

# The most powerful anti-drug message may start at the dinner table

By Tan Chong Huat, Tracy Loh

The Straits Times, Singapore, Page 4, Section: I OPINION

Monday 1 June 2026

1318 words, 858cm<sup>2</sup> in size

386,100 circulation

## *The most powerful anti-drug message may start at the dinner table*

Personal, one-to-one conversations can be much more effective than broadcast messaging. Why aren't more people having them?

**Tan Chong Huat and Tracy Loh**

"As a parent, I'm afraid if I expose him to this, he might go and look for it – and then it defeats the purpose," a father shared in a recent survey on drugs.

Many parents hesitate over talking about drugs with their children, fearing the conversation might backfire and instead spark curiosity about illicit substances and tip their children into trying them out. Yet, nothing could be further from the truth.

Youth likely encounter references to drugs long before most parents imagine they do – on Netflix, YouTube, gaming chats and social media memes. The question is then no longer whether their parents inadvertently raise their awareness around drugs, but whether they can get to them first.

Singapore recently marked Drug Victims Remembrance Day, held every third Friday of May. It's a time to reflect on the lives affected by drug abuse and to renew our collective commitment to prevention of drug abuse. But commitment, as the aforementioned 2025 National Drug Perception Survey (NPS) reminds us, also requires action.

According to the survey of 4,500 Singaporean and permanent resident respondents aged 13 and above, 90.9 per cent of youth and 89.2 per cent of adults say they are willing to help family or friends who may be at risk of drug abuse. But barely half feel they actually know how to do so.

Good intentions alone are not enough. When people do not know what to say, when to step in or where to seek help, early

warning signs can be missed, and those at risk may not get support before the problem worsens. The challenge isn't a willingness to talk about it – it's the confidence to broach the subject altogether.

### THE POWER OF A PERSONAL CONVERSATION

Our survey in fact reminds us that the most effective intervention may not be a public service announcement or a school programme, but a conversation. Among youth surveyed, 94.2 per cent of those whose parents had spoken to them about drugs say that the conversation deterred them from drug abuse.

That is not to diminish the role of anti-drug campaigns and school educational efforts, which still play an important role in raising awareness and reinforcing social norms, and which 92.3 per cent of youth found important.

But one-to-one personal conversations carry a weight that broadcast messaging alone cannot replicate because they are specific, personal, and come from someone the listener trusts. This is especially true today, as drug-related references now appear casually across international media, social platforms, and online communities, where they may be joked about, debated, or portrayed as part of everyday life. In this context, open and non-judgmental conversations are an essential complement to broader public education efforts.

Preventive drug education lays the groundwork, giving young people the broad strokes of why drugs are harmful and what the

risks are. When youth feel safe discussing curiosity, peer pressure or uncertainty, parents are better placed to step in early before risks escalate.

In fact, as one mother interviewed for the survey said, parenthood invokes a latent protective instinct – after all, no parent wants to see their child get into drugs. This is why a simple parent-child conversation about drugs is one of the most effective deterrents we have.

But such conversations aren't happening often enough – with only 62.8 per cent of youth. Why is this the case?

### AN UNDERUSED FRONT LINE

Parents cited reasons including the fear of saying the wrong thing, or feeling outpaced by new substances and slang. The biggest fear, however, was that starting the conversation might do more harm than good.

But we forget that what matters is that children hear first from a trusted adult, in an age-appropriate manner, and that the conversation is allowed to evolve over time. A simple message about safety and harm can later become a fuller discussion about peer influence, misinformation and consequences.

The parent-child conversation brings those messages home, echoing and reinforcing them in a way that is tailored to the child and responsive to their questions and pressures. Everyday moments, like scenes from a TV show, a social media post, or a casual comment from a friend, can become natural openings for

parents to ask what their child thinks and talk through the risks. By keeping their tone calm and non-judgmental, parents can help their children make sense of what they are exposed to, while signalling that difficult questions can be discussed safely at home.

Practical tools can also help parents feel supported. Conversation guides, real-life examples, helplines, clear step-by-step advice on what to do if they suspect drug use, and access to professional support can help parents take concrete steps to help their child. The Ministry of Education and the Health Promotion Board work with the Central Narcotics Bureau to distribute such resources to parents via Parent Hub, Parents Gateway, and school engagement sessions.

Beyond official platforms, social media, school communities or parent networks can help raise awareness of existing resources and make these conversations feel more normal and manageable.

When nearly all youth respondents who talked to their parents about drugs say it deterred them, making such conversations the norm should be a national priority.

### THE POWER OF PEER INFLUENCE

Youth themselves can be important voices, too, especially in environments where belonging matters, such as in schools or among friend groups. Many are also willing to help their friends, as the survey results showed.

But as is the case with parents, there is a capability gap. A student may want to step in when a friend jokes about trying drugs or hints at experimenting, but does not know what to say or when to involve a counsellor or another trusted adult.

With the right resources, training and platforms, they can be credible peer influencers in campuses, online spaces and youth communities – able to respond when a friend discloses drug abuse, to challenge misinformation respectfully, and seek help early without fear of stigma.

Peer-led workshops, facilitated discussions, and simple scenario-based training can help youth recognise warning signs, practise how to start a conversation, and know when to

bring in a trusted adult.

Student-led conversations, youth-created digital content and small group sessions can be built around the situations and pressures they actually encounter. Schools and campuses should create space for youth to shape how those messages are discussed and shared among their peers.

NPS 2025 reflects an evolving drug landscape, where society remains firmly anti-drug, but increasingly uncertain about how close the threat may be. Closing the advocacy gap by giving parents and peers the skills and support they need will allow us to move from awareness to action, and from vigilance to collective resilience.

Drug Victims Remembrance Day is a moment not just for reflection but also for resolve. The most powerful tribute we can pay to those affected by drugs is not a poster or a policy, but a parent who chooses to start that conversation tonight or a friend who cares enough to reach out and knows how to help.

• Tan Chong Huat is the chairman of the National Council Against Drug Abuse (NCADA) and senior partner of RHTLaw Asia. Tracy Loh is a member of NCADA and a senior lecturer at Singapore Management University.

**Youth themselves can be important voices, too, especially in environments where belonging matters, such as in schools or among friend groups. Many are also willing to help their friends, as the survey results showed. But as is the case with parents, there is a capability gap. A student may want to step in when a friend jokes about trying drugs or hints at experimenting, but does not know what to say or when to involve a counsellor or another trusted adult.**