathing techniques, and doing yoga and meditation. So don't just say "do it," take some time to do it together. You will see your mood and relationships improve as well.

Regina now explains how she keeps her daughters away from drugs.

What should parents be doing now to keep their kids away from drugs during this new school year?

Regina: I keep my daughters busy, whether it's through schoolwork or extra-curricular activities. I am brutally honest about drugs and what they do to the body. My teenager watched her sister ruin her life and die, and that is enough to keep her away from drugs and lead a clean, sober life.

What's the best advice you can give parents?

Regina: Keep your eyes open to your children's activity on the Internet and social media. Pay attention to their actions and reactions when around their friends. Look for changes in behavior and appearance. Keep them busy and encourage them to get involved in activities that will keep them away from drugs, i.e., surfing, gymnastics, and school sports.

I also suggest family activities, such as biking, running, boating, paddle boarding, etc. Give children a curfew, and make sure they adhere to it. And don't allow them to go to house parties unless the child hosting will have their parents there, and don't be scared to double-check with those parents. (Better to verify than to lose your child to an overdose.)

Lastly, be open and honest with your children...let them know that they can come to you with any problems. Let them know that you've been in their shoes, and you understand life isn't easy, but there are better ways to deal with things than to use drugs. If you (and your children) know somebody who has died or suffered from drug use and turned their life around, use that person as an example when talking to your kids about drugs.

Thank you Maritsa and Regina for this great information.

I wish you and your children a great school year. Again, talk to your kids and stay involved in their lives – that's how you can make a difference in keeping your children drug-free.

Be a part of the education in making healthy choices for your families.

Karen Perry is the executive director of NOPE Task Force.