



HOPE Newsletter - Issue 32

Raised a Heroin Addict And I Learned Something Every Parent Should Know

This loving mom of a heroin addict wants you to know that the first step to prevention is admitting that your kids are not immune to drug addiction.

By Patricia Byrne

My son Kevin is a heroin addict in long-term recovery. What could I have done differently?

This question haunted me for many, many years. Should I have taken him back to school to get a forgotten book? When he left his report on the counter in fifth grade should I have left it there instead of bringing it to school? He had ADD so organizing was hard for him. Did I do too much? Did he never learn to be accountable for his own actions? Was I too worried about him failing a stupid sixth grade math test? Should I have let him fail and learn the result of not putting in the work instead of making him study against his will? Should have, would have, could have were constantly swirling in my head. Tiny voices blaming, blaming...

Yes, I should have let him fall on his face when he was little. The consequences of their errors grow as they do. I didn't have to catch him when he fell — I was holding on so tightly he never really fell. And when he went away to college he fell hard. So yes, I should have let him fail more when he was young.

In all honesty, that is the one thing I feel I could have changed. I don't know what else I could have done differently that would have gotten him to 'just say no' to drugs. Above is an old newspaper clipping of my son and his friends from the neighborhood with their 'just say no' signs. They marched around the neighborhood chanting. He wore his D.A.R.E. (Drug Addiction Resistance Education) T-shirt forever. We spoke about drugs and drinking and sex. Once, when my son was a freshman in high school he had some friends over. Two of the girls brought booze into my home in soda screw top bottles (OK, lesson one: no outside drinks allowed in my home). They also had some joints on them. My son and his friend came to me and told me what was going on. **THEY CAME AND TOLD ME.** Parents were called, girls cried, drama ensued. **BUT HE TOLD ME.** How, then, did this kid end up a freakin' heroin addict? The one who told. The one who knew better. No matter how much we think 'they've got this', they don't. Life is not black and white, and adolescence is the murkiest of grays. We cannot rest

on our laurels, no matter how great our kids are – they are navigating a mine field. Kids do dumb things, but many stupid choices don't have the dire consequences too many families are facing today in eye of this epidemic.

Part of the problem is that we just didn't know. We didn't know to say, 'stay away from OxyContin kids, because it will lead to heroin'. We knew to say, 'don't drink – alcoholism runs in your family – but if you make poor decisions, don't compound them by driving. Call us, stay where you are'. We knew to say, 'Don't have sex, you're too young, but if you do, wear protection. If you get a girl pregnant, please come to us, we will work through this together'. We knew to say, 'don't do drugs, they are dangerous, people get addicted'. We didn't know to say, and I wish with all my heart we had, 'but if you get addicted, please come to us and we will help you. We will be here for you because we love you.' Of course this OxyContin thing wasn't on our radar. Who could ever imagine their kid would go so far as to stick a needle in their vein? I'll tell you, my son didn't think he'd ever do something so stupid either, even when he was addicted to OxyContin, until he did.

I can't re-think what we didn't know. But I can warn parents of young children today. Because now we do know about OxyContin and the path it forges to heroin. There are many 'not my kid' campaigns out there. Parents today need to arm themselves with information about what drugs are popular with what age groups in their hometown and what the warning signs are. They also need to have a plan about what they would do if they find out their child is making dangerous choices. Also, what's their plan if they find out some *other* kid is making dangerous choices. Do they tell the other parent? What will they do if their child came to them and told them they were addicted? What will they do to make it possible for their child to even feel capable of telling? Have a plan in place. Maybe even read a few books. Understand what enabling looks like. It can look a lot like love...

Co-dependence and enabling isn't something that only occurs with addiction. I was an enabler-in-training for years. We need to learn to recognize when a child should do something for themselves, even if it's hard to watch them not do it and pay the consequences. If your Senior won't fill out college applications then maybe he's not ready for college. Many of the things I learned in Alanon about detaching and not doing for someone what they can do for themselves would have come in handy during those teenage years. Would it have made a difference to my son? Would he have not become an addict? Who knows. But I do know that I would have been more equipped to deal with the addict who came to possess him.

Don't just hope your children will never be exposed to drugs. Assume they will. Talk to your kids, speak to your friends, and have a battle plan in place. If your school or town has informational meetings about this epidemic, show up, even if your kid is only 7 or 8. Be informed. Be ready. We need to fight this epidemic on all fronts. If your town does not have any form of parent education, Start the Conversation. All parents of young kids should listen to addicts in recovery speak. They are your neighbor's children. My son would tell you he had a nice childhood. He played baseball and soccer and took

karate. We had a good relationship. He knew his parents loved him, and – ***he did know better***. What made him make bad choices in spite of knowing better? What changed from the age of 14 to the age of 16, when the drinking began? *Murky gray. Minefield.*

Recognize addiction *can* happen to your child. The epidemic is real. Be afraid. Be prepared to fight for your child's life.

Forewarned is forearmed.

Arm yourselves.

TOWNSHIP OF NUTLEY

1 Kennedy Drive - Nutley, New Jersey 07110 - (973) 284-4951

Website: www.nutleynj.org - Facebook: www.facebook.com/nutleynjgovernment