



Parenting for Prevention: *How to Talk to Your Kids at Any Age About Alcohol, Other Drugs & Making Good Decisions*

Why it's Important Right Now

Many parents struggle with starting the conversation with their kids about alcohol and other drugs. Some parents wonder if they have enough information or know the facts, other parents worry that they have to reveal their own underage experiences with alcohol, and many think that their kids are too young or that talking about alcohol may encourage them to try it. The fact is, you can help prevent alcohol and other drug use at any age by using age-appropriate strategies that begin with a solid foundation of good-decision making. When kids have the confidence to make their own choices and understand that making good decisions keeps them healthy and safe, the more challenging conversations about alcohol and other drugs are not so daunting.

Talking with your Toddler (ages 2-4)

During the preschool years kids begin to learn the importance of healthy routines such as exercise, eating right, tooth-brushing and getting plenty of sleep. This is a great time to introduce habits that lay the foundation for a drug-free life.

- Use everyday opportunities to remind your toddler why eating an apple is good for their bodies and how dancing to their favorite song keeps them strong. Join in with them. Kids learn from watching your examples.
- Allow your child to make choices about what to wear or what book to read. Recognize their good choices and support your child's decision-making skills. It builds their confidence.
- Help your child avoid dangerous substances that exist in their close environment. Point out harmful chemicals commonly found in homes, such as household cleaners and medicine. In the yard, identify hazards such as poison ivy or insect sprays. Explain that a parent or adult needs to be present with dangerous substances and to tell a parent or adult if they came into contact with anything poisonous. Teach them to recognize symbols and signs for danger.



Talking with Younger Children (ages 5-8)

Kids in elementary school are exploring their independence and discovering their individuality, but they are still closely tied to family and comforting routines. They are beginning to absorb messages from peers, school and the media.

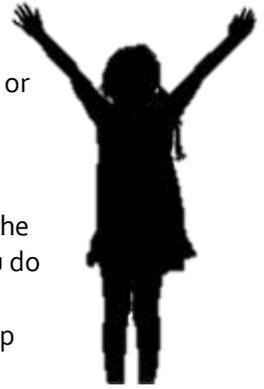


- Discussions should be factual and focused on the present. Talk with your child about the immediate impact of alcohol – drinking too much can make you act differently, fall and get hurt or make you sick. Smoking makes your breath smell bad and damages your lungs making it hard to run or play.
- Talk to your kids about the drug-related messages they see on TV, in magazines or at the movies. Ask them how they feel about how alcohol or drugs were portrayed. Was using substances glamorized?
- Establish clear no-use rules for drinking and drug use. Tell them the reasons for your rules. Let them know that your job is to keep them safe.
- Be responsible about how much you consume and talk out loud about the safe and responsible choices you are making.
- Get to know your child's friends and their friends' parents to make sure they are giving their children the same kinds of messages you give your children.
- Keep kids busy with activities – art classes, music lessons, sports, community service, or a homework club all emphasize a healthy lifestyle.

Talking with your Tween (ages 9-12)

Pre-teens are figuring out their place in the world. While their friends' opinions are gaining power, parents still have the most influence on their decisions. That's why it is important to keep talking with them about making healthy choices, especially about drug and alcohol use.

- Set rules and establish consequences if those rules are broken. Make sure your child understands them. Be consistent with follow through. This goes for homework, bedtimes and curfews, as well as no-use rules about tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs.
- Base drug and alcohol messages on facts, not fear. Scare tactics don't work.
- Help your child with refusal skills. Have them practice responses if someone offers them alcohol or drugs. Saying "No, thanks. I've got a big game tomorrow" shows that they care about being healthy. Let them know they can use you as an excuse and say: "No, my parents will kill me if I smoke a cigarette."
- Kids at this age are not concerned with long-term consequences. Keep discussions focused on the immediate negative effects – cigarettes make your clothes and hair smell; alcohol can make you do something embarrassing; marijuana will make it hard to play in the basketball tournament.
- Help them separate reality from fantasy. Watch TV and movies with them. Ask questions to help them make the distinction between the two. Include advertising in your discussions and explain that magazines create enticing images to sell products to young consumers.



Talking with your Teen (ages 13-18)

The average age kids try drugs for the first time is 13. This is a critical time in helping youth make positive choices when faced with drugs and alcohol. Through the teen years, young people will have to make plenty of choices about drug use and whether they should give into peer pressure or their own curiosity. Your clear and consistent messages about not using alcohol and drugs and your reasons why can help prevent teen use.



- Let your younger teen know you respect them as an individual. They need to hear a lot of positive comments about who they are, not just what they do. Positive reinforcement establishes a strong sense of confidence and can lower the risk of drug and alcohol use.
- Check in with your teen every day – celebrate their successes and support them through the tough times. You'll earn your child's trust, develop strong communication habits, and pave the way for honest discussions about alcohol and drugs.
- Talk with your teen about what they are learning in school about drugs and alcohol and continue the conversations at home. This is a great opportunity to share your values, expectations and concerns about alcohol and drugs and to learn what your teen is thinking.
- Older teens need to hear factual, detailed and reality-driven messages. Substance use can put them in dangerous situations, cause serious permanent health consequences, or lead to addiction.
- Emphasize that substance use can interfere with your teen's future goals and plans. Discuss how drug use can ruin your teen's chance of getting into college or landing their dream job.

RESOURCES

KidsHealth

www.kidshealth.org/parent/positive/talk/alcohol.htm

National Institute on Drug Abuse

<http://www.drugabuse.gov/parents-educators>

The Partnership for Drug-Free Kids

<http://www.drugfree.org/>

NIH/National Institute on Alcohol Abuse & Addiction

http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/MakeADiff_HTML/makediff.htm

Parenting for Prevention is a Decisions at Every Turn Coalition educational series for parents and other caring adults to increase awareness and knowledge about important issues youth issues and to encourage dialogue about making healthy choices.

Please visit <http://www.AshlandDecisions.org/parent-tip-sheets.html> for our complete library of tip sheets.

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