



**Connecting  
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## Talking With Kids About Alcohol and Drugs

The issue of drugs can be very confusing to young people. If drugs are so dangerous, then why is the family medicine cabinet full of them? And why do TV, movies, music and advertising often make drug and alcohol use look so cool?

We need to help our kids to distinguish fact from fiction. And it's not too soon to begin. About half of young people start experimenting between the ages of 13 – 15. The more we feel comfortable talking to our young people about alcohol and drugs the better choices they will be able to make. Studies show that the better our communication is with our young people the healthier they become.

### Positive Communication

Student surveys reveal that when parents listen to their children's feelings and concerns and communicate positively; their kids feel comfortable talking with them and are more likely to stay drug-free.

### Practice Situations and Using Refusal Skills

It is important for young people to learn how to deal with situations where they will be offered alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana, and other drugs. The more practice we can give them saying no, or "no thanks – my good friend tried that and got really sick", or any other creative ways to not lose face, be safe, and be true to their convictions. Other situations to practice being safe is not getting into a car with a drinking driver. Drinking driving is the number one killer of youth. Having your young person sign a contract about not getting into a car with a drinking driver is another way to be clear about avoiding this risk. Brainstorming and planning with your youth how they will get home safely from difficult situations is proactive and sets the stage for a planned, hassle-free way to get home safe.

### Encourage choice

Allow your young person plenty of opportunity to become a confident decision-maker. An 8-year-old is capable of deciding if she wants to invite lots of friends to her birthday party or just a close pal or two. A 12-year-old can choose whether she wants to go out for chorus or join the school band. As your child becomes more skilled at making all kinds of good choices, both you and she will feel more secure in her ability to make the right decision concerning alcohol and drugs if and when the time arrives.

### Provide age-appropriate information

Make sure the information that you offer fits the child's age and stage. When your 6 or 7-year-old is brushing his teeth, you can say, "There are lots of things we do to keep our bodies healthy, like brushing our teeth. But there are also things we shouldn't do because they hurt our bodies, like smoking or taking medicines when we are not sick."

If you are watching TV with your 8 year-old and marijuana is mentioned on a program, you can say, "Do you know what marijuana is? It's a bad drug that can hurt your body." If your child has more questions, answer them. If not, let it go. Short, simple comments said and repeated often enough will get the message across.

You can offer your older child the same message, but add more drug-specific information. For example, you might explain to your 12-year-old what marijuana and crack look like, their street names and how they can affect his body.



*"Connecting Together to Build a Brighter Future"*



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## Establish a clear family position on drugs

It's okay to say, "We don't allow any drug use and children in this family are not allowed to drink alcohol. The only time that you can take any drugs is when the doctor or we give you medicine when you're sick. We made this rule because we love you very much and we know that drugs can hurt your body and make you very sick; some may even kill you. Do you have any questions?"

## Be a good example

Young people will do what you do much more readily than what you say. So try not to reach for a beer the minute you come home after a tough day; it sends the message that drinking is the best way to unwind. Offer dinner guests non-alcoholic drinks in addition to wine and spirits. And take care not to pop pills, even over-the-counter remedies, indiscriminately. Your behaviour needs to reflect your beliefs.

## Discuss what makes a good friend

Since peer pressure is so important when it comes to kids' involvement with drugs and alcohol, it makes good sense to talk with your children about what makes a good friend. To an 8-year-old you might say, "A good friend is someone who enjoys the same games and activities that you do and who is fun to be around." 11 to 12-year-olds can understand that a friend is someone who shares their values and experiences, respects their decisions and listens to their feelings. Once you've gotten these concepts across, your children will understand that "friends" who pressure them to drink or smoke pot aren't friends at all. Additionally, encouraging skills like sharing and cooperation -- and strong involvement in fun, healthful activities (such as team sports or scouting) -- will help your children make and maintain good friendships as they mature and increase the chance that they'll remain drug-free.

## Build self-esteem

Kids who feel good about themselves are much less likely than other kids to turn to illegal substances to get high.

As parents, we can do many things to enhance our children's self-image. Here are some pointers:

- Offer lots of praise for any job well done.
- If you need to criticize your child, talk about the action, not the person. If your son gets a math problem wrong, it's better to say, "I think you added wrong. Let's try again."
- Assign do-able chores. A 6-year-old can bring her plate over to the sink after dinner; a 12-year-old can feed and walk the dog after school. Performing such duties and being praised for them helps your child feel good about himself.
- Spend one-on-one time with your young person. Setting aside at least 30 uninterrupted minutes per child per day to talk, play a game, or take a walk together, lets her know you care.
- Say, "I love you." Nothing will make your young person feel better.

## Repeat the message

Information and lessons about drugs are important enough to repeat frequently. So be sure to answer questions as often as they ask them to initiate conversation whenever the opportunity arises.

## If you suspect a problem, seek help

While kids under age 12 rarely develop a substance problem, it can -- and does -- happen. If your child becomes withdrawn, loses weight, starts doing poorly in school, turns extremely moody, has glassy eyes -- or if the drugs in your medicine cabinet seem to be disappearing too quickly -- talk with your young person and reach out to local drug and alcohol organizations. You'll be helping your youth to a healthier, happier future.



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