

3. WARNING! AMBIVALENCE IS NORMAL

Sometimes change will make sense to your child, other times it won't. He may give reasons for change one day (green lights); and the next day he argues against it (red lights). This motivational seesaw *is normal*, it's how ambivalence gets expressed and is for the course in virtually any kind of change — from dieting to ending relationships to changing careers — not just changing substance use.

Why might your child feel ambivalent, when the costs seem so clear to you? The change you hope for may have its benefits, but remember, your child gets something from using substances (it's reinforcing!). As a result, sometimes using or not changing makes sense. Changing that behavior requires learning a new behavior to replace it, and the work involved in learning can be hard and uncomfortable.

Change can be understood as a cost-benefit equation, as illustrated by the (less loaded) example below:

| Reasons to Exercise/Change (Benefits) | Reasons to Not Exercise/Not Change (Costs) |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>better health</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>feel really awkward in the gym socially</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>increased energy</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>like extra time at home</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>doctor will be happy</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>get fatigued from exercise</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>feel better about myself</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>reminds me how out of shape I am</i> |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>don't want to pay for gym</i> |

This is ambivalence: wanting to go in two directions at the same time, often with good (or good enough) reasons either way. If you listen carefully, you can hear your child's ambivalence in the way he talks about his experiences and decisions. Try to appreciate that his reasons for both changing a behavior and not changing it are reasonable—and don't take the bait! Arguing with

ambivalence or trying to make him see your side is just begging for him to defend his reasons for not changing. If you react to “I don’t want to change” (red light talk) by arguing, trying to shout it down, or lecturing (“what do you mean you don’t want to stop, you are failing school because of it!”), you are probably going to get a defensive response (yelling back or better yet, door slamming). And, you may miss hearing the other more subtle examples of your child’s desire to change (“I don’t want to have to go to summer school”).

Not getting into an argument gives him room to reflect on his own reasons to change. Instead of fighting with ambivalence, you can gently guide his behavior with your responses. You can choose to respond with communication and behavioral strategies that help tip the scale toward change. Patience can come in very handy!