

BY CHERYL K. OLSON

**"Your jacket smells like cigarettes,"** Laura Rosen said when she picked up Ariel, her 12-year-old daughter, from an afternoon at the mall.

Instead of the denial Laura expected, Ariel said, "So? Smoking's not really that big a deal, Mom."

"What do you mean, not a big deal? How about lung cancer? I think that's a pretty big deal, don't you?"

"A lot of kids smoke," Ariel said, bristling. "Besides, I just do it once in a while because it helps keep me from gaining weight."

Parents who thought that cigarettes were going the way of the dinosaur are in for an unpleasant surprise. After leveling off in the 1980s, cigarette consumption among teenagers and even younger children is on the rise. A University of

who not only see cigarettes as badges of defiance and maturity, but also think the statistics don't apply to them—after all, they're going to live forever.

Therefore, keeping your child smoke-free requires more than logical explanations. You have to be aware of the reasons that lighting up has become attractive to many preteens.

Surprisingly, an older child's growing ability to reason can make her more susceptible to the allure of cigarettes. By sixth or seventh grade, a child is usually able to perceive that deci-

sions aren't always black or white, notes Elizabeth Wells, Ph.D., a researcher at the University of Washington. "Kids this age are changing toward a more complicated view that allows some to see a reason to start smoking"—for instance, that cigarettes might impress others or make them feel more grown-up, or help them relax. Girls this age often think that smoking keeps them thin. (A number

**Ads convince many kids that smoking makes you cool and keeps you thin.**

# The lure of lighting up

**Kids think they'll live forever. So how do you help your preteen resist cigarettes?**

Michigan study found that in 1994, 18.6 percent of eighth-graders had smoked one or more cigarettes in the previous month, up 30 percent from 1991. What makes these numbers especially alarming is the conclusion reached by a number of other studies—that if a child manages to avoid smoking as a preteen or teenager, she'll likely never begin the habit.

Many parents assume that kids are supposed to know better than to get hooked on cigarettes. Decades of publicity about the well-documented dangers of smoking have convinced millions of adults to quit. Unfortunately, the facts are often lost on preteens,







Preteens often see cigarettes as badges of individuality and sophistication.

of researchers believe that the slim cigarettes marketed to women reinforce this idea.)

In a recent University of Washington study tracking kids between fourth and seventh grades, researchers found that older children were less likely to believe in the dangers of smoking than younger ones. "They begin to say, 'Well, everyone who smokes doesn't die of lung cancer right away,'" says Wells. Because even older children are generally focused squarely on the present, it's hard for them to grasp that nicotine addiction is gradual. "Most kids who are puffing think they'll never be daily smokers, but the odds are very high that they will," notes John P. Pierce, Ph.D., professor of cancer research at the University of California, San Diego.

One reason is that tobacco advertising is so persuasive. According to research conducted by Pierce, 65 percent of 12-year-olds can describe in detail a favorite cigarette ad. And a study at the University of Illinois found that children who are exposed to cigarette advertisements are more likely to see smoking as a sign of popularity.

Tobacco advertising, with its emphasis on image, can influence children in other ways. "It's amazing how even 12-year-old smokers identify with a particular brand," says Dee Burton, Ph.D., of the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Public Health. In her research, Burton found that kids who want to be seen as tough smoke Marlboros, while Camels allegedly signify a suave, cool person. These two brands—as well as Newport, the brand most favored by African-American youngsters—are the most popular among American teens.

An important boost to brand identification is the merchandise—Camel hats, Marlboro jackets, and so on—that preteens can buy through the mail with coupons from cigarette packs. "You have to say you're 21," says Pierce, "but that doesn't stop any kid I know." In fact, pretending to be an adult to get the merchandise can make it even more attractive.

If you think your child might be experimenting with cigarettes—or if you feel he's vulnerable to peer pressure to start—here are eight steps to take.

**1. Keep a smoke-free house.** This sends a very clear message about

your values.

Also, if your child's school permits children to smoke on its grounds, ask the school administration to reconsider this policy.

**2. Listen to what he says, and let him discover his own answers.** Ask him what he feels the pros and cons of tobacco might be, and discuss what's really behind each belief. Don't dismiss even the most illogical-sounding reason, but try to help your child think through it. For example, if he

says, "Other kids might think I'm cool if I smoke," ask him to define what makes one person "cooler" than another, and to make a list of the qualities he admires in others his age. Also, if he believes that smoking has certain benefits, discuss other ways he might get those benefits; if, for instance, he thinks a cigarette can calm a person's nerves, ask him, "What are some other ways that people can calm themselves down?"

**3. Let her know what nicotine addiction is really like.**

"When a young person knows how unpleasant it is for a smoker who is trying and trying to quit, or who has to run out in the middle of the night to buy cigarettes, that undercuts the supposedly independent, rebellious image of the cigarette smoker," says Burton. If you don't smoke, enlist a relative or adult friend to describe the grim realities.

**4. Focus on short-term consequences.** When you talk about your own attitude toward cigarettes, mention bad breath (you can use the well-known line, "Kissing a smoker is like licking an ashtray"), nicotine-stained

fingers, burns in clothing, and impaired sports performance. To a preteen, these are far more powerful arguments than the warnings about lung cancer or heart disease. Research shows that scare tactics don't work, especially when they involve consequences that are far in the future.

**5. Let her know you don't want her to smoke.** Remind her of how much you care about her, and say that the idea of her lighting up a cigarette upsets you—not because it's immoral or "looks bad," but because you're worried about the effects on her life and health.

**6. Show him how cigarette companies try to influence people.** Point out how advertisements are designed to encourage certain beliefs—that smokers are sophisticated, popular, and slender—and have him compare the models in ads with adult smokers he knows in real life. Say, "You're too mature and intelligent to fall for their sales pitch."

**7. Discuss alternatives to lighting up.** Ask her how she'd feel if she were at a party where some of her friends were

smoking, and brainstorm with her on ways she might gracefully refuse to join in if she is offered a cigarette.

**8. Don't stop talking about the effects of smoking.** Just because you find your child with cigarettes even after you've made your best case against them, yours is not a lost cause. But you need to acknowledge that you have a limited ability to control a preteen's actions. Say something like, "The decision is completely up to you, but I'm sorry you've made this one. I just hope that at some point you'll understand the effect cigarettes can have on your health and your life. I also hope that happens soon, because the longer you wait, the harder it will be to stop."

Then bring up the topic from time to time in a calm manner, making sure your child knows you'd like him to stop. However, remember that getting angry or threatening to punish him for smoking is likely to backfire. □

## 3 things not to say

**"You're too young to smoke."** Wanting to appear grown-up is, for many preteens, a prime motivation for picking up the habit.

**"You're grounded!"** Coming down too hard can fuel your child's urge to rebel—which he'll likely express by smoking. Besides, mere punishment doesn't give him the chance to understand why he shouldn't light up.

**Nothing.** "If your child is aware that you've noticed signs of her smoking but haven't said anything, that amounts to tacit approval," says Saul Shiffman, Ph.D., head of the University of Pittsburgh Smoking Research Group.

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