

Nicotine, Alcohol and Drug Use Prevention, and Early Intervention: A Quick Guide for Caregivers

As parents and caregivers of young people, one of the most important ways to set the stage for a child's healthy development into adulthood is to be proactive in understanding and communicating effectively about substance use. When combined with discussions around social-emotional health, self-regulation, and persistence, this can help promote an open, trusting relationship that will serve your child well during the challenging teen years and beyond. This guide provides a brief overview of some strategies you can use to help protect your child from the harms of nicotine, alcohol and drugs, along with general tips for communicating with teens about substance use as well as other important issues.

- **Know your own feelings:** Before you can have a conversation with your child, understand your own feelings around substance use. Ambiguity opens the door for confusion and experimentation.
- **Your past is not their present:** Parents and caregivers often hope things will take care of themselves with regard to substance use because of their own experiences. However, each individual has a unique set of characteristics that affects susceptibility to substance use and addiction, that the types, strengths and risks of available substances change over the years, and that many of the social circumstances that contribute to substance use risk today are quite different from what they were in the past.
- **Setting expectations and boundaries:** Once you know your own boundaries, make them clear to your child. Clear and consistent expectations, boundaries and consequences are important to establish early, before your child begins using substances. Just as important is praise for meeting those expectations. The research is clear that, despite signs from teens that they want you to leave them alone, young people consistently point to parents as the most important influence on their decisions around substance use.
- **Model:** Very liberal parental attitudes about substance use as well as heavy drinking or any drug use by parents are strongly associated with more frequent and heavier use by teens. Be mindful of your own behaviors and attitudes and how they affect your child.
- **Communicate:** Having frequent, open, non-judgmental and empathetic conversations with your child is the foundation of effective parenting (see opposite page for tips).

Understanding the why, who, where, and when allows you to open the door to communicating effectively with your children.

- **WHY:** Kids, just like adults, want to vape, drink or use drugs not because they want to do something bad, but because they have a practical reason (e.g., to see what it feels like, to "party," to feel a part of a group or culture, to escape problems). Understanding why a child wants to use or does use substances allows you to open the discussion and promote healthier activities that help achieve similar feelings or goals.
- **WHO:** One of the strongest predictors of substance use or not using is whether a person spends time with other people who use. This includes friends, siblings and parents.
- **WHERE:** Availability drives substance use. Whether it be in the home or at a party, if nicotine, alcohol or drugs are accessible, the likelihood of use increases. Limit access to all substances in your home and be mindful of environments where they are available including other people's homes and party areas (PADJ).
- **WHEN:** Regardless of your beliefs around substance use, the evidence is clear: the longer young people delay first use, the less likely they are to develop problems.



In addition to these factors, understanding your child's temperament (e.g., risk taker, socially anxious, etc.), history of substance use in your family, mental health concerns, and other risk factors for problem use can help you have useful conversations with your children and know when it's best to seek outside help.

TIP: Work with your kids to approach not drinking and using with confidence. It takes courage and power not to drink or use. You are not taking something away with boundaries, but giving them skills for life so they can live with intention.

Conversation Tips

To keep conversations going with your kids – about substance use or other things – use **OARS** skills:

Open-Ended Questions: Ask questions that can't be answered with just "yes" or "no."

Affirm: Find something good in your child's words or deeds to affirm. In a conversation about why they may be interested in using substances, affirm their feelings and empathize with their situation.

Reflect: Repeat your child's words without inflection to let them know you are listening.

Summarize: Identify the key points you and your child have discussed.

Providing Feedback: Creating an openness to conversation allows you to offer feedback or guidance in an empathic and non-judgmental manner. Once you have an understanding of a situation:

- 1- Ask permission to share an idea or recommendation
- 2- Share your idea or recommendation
- 3- Check back for understanding
- 4- Get their feedback
- 5- Reflect and repeat

This is not a one-and-done conversation; it is a journey. Adapting your communication to your child's developmental stage and actual social circumstances (e.g., a freshman vs. a senior; access to alcohol vs. limited availability) allows you to have more meaningful and relevant conversations.

Tip: Being awake when your children get home from a social event and having a conversation about their experiences – even a conversation that has nothing to do with alcohol or drugs – is helpful in keeping the lines of communication open, giving them something to remember while they are out, and letting them know you are there for them.

For more tips on prevention and intervention go to www.drugfree.org. It is also helpful to ask a trusted friend or colleague for recommendations.

To speak with a parent or caregiver specialist about your child's nicotine, alcohol or drug use, **text** your question or concern to **55753** and a Partnership Specialist will get back to you within 24 hours with resources and for a text conversation.