

## Talking to your Kids about Drugs.

Kids hear about drugs (tobacco, alcohol, and prescription pills) everywhere, it seems. On TV, radio, the news, in music and movies. Sometimes on the street or on the playground.

The teen years are the most likely time for someone to start taking drugs. And starting drug use as a teen can lead to drug problems when they grow up.

There are many things you can do to help your children stay away from drugs before the opportunity for them to partake happens that can help lead them into making good choices. As with everything, the desire to change comes from within. If you truly want to help your child live a sober and healthy lifestyle, the change starts with you. Our kids look up to people who are older than them, especially their parents. Observe your own habits. Do you drink? Are your drinking habits healthy? Do you partake in other substance usage? [Check out these articles](#) and answer honestly for yourself and your children.

## Could your kids be at risk for substance abuse?

Families strive to find the best ways to raise their children to live happy, healthy, and productive lives. Parents are often concerned about whether their children will start or are already using drugs such as tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, and others, including the abuse of prescription drugs. Parents play an important role in preventing their children from starting to use drugs.

First, before talking with your kids about alcohol and drugs, you need to be up-to-date about them. Here are some topics that you should educate yourself on:

- Different types of drugs
- Effects of drugs on the body
- Signs of drug use

Being educated allows you to present facts to your kids. Your children may have heard inaccurate information, especially from other teens and children, and you can provide them with the correct information.

This website, along with the websites listed under [Links](#), can provide you with this information.

After you have educated yourself, it is time to talk with your kids. Remember that your child sees you as an authority figure. When speaking with them about alcohol and drugs, you should avoid confrontation and keep the conversation going. Using this approach will show them that you are concerned and make them feel like they can speak freely about the subject. A good way to start off a conversation is by asking a question and let them speak first. Good conversation starters include:

- What have you heard about alcohol and drugs?
- What have you heard about alcohol and drug use?
- What do you think about alcohol? Marijuana? Cocaine? Prescription drugs? Other drugs?

When your child starts talking, let them finish before you respond -- even if their response upsets you.

A good response should include accurate information you found about alcohol and drugs, especially if the child has said something that is factually incorrect. In some cases, you might show the child the source of your information. If your child asks you a question that you don't know the answer to, don't be afraid to say, "I don't know." This will give you the opportunity to search for the answer with your child, making them an active participant in the process.

Another way to create a positive conversation is to role play with your child. Imagine a situation where the teen could be asked to use alcohol or drugs and give the teen the opportunity to plan a response. If the child comes up with a way to say "no" , praise them. If they have a different answer, talk with them about ways to say "no". It is important that kids know that saying "no" to an offer of drugs or alcohol is okay -- and is expected. You should work into your conversation that a lot of kids -- including teenagers -- refuse to use drugs or alcohol, even at teen parties where adults are not present.

At some point in your conversation, you probably ought to explain that use of drugs or alcohol by teens is illegal. If they are caught, they can be arrested, go to jail, appear in court, and possibly have a criminal record that will remain with them for the rest of their lives. A criminal conviction for drug use can keep a person from getting a good job, or attending a good college, or obtaining federal financial assistance for college, and can interfere with other opportunities. Whether the child believes that smoking marijuana or drinking alcohol "is no big deal" doesn't affect the fact that huge consequences can result from doing these things.

Another point that you might want to work into your conversation is that using drugs or alcohol will always affect a person's ability to make good decisions. Drug and alcohol use is a primary or secondary factor in about 80% of the crimes that result in people going into prisons. It's also a factor in many teenaged pregnancies. One drink, or one marijuana joint reduces a person's ability to make good decisions. And experts uniformly agree that the more you drink, or smoke, or snort, or inject, the poorer your decisions will be.

Yet another point is the effect of alcohol or other drugs on driving ability. Many people operate motor vehicles after consuming alcohol or drugs, which often results in arrests for drunken or drugged driving. Again, consumption of even small amounts of alcohol or other drugs will reduce a person's ability to safely operate a motor vehicle. A person convicted of drunk driving can go to jail for a year or more. Even worse, alcohol or drugs is a factor in many serious accidents resulting in death or permanent injury. Teens rarely believe that they will die as a

result of any bad decision, but they are more likely to believe that they could be seriously injured. You might ask your teen to think about being crippled from a car accident, or causing the death of another person.

The object of this kind of conversation with your child is to help your child learn to make good decisions on his or her own. Making good decisions about drugs and alcohol as a child or teen can keep them out of trouble, do better in school, maintain good health, and set them on a path of a productive and responsible life.

This kind of conversation ought to occur over several days. Regardless how your first conversation goes, you should raise this topic several other times. Repetition reinforces the message, and you might prefer to break the conversation into several segments.

Talking your children about alcohol and drugs shows them that you care and will open a line for future communications about the subject. Getting the facts while they are young can provide them with the tools to say "no".

## **Preschool to Age 7**

Before you get nervous about talking to young kids, take heart. You've probably already laid the groundwork for a discussion. For instance, whenever you give a fever medicine or an antibiotic to your child, you can discuss why and when these medicines should be given. This is also a time when your child is likely to pay attention to your behavior and guidance.

Take advantage of "teachable moments" now. If you see a character in a movie or on TV with a cigarette, talk about smoking, [nicotine](#) addiction, and what smoking does to a person's body. This can lead into a discussion about other drugs and how they could cause harm.

Keep the tone of these discussions calm and use terms that your child can understand. Be specific about the effects of the drugs: how they make a person feel, the risk of overdose, and the other long-term damage they can cause. To give your kids these facts, you might have to do a little [research](#).

## **Ages 8 to 12**

As your kids grow older, you can begin talks with them by asking them what they think about drugs. By asking the questions in a nonjudgmental, open-ended way, you're more likely to get an honest response.

Remember to show your kids that you're listening and really paying attention to their concerns and questions.

Kids this age usually are still willing to talk openly to their parents about touchy subjects. Starting a dialogue now helps keep the door open as kids get older and are less inclined to share their thoughts and feelings.

Even if your questions don't immediately result in a discussion, you'll get your kids thinking about the issue. Show them that you're willing to discuss the topic and hear what they have to say. Then, they might be more willing to come to you for help in the future.

News, such as steroid use in professional sports, can be springboards for casual conversations about current events. Use these discussions to give your kids information about the risks of drugs.

## **Ages 13 to 17**

Kids this age are likely to know other kids who use alcohol or drugs, and to have friends who drive. Many are still willing to express their thoughts or concerns with parents about it. They may ask you more specific questions about drugs.

Use these conversations not only to understand your child's thoughts and feelings, but also to talk about the dangers of driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Talk about the legal issues — jail time and fines — and the possibility that they or someone else might be killed or seriously injured. Also make sure they know they have options. A lot of drug use is done through peer-pressure. Let your kids know they can say “let me think about it”, or “I’ll have to pass”, or “no, thanks though” or “I’m good.” Having at least 3 different phrases they can say to decline drugs will prepare them for the times when someone asks more than once if they would like drugs. Talk to your kids about phrases that they might like and feel natural for them to say.

Consider making a written or verbal contract on the rules about going out or using the car. You can promise to pick your kids up at any time (even 2 a.m.!), no questions asked, if they call you when the person responsible for driving has been drinking or using drugs.

The contract also can detail other situations: For example, if you find out that someone drank or used drugs in your car while your son or daughter was behind the wheel, you may want to suspend driving privileges for 6 months. By discussing all of this with your kids from the start, you eliminate surprises and make your expectations clear.

## **Laying Good Groundwork**

No parent, child, or family is immune to the effects of drugs. Any kid can end up in trouble, even those who have made an effort to avoid it and even when they have been given the proper guidance from their parents.

However, certain groups of kids may be more likely to use drugs than others. Kids who have friends who use drugs are likely to try drugs themselves. Those feeling socially isolated for whatever reason may turn to drugs.

So it's important to know your child's friends — and their parents. Be involved in your children's lives. If your child's school runs an anti-drug program, get involved. You might learn something! Pay attention to how your kids are feeling and let them know that you're available and willing to listen in a nonjudgmental way. Recognize when your kids are going through difficult times so that you can provide the support they need or seek additional care if it's needed.

A warm, open family environment — where kids can talk about their feelings, where their achievements are praised, and where their self-esteem is boosted — encourages kids to come forward with their questions and concerns. When censored in their own homes, kids go elsewhere to find support and answers to their most important questions.

Make talking and having conversations with your kids a regular part of your day. Finding time to do things you enjoy together as a family helps everyone stay connected and maintain open communication.

If you are looking for more resources for yourself or your child, be sure to also talk to your doctor.

The following five questions, developed by the Child and Family Center at the University of Oregon, highlight parenting skills that are important in preventing the initiation and progression of drug use among youth. For each question, a video clip shows positive and negative examples of the skill, and additional videos and information are provided to help you practice positive parenting skills.

**Questions:**

- **Are you able to communicate calmly and clearly with your teenager regarding relationship problems?**
  - **Do you encourage positive behaviors in your teenager on a daily basis?**
  - **Are you able to negotiate emotional conflicts with your teenager and work toward a solution?**
  - **Are you able to calmly set limits when your teenager is defiant or disrespectful? Are you able to set limits on more serious problem behavior such as drug use, if or when it occurs?**
- Do you monitor your teenager to assure that he or she does not spend too much unsupervised time with peers?**