

Drug and Alcohol Prevention: Talk Early and Often

Did you know 83% of youth say their parents are the leading influence in their choice to not drink? Parents play a key role in preventing alcohol or drug use amongst youth. While there are several ways to help prevent the use of alcohol and drugs (fostering healthy and responsible attitudes, encouraging supportive relationships, fostering the development of positive interests and showing kids that their decisions matter), one of the best strategies parents can engage in is talking openly and honestly with their youth. Research shows that kids who have conversations with their parents and learn about the dangers of alcohol and drug use are 50% less likely to use alcohol and drugs than those who don't have such conversations (National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, Inc.). The challenge for many isn't recognizing the importance of these conversations, but knowing when and how to engage in discussions about alcohol and drugs with their kids. A simple rule of thumb: It's never too early to start. Even at young ages, parents can take advantage of "teachable moments" when alcohol or drug issues come up on TV, in the movies, on the news, or in conversations. The younger the child, the more help they will need to make sense of the information. Below are some basic guidelines that can assist parents in having conversations about drugs and alcohol.



Ages 5-8

- **Let your child know how you feel about tobacco, alcohol and other drugs:** Keep your conversations factual and focused on the present (future consequences are too distant to have any meaning). For example, let them know that being high on alcohol or drugs makes it harder to play ball, finish a puzzle or do things they enjoy.
- **Talk to your child about drug-related messages in the media:** Ask your child whether different ads, TV shows or videos make drugs seem cool and acceptable, or whether they also show their adverse effects. Encourage your child to ask questions or share concerns about the things they are seeing or hearing.
- **Set clear family rules about drug use and examine your own actions:** Tell children why you don't want them to take drugs, drink or smoke. Try to be a good role model. Actions always speak louder than words.
- **Help kids build problem-solving skills:** If your child is having trouble with homework, a friendship or bully at school, help them pinpoint the problem and find long-term solutions. Point out that "quick fixes" don't often work.
- **Get to know your child's friends and their parents:** Check in by phone or visit every once in a while to make sure that these families share the same values as you do about alcohol and drugs (This a good rule to follow for all ages).

Ages 8-12

- **Keep in mind that the tween and pre-teen years is one of the most important times in a child's life to have conversations about drug and alcohol use:** This is the time when kids need your advice and input more than ever as they start to form their own opinions and thoughts surrounding important issues.

- **Make sure your child knows your rules about drug use and the consequences if they're broken:** Kids this age can understand the reason for rules and appreciate having limits in place. Research shows that children are less likely to use substances if their parents have established a pattern of setting clear rules and consequences for breaking them.
- **Teach your child to say “no”:** Kids need to know how to not give in to peer pressure and get out of uncomfortable situations. Brainstorm some solutions your child may use if offered alcohol or drugs. It is also important to talk to your child about the risk associated with maintaining friendships with kids who choose to use drugs or alcohol.
- **Help build your child's self-esteem:** Puberty can be a time of vulnerability and insecurity, putting kids at greater risk for giving into peer pressure. During these years, provide your child with lots of positive reinforcements, praise their successes and recognize good decisions they are making.
- **Base drug and alcohol related messages on facts not fear:** Facts are more likely to sink in during the long term.
- **Keep your conversations in “present tense”:** Due to brain development, tweens and preteens aren't concerned with future problems that might result from experimenting with alcohol and drugs. Focus on how using drugs or alcohol could be harmful to them in the present.
- **Help children separate reality from fantasy:** Watch television and movies with your kids and ask lots of questions to reinforce the distinction between what is real and what is fictional.
- **Encourage healthy activities:** Look for ways to get your child involved in sports, hobbies, school clubs, music and other activities that reduce boredom and excess free time. Encourage positive friendships and interests and look for activities that you and your child can do together.

Ages 13-18

Many of the previously discussed suggestions also apply to teenagers when addressing alcohol and drug concerns, but below are some special suggestions to consider for this savvy age group.

- **Communicate your expectations surrounding alcohol and drug use:** Make sure your teen knows the consequences for going against your expectations and enforce those consequences when rules are broken. Kids who are not regularly monitored by their parents are 4 times more likely to use drugs.
- **Make it clear that you disapprove of alcohol and drug use:** Remind your teens of the negative consequences of using alcohol and drugs as well as the positive benefits of abstaining from substance use.
- **Provide your teen with positive reinforcement:** Teens need to hear lots of positive comments about their life and who they are as individuals.
- **Show interest and discuss your teens daily ups and downs:** This will help you earn your child's trust and learn how to talk with each other.
- **Don't just leave your teens anti-drug education up to their school:** Ask your teen what they have learned about drugs in school and then build on that with additional topics such as, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, positive approaches to stress reduction and peer relationships.

References: Partnership for a Drug-Free America; American Academy of Pediatrics; National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, Inc.