

Suggested Rules for the Road –

Conscious Parenting in this Time of Psychoactive Substance Use

By Phil Wolfson, M.D.



LIVING consciously while raising children thoughtfully, in a complex and constantly changing world, is a great challenge. In these times of increased possibility for marijuana legalization, yet still in the epoch of the doomed-to-fail War on Drugs, parents have new options and old concerns in making decisions regarding substance use in the family context.

This brief paper primarily addresses the adult end of things, creating a positive guideline for responsible substance use when raising kids. Internalization—introjection—is the core of self-control, and positive parenting leads to forming generally positive introjects in our children. These serve as references for assessing and judging potential actions. Punishment is a poor secondary response, often ineffective and employed when children’s self-guidance—their introjects—are absent or fail. The issue of kids with substance trouble in their lives and constructive parental responses—the therapeutics—is not our subject per se. Presented here is a prevention strategy based on thoughtful, loving parenting. Success in this strategy is no guarantee against kids getting in trouble. Children are independent-minded folks. I am advocating for conscious parenting, creating a family structure that creates a long-term culture that enfolds the child, but yet is responsive and sets limits when difficulties arise.

Editors note: If you wish to correspond with the author of this article, please send an email to askmaps@maps.org and we will share it with him.

This piece is a longitudinal, historical, experiential analysis, anecdotal and selective as historical texts usually are constructed, but hopefully valuable nonetheless. The analysis presented is conditional and not definitive. It is open to amplification, change, and rearrangement, hence the word “suggested” in the title. It is an attempt to open the door for reflection, discussion and variation, so please respond with your own two cents. Hopefully, the coins of experience will pile up and we will have a burgeoning consensus as a workable guideline.

As parents, it seems we have to learn from scratch, almost as if we ourselves were never children. When we bring a child into this world as a conscious choice, we can’t avoid fearing that we will ruin the kid, act like our parents (or for some of us, not as well as our parents), and that our previously free lives will be curtailed and limited. We fear our own impatience and worry at times about the possibility of breaking into violence. We search for guides and books, role models, and other parents with whom we can share and compare.

In the end, raising children is an empirical, adaptive process to be learned anew, although there are plenty of resources to assist us if we look for them, even inside ourselves. Certainly, there is no one right way. I have a fond memory of Ben Spock, the great anti-war activist who was always in his three-piece suit at demonstrations. He was pulling out a few hairs from his already sparse head as he related to me the vast changes he had to make in his new edition of *Dr. Spock’s Baby and Child Care* in order to accommodate feminism and enlightened, nurturing father-care in 1969. He was pleased and chagrined, knowing he had missed the emerging consciousness. Greater social awareness and equalization were changing child-rearing views and practices. The methodology he had offered previously as a guideline for parenting was attitudinal and relative, and not a fixed approach for all times.

Child-rearing is an historically determined practice, varying from culture to culture. The positive influences that tend to motivate a child into becoming a loving, thoughtful, and

productive adult become more and more clear. They can be abstracted from the particular context, which is driven by situational, cultural, gender, political, class, and psychological factors. “Determinants” is too strong a word. Humans are more flexible than that, but we are more easily wounded and—traumatized—than we give ourselves credit for being, and trauma is formative and deforming. Our era is the first to even define trauma, and we are still elaborating an understanding of that which is traumatizing. If there is to be progress in terms of our capacity to live respectfully, peacefully and with compassion for each other and nature, it has to begin in the family with child rearing. This progress must extend to those institutions that support families, like schools, health care, and community/spiritual groups and institutions. Society/family is a reciprocal bidirectional informational exchange. Individual units, families and their members, are able to generate their own particular cultures, despite pressure to conform from dominator external structures. This gives the family both strength and vulnerability.

The principles that work for child rearing in general guide the use of substances in the family.

- Provide a secure, nurturing, affectionate, creative and friendly family environment.
- Provide safety from outside and inside-the-family negative forces.
- Embrace nonviolence. Practice one person/one vote, except for when a child’s economic health or safety demands parental guidance or protection.
- Use persuasion for control, except when safety requires a stronger protective and authoritative response.
- Use respectful, acknowledgement-based communication that recognizes differences in age and capacity, but seeks understanding in a language appropriate to conditions.
- Stress that friendship is the goal for now and all time.
- Be thoughtful, open-minded, and openhearted in developing growing children’s abilities, understandings, and independence.
- Encourage interdependence and inter-responsibility, from each according to ability and to each according to needs.

Overall, we can refer to these qualities for a child’s best possible environment as “love and respect.” Conscious and conscientious use of psychoactive substances in a family environment is contained and constrained by adherence to these principles.

I will offer a personal story about conscious use of Ecstasy in my own family. My oldest son, Noah, had been stricken with leukemia when he was about 13 years of age. He went into remission quickly, but the process was emotionally arduous. His psychological difficulties and their impact on our little family of four (and our larger extended community) were extremely harsh. Noah died four years later, near 17 years of age. The following is an excerpt from my forthcoming book, *Noe—A Father/Son Song of Love, Life, Sickness, and Death*:

We needed a novel form of family time, something so powerful it would sweep away the awful load, and give us a moment’s respite from carrying the overstuffed burlap bag of backbreaking woe. We needed a method for emotional time-outs, for being together tasklessly and purely in connection. Our MDMA experience called to us because of the power of its positive alteration of consciousness and the sensuous but non-sexual intimacy we had experienced. Thus, we hatched the Family MDMA Inter-

lude. No, our children did not imbibe. We took seriously their need for an uncompromised neurological unfolding of their minds. They had no need for chemicals, just the space in which to relax with us, play, say whatever was in their minds, and know that we would react without defense, in positive alignment with them. And, as is children’s nature, they were adept at instantly integrating with our altered mind state, enveloped by the warmth of the family snuggle—stillness in the midst of the storm. Yes, they knew what we were doing, and after the first successful session, would request of us to have that form of family time again. They enjoyed us being somewhat immobilized, out of parent role, soft, less worried, able to talk about our fears without the usual fearfulness. It was a hug-in. And, in fact, we could function and handle their needs. We were never prostrated and nodding out. It was not that kind of experience. We weren’t going for dose, but for connection. We wanted to be present, not spaced-out.

Not that this kind of togetherness couldn’t and didn’t happen on the natch. It did. What was different was deliberately taking the time together in a state without ends or action—just “being” for a more sustained period of time. And, yes, we integrated more of that kind of time into our lives without the use of MDMA or other substances. We learned from our experience “on” and could do much the same “off”—when we remembered to stop and breathe.

How did we deal with the outside world and the “say no to drugs,” “turn in your parents” campaigns at their schools? We taught them about family confidentiality, about our family and friends as an envelope in which unique and wonderful things could happen which differentiated it from societal norms that we could demonstrate were nonsensical and even harmful. We never threatened them about exposing us to others, but rather discussed the possibilities for misunderstanding, disapproval, and the potential consequences of illegality. Some things are private to the family—violence and abuse not being in that category. We distinguished between substances that were mind- and heart-expanding and those that provoked addiction, difficult, and even violent behavior, like too much alcohol, which was often being represented with its consequent mayhem on their television screen.

Openly discussing what we were doing, Noah and Eric were urged to comment on what they saw and to express their feelings, however different from ours. If they had a concern, we would listen, and we would not lie to them. There were times when we might have wished to lie, but we didn’t. In any event, their antennae had been honed for the nuances of obfuscation. They would confront us if they sensed hesitation or story-telling. We were careful and they never encountered us having difficulty while under the influence, observed no aftermath, no compulsive use. Family sessions occurred once every month to three months, depending on available time, desire, appropriateness, a sense of the need to have a prolonged interaction without jumping around and doing. And as there was no secrecy, they discerned that the negativity beaming in from the Authority Sphere was not their experience, not the ‘truth’. They had been part of the movement for progressive democracy for everybody—against racism and sexism, pro-choice, for world peace and Gaia holism since their earliest days of life. They knew that it was worth standing up for their beliefs—outside the home and in it. No, they never themselves asked to take MDMA. Compared to other kids in their high school realms who often lived with parental stealth—coking and smoking in

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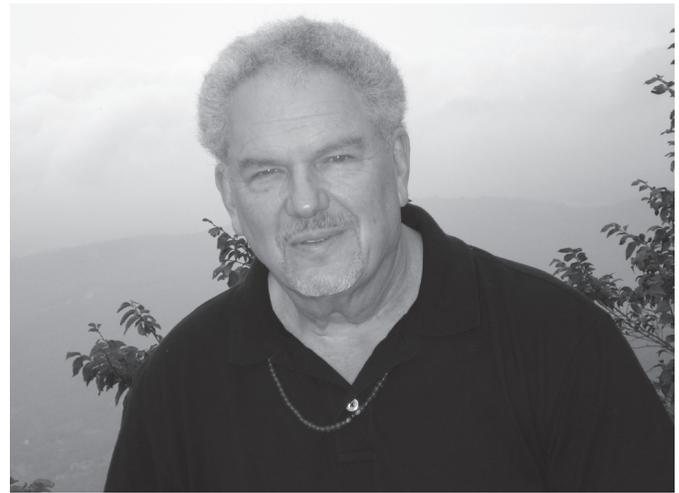
basements and closets in stigmatized secrecy—our kids were late bloomers. We explicitly took the position that we would not be hypocrites to our children, and that they had the capacity to come to clear understandings based on their own view—if given accurate information. If they were interested in using substances, they had an open door to us for discussion—and use—if we agreed. As parents, we consciously avoided splitting on crucial issues, attempting to come to a parental consensus before making decisions with our kids. Knowing the potential difficulties, we strove to protect them from the consequences of illegalization. “Better we give you what you want than buy some unknown, potentially harmful crap from someone who charges you outlandish prices, has something on you that can be used against you, and who could get you involved with the anti-drug and the drug worlds, the cops and school authorities.” In fact, they never asked until they were late teenagers, a far better outcome than the common illicit and often difficult use by thirteen- and fourteen-year olds.

This is not a tale to suggest emulation. Our circumstances were relatively unique as was the history and culture of our particular family. I offer it here to indicate that there can be a very positive, beneficial experience within family life with substances present—if you mostly know what you are doing, cover the possibilities for difficulty, have outside support at the ready, and if you practice honesty with those you love. Parents have and will use substances in their families. If you believe that what you are using is a potentially empathogenic substance indeed, and if you accept the feedback of those around you without quibble or quarrel, this terrain can be negotiated with consciousness and benefit.

Suggested Rule for the Road: If you are uncertain about the effect of a substance on your consciousness and behavior, leave your kids out of it, do your imbibing away from them, and make sure you can come home to your kids sanely and lovingly—or leave off—for, I believe, the best thing you can do in life is love and your kids are the best ones to love and from whom to receive love. Teach honestly that family values at times differ from the views expressed and imposed from outside—including laws—and that the family does have as one of its goals to selectively siphon the outside view in and selectively siphon inner practices out. Obviously there are difficult choices and complex mindsets.

If you act hypocritically in front of children, they will most likely detect this and come to not believe much that comes out of you. Don't have them cover for you or make excuses for you. Don't make them into liars on your behalf or have them cover up on the basis of a secret family life that no one outside will understand. They can understand that a family has some privacy needs and may have different values from those that are externally pressured.

Another Suggested Rule: Potently addictive drugs can and do cause havoc for families. Their use tends toward creation of a family culture of deception, and parental self-involvement and risks the integrity of the family. If you are raising a child, consider not using substances that may blow you and them away. There is no excuse for taking such chances with the lives you bring into the world. Let that restrain you from thinking you will get away with it. The cultivation of honesty with your own children has the greatest reward—friendship and trust.



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These are functional criteria based on valuing enlightened love. It is not about morality. It is about the only relationship that contains the gem of absolute love—that between children and parents—reciprocal love born of the dependent responsibility of nurturance and respect.

A Corollary of a Suggested Rule: Having limits is a necessity for following the psychoactive path as creative and mind-expanding. Use of virtually any substance can result in dependency, sometimes surprisingly so. There have been a few MDMA addicts who did it every day and in every way. Too much of anything can result in a negative alteration. All psychoactive substances affect consciousness, narrowing focus, affecting functionality, and while potentially mind-expanding are also mind-constraining and behavior-altering. There are things to do in private, away from kids who have childcare provided by responsible baby sitters.

Alcohol intoxication is the most common poison. The damage from alcohol intoxication on the population is mind-boggling. People do things under the influence of ethanol that they would never do on the natch—violent crimes against children, violent crimes against parents and relatives while kids watch, incest, beatings, and rape. The stories are endless. There is also verbal abuse, arguing, disappearing into dark holes, passing out, memory loss, and driving while intoxicated. Alcohol is paradigmatic. If you follow the rules for sane alcohol consumption, you can use responsibly and enjoyably in front of kids and teach them limits. Otherwise...

There is a great riddle—still poorly explained—that also may apply to other substance dependencies—a cautionary.

Despite the mayhem and adversity, children of alcoholics are four times as likely to become alcoholics themselves. There does appear to be a genetic component, but its effect is probabilistic and phenotypic, not a Mendelian linear influence. And I doubt that the genetic basis is for alcoholism per se—rather I think for a more complex set of behavioral possibilities. There are other possible and contributing explanations that arise from the influence of the home environment. One is that children are great mimics and from an early age, even before their first year is completed, they learn by observing other people's behavior. Children internalize and are damaged by what they see and experience. Perhaps there is a created hole, an incomplete gestalt

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that is like a craving. This kind of craving may be like a cognitive causal map created during a child's repeated exposure to intoxicated adult behavior. For the adult, craving is about trained and then starved neurons, or the habitual turn to substances to eliminate negative feelings. For children of alcoholics it may be a programmed psychological map for them to seek solace through substance use. Cravings, as attraction and compulsion, are bad for our clarity, and they inhibit following a more enlightened path. As parents we need to be aware that our good and bad behavior may engender similar behavior in our kids.

Conscious consumption of ethanol is the exemplar for the legal period. Alcohol products are on our shelves and accessible to our children.

Medical marijuana is spreading nationally and full decriminalization is hopefully near. Parents are even promoting medical marijuana for their children. My colleagues and I receive requests from parents on behalf of kids as young as 12. What does this mean about parental behavior? Do parents assume an open non-hypocritical stance to their use of marijuana? Do they continue to smoke secretly and cover their tracks, as so many have done? Do they leave their stashes out for children to find, or in accessible places? Do they offer their kids a joint and guidance? What age is appropriate?

Most of us would agree that marijuana intoxication is relatively benign, compared to overuse of alcohol. Nonetheless, there are potential risks for affecting children's lives: inattention, sluggishness, difficulty in responding to emergencies, inexplicable foolishness, inappropriate behavior, and the munchies (aka binging). There may also be diminished motivation with chronic heavy use or, the possibility of withdrawal reactions— anxiety, insomnia, irritability. This is not a list of inevitable effects, rather an inventory for self-scanning and awareness.

It is also true that many parents have or will choose to smoke in front of their kids, and/or be stoned with their kids. There are joys as well as risks: great silly fun, heightened playfulness, penetrating mutual understanding, a break from the usual, release from tension—to name some.

Another benefit of legalization is our potential discernment of the distorting stigma of the "illegal" and with its removal an improvement in our self-regard and the cessation of the tendency towards rebellion and forbidden fruit reactivity. Being marijuana legal is a distinct pleasure.

Suggested Rule: Know your limits, keep them, and learn when your degree of intoxication will negatively affect your relationship with your kids and your ability to be responsible for them. Accept feedback, even if it is not what you want to hear. Don't overdo it and become a stoned parent. Stop using marijuana for a significant time if you find your use creeping up or, if you are feeling compelled. A cautionary: Don't drive or use machinery when stoned—don't risk yourself or the lives and wholeness of others. Use according to the principles above. Create a culture of forthrightness and honesty in which your children come to you voluntarily and discuss drug use without fear. They will then know that you will listen and offer a clear response and the possibility for further discussion. The family truly can be a refuge.

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It is important to help kids learn about their potential interaction with substances, rather than avoiding the subject, for that engenders the notion of unavailable and judgmental parents, much as has been the situation with parents dealing with inevitable sexuality. Assisting our kids with information enables them to better assess the myths and propaganda that are bombarding them. Kids want facts and data just like we do, and they are good at detecting mystification and disinformation. Education by informed parents is a great assist to young minds struggling to have fun, be unique, and sort out truth from fiction. Difficulties often initially arise when children begin using secretly, when they are too young, or in potentially bad settings. Parental interventions that come out of the blue are often unsuccessful, or engender more rebelliousness.

Adolescents tend to establish psychological territories that parents are blocked from entering. But that can go too far, and parents may give up on knowing what their kid is doing and proceed in denial, despite evidence that their kid is having difficulty. The Oxycontin high school epidemic is a good example of this. Continuing the dialogue, inquiry, and wanting to know without intruding (except when safety demands) are prerequisites for navigating adolescence. Establishing an educational and intimate trust relationship from an early age is imperative for sanity with adolescents. It is important to attempt to work out parental unity and avoid splitting. "Do No Harm" always applies, as does "Prevent Harm When You Can," especially to those with whom you closely relate. For example, there is data suggesting that heavy use of marijuana before the age of 15 is associated with a higher rate of schizophrenia and psychotic symptoms. In absolute numbers and percentage difference, this is a small change from baseline. Nonetheless, I don't know of any child who needs to use marijuana heavily before 15. Some do and I believe that such use calls for thoughtful intervention. I am not a fan of heavy use after 15 either, save when there may be real medical utility. And marijuana does have many potential benefits for many people for treating a wide variety of illnesses, as well as for health and mindfulness.

Personally, I think it is a wonderful thing to hang with your mature child and spend quality time together, including—if there is interest and mutual consent—to trip together. It can engender understanding, closeness, friendship, and pleasure. For those of us who value psychedelic experience as mind-expanding, why would we not create a loving, careful set and setting in which to experience this with our closest friends—our children?

References:

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