

### **“You’re a Role Model.....Even When You Don’t Want to Be!”**

*by CODA Educator, Heather Hodgson-Schleich*

In my years with CODA, I have had the privilege of helping to shape the knowledge base and attitudes of Canada’s youth. I have also had the privilege of talking to parents, teachers and professionals.

One of my most memorable parent presentations was in Northern Ontario. After I had covered the main portion of my presentation, a parent asked, “When should I start talking about drugs with my kids?”

I answered that, as with any safety issue – road safety, stranger awareness, personal safety – drug awareness should be started as soon as the child is able to walk and understand your words. Many children ingest medications, alcohol or other drugs because these are left within reach and the child has no idea of the dangers. The child mimics adult behaviour and wants to be like his or her role models; that is one component of the learning process.

Then, I used a story from an elementary school in Southern Ontario. In this case, a grade two student had asked about ‘pot’. In terms that a seven-year-old would understand, I had explained the legal issues, as well as some of the effects on the body. The child shook her head slowly and said, “My mom is NOT going to be happy when she hears this!”

Although everyone laughed, it led into a discussion of role modeling and how children see and hear everything; about how important it is to discuss medications, alcohol and other drugs with children.

As the child grows and develops, more detailed information can be provided. But it has to be a two-way discussion to be effective. Parents have to learn to listen, not only to the words and what *is* being said, but also to what *is not* being said. Parents also have to research and find the answers because, if there is a void of information, the child will go elsewhere and, perhaps, get the wrong information.

One parent asked, “Where do kids ‘from good homes’ get the idea to take drugs?”

I answered that children are bombarded with information about drugs on television and radio, in publications, on the Internet and through observations of family, friends and peers.

Many times, what we say and do are different. After a hard day, it may be tempting to have beer or wine to ‘settle our nerves’. We pop a pill to cure a headache that may have been resolved by taking the time to relax in a hot bath or lie down where it is quiet. Then we wonder where children get the idea that taking drugs is a way to escape or to ease pain quickly.

A colleague, Henry Schankula, always stressed, “You are a role model even if you don’t want to be.” This is an important message to convey to parents, teachers, siblings and mentors of all ages.