



# Partnership to End Addiction

## CATCHING IT EARLY

*Not sure how to prevent drug or alcohol use? Or what to do if you suspect or have discovered substance use? We have the science- and research-backed information to help you help your child.*

### **Teen substance use**

The teen and young adult years are confusing, complicated and formative. Understanding what's happening socially and developmentally — and how it can intersect with substance use — is fundamental to setting the stage for healthier outcomes.

### **Worried about possible use?**

It's important to take any substance use seriously, but before acting on impulse, take a breath and review strategies for communicating effectively and encouraging positive behavior change.

### **Communication & parenting skills**

Learn how to create a foundation that discourages risky behavior, helping prevent substance use or addiction.

### **Information by substance**

Get everything you need to know to better prevent the use or misuse of the substances most accessible to teens and young adults. Comprehensive and up-to-date drug guide at: <https://drugfree.org/drugs/>

[Alcohol](#)

[Marijuana \(Cannabis\)](#)

[Vaping](#)

[Prescription & over-the-counter medication](#)

# Prevention Tips for Every Age

As a parent, you are the biggest influence in your child's life and having open, honest conversations is one of the most powerful ways to connect with your kids and help them develop into healthy adults. When addressing some more challenging topics – like nicotine, alcohol or drugs – it's not about having a one-time “drug talk,” but rather tackling the subject through more frequent, organic conversations that evolve as your child gets older. Some things to keep in mind:

- Keep lines of communication open and make sure you come from a place of love and compassion – even when you're having tough conversations.
- Balance any consequences with positive encouragement.
- Frequent touch points and teachable moments come up all the time — use these as natural opportunities to discuss substance use.

## Preschool (2-4 years old)

The preschool years are all about laying the foundation for healthy habits. The following are some age-appropriate scenarios to help your child understand risks related to substance use.

### Scenario:

Taking your daily vitamin, or giving your child their daily vitamin.

### What you can say:

Vitamins help your body grow. You need to take them every day so you can grow up big and strong, but you should only take what I give you. Someone else's vitamins or too many vitamins can hurt you and make you sick.

### Scenario:

Your kids are curious about medicine bottles they see in your home.

### What you can say:

You only take medicine when you're sick, and only if your parent or doctor gives it to you. Taking medicine by yourself, taking the wrong medicine or taking medicine that isn't especially for you could be dangerous.

### Scenario:

Your child sees an adult smoking or vaping and, since you've talked about the dangers of smoking before, they are confused.

### What you can say:

Grownups make their own decisions and sometimes those decisions aren't the best or healthiest choice for their bodies. When someone starts smoking, their body feels like it has to have cigarettes and that makes it harder for them to stop doing it. That's why it's so important to never even try smoking or vaping.

## **Prevention tips for preschoolers:**

- Explain the importance of taking good care of our bodies – eating right, exercising and getting a good night’s sleep. Discuss how good you feel when you take care of yourself — how you can run, jump, play and even go to work for many hours.
- Celebrate your child’s decision-making skills. Whenever possible, let your child choose what to wear to help reinforce your child’s ability to make decisions.
- Help your child avoid dangerous substances that exist in their immediate world. Point out harmful chemicals commonly found in homes, such as bleach, kitchen cleaners and furniture polish.
- Keep all substances out of sight and out of reach of kids.
- Help your child understand the difference between make-believe and real life. Ask your child what they think about a TV program or story. Let your child know about your likes and dislikes and discuss how violence or bad decisions can hurt people.
- Turn frustration into a learning opportunity. If a tower of blocks keeps collapsing during a play session, work with your child to find possible solutions to the problem. Whenever possible, allow your child to come up with solutions so that they can gain confidence in their own abilities to problem solve or self-soothe.

## **Early elementary (5-8 years old)**

Younger elementary school children still crave time and connection with family and most are eager to please, but they’re also beginning to explore their individuality. Building on the aforementioned tips, here are some age-appropriate scenarios to help your child understand how to stay healthy and avoid risks related to substance use.

### **Scenario:**

Your child has expressed curiosity about the pills they see you take every day — and the other bottles in the medicine cabinet.

### **What you can say:**

Just because it’s in a family’s medicine cabinet doesn’t mean that it is safe for you to take. Even if your friends say it’s okay, you can say, “No, my parents won’t let me take something that doesn’t have my name on the bottle and that my parents didn’t give to me.”

### **Scenario:**

Your child chooses an outfit for school that doesn’t match and will definitely attract attention.

### **What you can say:**

“I love how you express your individual style and personality in your outfits.” Whenever possible, let your child choose what to wear, even if the clothes don’t quite match. You are reinforcing your child’s ability to make decisions for themselves.

## **Prevention tips for early elementary school:**

- Talk to your kids about substance-related messages they see on TV or in movies or overhear at school. Ask your kids how they feel about the things they've seen or heard — you'll learn a great deal about what they're thinking.
- Keep your discussions about substances focused on the present — long-term consequences are too distant to have meaning to most children of this age.
- Discuss the differences between the medicinal uses and illegal uses of drugs, and how taking prescription medicine the wrong way can be very dangerous.
- Set clear rules and expectations. If you smoke cigarettes, use vaping products or drink alcohol, be mindful of the message you are sending to your children. Try not to convey that it takes a drink or pill to relax, relieve stress or have fun. Be clear that alcohol and other substances are especially dangerous for kids whose brains and bodies are still developing.
- Work on problem solving together: Help them find long-lasting solutions to homework trouble, a fight with a friend or dealing with a bully. Be sure to point out that quick fixes are not long-term solutions. Even if the choices they end up making are not exactly what you may have had in mind, there is opportunity to build confidence and resilience (assuming the choices are not dangerous).
- Get to know your child's friends — and their parents. Check in to make sure they are giving their children the same kinds of messages you are giving yours. If those messages are different or inconsistent with yours, talk with your children about how different people make different choices. Explain why you believe your family's choices are best for you and your children.

## Preteen (9-12 years old)

Preteens who are trying to figure out their place in the world tend to give their friends' opinions a great deal of power. At the same time, they're also beginning to question their parents' views and rules. This shift is natural, healthy and part of a normal process of maturity and identity development. The following are some age-appropriate scenarios to help your preteen understand how to stay healthy and avoid risks related to substance use.

### Scenario:

Your child is just starting middle school and you know that it's more likely that they will now be exposed to substances at school or in social environments.

### What you can say:

I know we talked about this when you were younger, but you're at the age now when you might be seeing or hear about other kids vaping, smoking, drinking or using drugs. I want you to remember that our family does not allow any substance use because it's bad for your health and your brain. I'm here for you and the best thing you can do is talk to me if you are confused or concerned.

### Scenario:

You hear from other parents that kids are selling prescription drugs at your child's school. Your child hasn't mentioned it but you want to talk to them about it.

### What you can say:

"I heard some kids at your school are selling pills – prescription medications that they or someone in their family takes. Have you heard about kids doing this?" Practice role playing some practical responses they can give if offered medications by a friend. Let them know that they can always use you as an excuse to get out of a

bad situation. You can say, “If you’re ever offered prescription medication, you can tell them, ‘my parents would kill me if I did that’ or ‘my parents can always tell if I’m lying or hiding something.’”

### **Scenario:**

Your child’s favorite celebrity is involved in a drug scandal and your child read about it online.

### **What you can say:**

Being in the public eye puts a lot of pressure on people, and some may turn to drug use because they think it will relieve that stress. But when a person uses drugs and alcohol — especially a young person who’s still growing — it changes how their brain works and they make poor decisions. Most people who use drugs and alcohol need a lot of help to get better. I hope the celebrity has a good doctor and friends and family members to help them through this.

### **Prevention tips for preteens:**

- Make sure your child knows your rules — and that you’ll enforce the consequences if rules are broken. Kids are less likely to use nicotine, alcohol and other substances if their parents have established a pattern of setting clear rules and consequences.
- Feelings of insecurity, doubt and pressure may creep in during puberty. Offset those feelings with a lot of positive comments about your child’s individuality and strengths. Focus on their effort, creativity and kindness rather than specific outcomes such as good grades or winning a game.
- Get to know your child’s friends — and their friends’ parents. Check in by phone or a visit once in a while to make sure they are on the same page with regard to supervision and prohibiting substance use, particularly when their home is to be used for a party or sleepover.
- Help children separate reality from fantasy. Watch shows or movies with them and ask lots of questions to reinforce the distinction between the two. Remember to include advertising in your discussions, as those messages are especially powerful.

## **Teenager (13-18 years old)**

We know teens are incredibly savvy when it comes to their knowledge about substance use, and they need information and messages based in real life. This is a pivotal time for parents to help their kids make positive choices about substances. The following are some scenarios to help your child understand how to stay healthy and navigate risks related to substance use.

### **Scenario:**

You’re with your child and you both notice a few kids vaping.

### **What you can say:**

“It really concerns me to see those kids vaping. I know that it’s becoming more common among kids your age, but that doesn’t mean it’s safe. What do you think about vaping? Do any of your friends do it?” While vaping may be a popular activity for some teens, it isn’t considered safe, especially for teens and young adults whose brains are still developing. Set clear expectations and explain why you don’t want your child vaping (e.g., concern about toxins, a broad range of health consequences, nicotine addiction).

### **Scenario:**

Your teen is starting high school — and you want to remind them that they do not have to give in to peer pressure to vape, drink or use substances.

### **What you can say:**

“High school will be a fun time in your life, and we want you to enjoy yourself with your friends, but we also know you might experience pressure to drink alcohol, vape or use marijuana or other substances. A lot of people feel like this is just a normal part of being a teenager. It isn’t. Most teens actually don’t do those things.

You’ll have lots of decisions to make for yourself, and you might even make some mistakes. Just know that you can talk to us about anything, anytime — even if you DO make a mistake or feel stuck in a situation and need our help. We won’t freak out and, together, we’ll figure out a way to help you.”

### **Scenario:**

Your teen has started to hang out with kids you don’t know — and dropped their old friends.

### **What you can say:**

“I’ve noticed you’re hanging with a different crowd than you have in the past. Is something going on with your usual friends? Is there a problem with them, or are you just branching out and meeting some new kids? Tell me about your new friends. Do you want to invite them over to our house sometime? I’d really like to meet them.”

### **Scenario:**

Your kid comes home smelling of alcohol or cigarette smoke.

### **What you can say:**

Your response should be measured, quiet and serious — not yelling, shouting or overly emotional. Your child should realize that this isn’t just a small, frustrating moment like when they don’t complete a chore or do what you’ve asked; this is a very serious moment. You can say, “I’m really upset that you’re smoking/drinking. I love you and care about you and want to understand why you chose to do it. Your health and well-being are what’s most important, and I need you to be honest. So for starters, tell me about what happened tonight and why you or your friends were drinking.”

### **Prevention tips for teens:**

- Make sure your teen knows the rules and the consequences for breaking those rules — and, most importantly, that you really will enforce those consequences. Kids are less likely to use nicotine, alcohol and other substances if their parents have established a pattern of setting clear rules and consequences for breaking those rules. Those consequences should be reasonable, enforceable and short-lived. If there’s no end in sight, teens will feel like there’s no way out and no real reason to continue to refrain from engaging in the undesired behavior.
- Make it clear that you disapprove of all alcohol, vaping, nicotine and drug use, and look for opportunities to discuss your feelings about substance use in a productive way: letters from the school, reacting to advertisements or seeing substance use on TV and in movies. Be ready to listen rather than give a lecture. Try using open-ended questions to get the conversation started.
- Let your teen in on all the things you find wonderful about them. They need to hear a lot of positive comments about their lives, who they are as individuals and all of the wonderful things they have to look forward to if they are healthy and safe.

- Show interest in and discuss your child’s daily ups and downs. You’ll earn their trust, learn how to talk to each other, and you won’t take them by surprise when you voice a strong point of view about substances.

## **Young adult (19-25 years old)**

As you prepare your young adult child for life after high school, you can help guide them to a healthy experience — while still supporting their independence. The following are some scenarios to help share guidance with your young adult child.

### **Scenario:**

Your adult child is moving to their own apartment or into a college dorm.

### **What you can say:**

“I know you’re off to start your own life, and I respect that you’re old enough to make your own choices, but if you ever want another perspective, please know that I’m always here for you.”

### **Scenario:**

After watching a movie portraying drug use together, you want to gauge your adult child’s opinion on substance use.

### **What you can say:**

“I know you might think I’m being over-protective or meddling, but that movie really disturbed me and I’m curious about your thoughts: Is there a lot of drug use going on at your school? Do you have any friends that use drugs? How do you feel about that?”

### **Tips for young adults:**

- Keep an open line of communication with your child as they leave home.
- Your child needs to know that if any problems or difficult situations arise, they can turn to you for help. Be an at-home resource for your young adult child.
- Stay alert to possible mental health issues. There is a strong link between mental and physical health issues (including stress and anxiety) and substance use. Make sure you know what campus mental health resources are available to your child — and make sure they know, too.
- While the most popular drugs on college campuses are alcohol, vaping and marijuana, non-medical use of prescription stimulants, pain relievers and tranquilizers is also common and can be very dangerous. Though prescription medications can be beneficial when prescribed for your child by a doctor, their misuse (e.g., using someone else’s pills or in amounts or for reasons not prescribed) can have serious short- and long-term consequences.

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Last Updated September 2023

## Related Reading

### [Marijuana Talk Kit](#)

[Download our Marijuana Talk Kit for parents.](#)

### [How to Prevent Underage Drinking](#)

[What do you do, and what can you say if your child has been caught drinking?](#)

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### **Connecting with Your Teenager**

Learn ways to create a strong bond with your child to help reduce their chances of engaging in risky behavior.

#### [Learn more](#)

### **Setting Limits, Monitoring Behavior**

Rules mean you care about your child and his or her safety. Don't feel bad about setting limits — your child needs them.

#### [Learn more](#)

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