

Family ForumTM



What Parents Need to Know to Talk to Their Kids about Tobacco



It's never too soon to begin talking with your kids about the harmful effects of smoking. The Washington State Healthy Youth Survey 2002 showed that more than half of the kids who try smoking light their first cigarettes by age 13. A Washington State Adult Tobacco Survey, taken in 2002, indicated that almost 7 out of 10 adult smokers began before age 18.

In Washington, 55 kids start smoking every day. Tragically, more than a third of these kids will eventually die from smoking-related diseases. In fact, tobacco use remains the leading cause of preventable death. Tobacco-related diseases kill about 8,300 people every year in our state, more than AIDS, alcohol, drug abuse, car crashes, murders, suicides and fires combined.

That is why the Washington State Department of Health has launched a comprehensive, statewide campaign to reduce and prevent tobacco use among kids. As part of this effort, we have created powerful anti-smoking advertisements especially for Washington state youth.

Our latest ads, which are running statewide through August, focus on tobacco addiction. Why? Because too many kids believe that they have to smoke for years before becoming "addicted," when in fact national studies show that more than a third of all kids who try smoking become regular, daily smokers before leaving high school. And tobacco doesn't care about your age ... it is as tough for teens to quit as it is for adults. The Healthy Youth Survey found that almost three out of four high school regular smokers have already tried to quit, but failed.

Chances are good that your kids already have seen and heard these ads – on television and

radio, the Web or billboards. I personally would like to encourage parents to use the ads as a way to initiate conversations with kids about smoking. The ads offer powerful opportunities for parents to talk about tobacco addiction and, more importantly, to get a clear understanding of what their kids know and what they think about smoking.

Set aside a specific time for the conversation. If possible, view the ads together by going to our youth prevention Web site, www.unfilteredtv.com, where visitors can watch both 30-second television ads. Each ad features a group of smoking teenagers. In one scenario these kids are invited onto a hip, exclusive smokers' bus, only to realize that it is full of miserable, disease-ridden smokers – and they can't get off. The second ad features a similar scenario, but in an exclusive, smokers' nightclub.

After viewing the ads together, parents should initiate the discussion by asking questions, not lecturing.

Marilyn Cohen, a media literacy expert at the University of Washington's Teen Health and the Media Project, recommends talking with kids in a way that elicits their

opinions, encourages them to critique the ads, and gets them thinking about smoking prevention. For example, ask questions like:

- Do the people in the club or on the bus remind you of anyone we know (e.g. someone who smokes)?
- What do you think the ads are trying to tell us about smoking?
- Who do you think these ads are for (e.g. kids, adults, teens)?
- Why do you think the kids in the ads want to get off the bus or that the kids in the nightclub seem so unhappy all of a sudden?

Parents can then use this conversation as a way to discuss smoking in a more general way, offering facts about smoking and addiction, or better yet, researching the issue online together.

Empowering kids to take responsibility for their own health by making informed choices is the guiding principle behind our entire advertising campaign. And it's working. Last year, nine out of 10 youth who had seen our ads said the ads had given them good reasons not to smoke.

Moreover, since the inception of our statewide tobacco prevention and reduction campaign, 53,000 fewer Washington kids are smoking.

I hope parents will help us build on these successes by talking with their children early and often about smoking. Together, we will reduce youth smoking in Washington and we will save lives.

Mary Selecky
Washington State Secretary
of Health

Youth Smoking in Washington

There are about 53,000 fewer Washington kids smoking than before the launch of the Department of Health's program in 2000.

The reduction in smoking among high school youth in Washington greatly exceeds the national rate of decline.

Despite progress, about 55 Washington youth start smoking every day – more than a third will become daily, habitual smokers before they leave high school.

Most kids who try smoking will light their first cigarette by age 13.