

Talking to Your Children about Alcohol and Other Drugs

Young Children (Elementary School)

Though we'd like to believe otherwise, the truth is that even elementary students may be offered or otherwise exposed to alcohol and other drugs. Thus, it is important that you talk with your young child about the dangers of drugs and ways to avoid them.

Keep it simple – For example, ask your child what they would do if a new school friend asked them to try a sip of beer when no parents or teachers are around. Reaffirm that your child is not allowed to do this, and practice ways that they can say "no."

Don't overwhelm your child – Going into graphic details about the dangers of drugs will probably do little more than terrify your child, and turn the very thought of school into an angst-inducing idea.

Be a good role model – If the first thing you do when you come home is head for the refrigerator and reach for a cold beer, you're teaching your child that alcohol is either the reward for a hard day's work or a means of coping with the day's frustrations. Pay attention to the messages you're sending your kids.

Adolescents (Middle School)

The middle school years can be particularly challenging. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), one in two U.S. eighth graders have tried alcohol; National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) reports 16 percent of eighth graders has smoked marijuana. Thus, in talking with your adolescent it is essential to address the very real likelihood that they will be exposed to drugs.

Be specific – Explain to your child that drugs can inflict significant damage, that you absolutely disapprove of their use, and that your adolescent needs to be prepared to say "no" when presented (or pressured) with drugs.

Be realistic – Don't overstate your case. For example, exaggerating the dangers by telling your child that one drink or one toke can ruin their life may cause them to discount all of what you are telling them. Stick with the facts – reality provides plenty of information about the very real devastation that drugs can cause.

Be supportive – Your adolescent needs to know that you're on their side. Let them know that they can confide in you without fear of reprisal if they're being pressured to drink or take drugs, and continue to role-play or discuss ways to avoid situations where drugs and alcohol are likely to be present.

Teenagers (High School)

High school is usually a time of increased freedom for teens and increased worries for parents. And it's not likely that your child's teen years will be entirely complacent ones in your house.

But that doesn't mean that use of alcohol or drugs by your teen is a foregone conclusion, or that any teen who experiments is destined for abuse and addiction.

Stay strong – If your child is going to directly challenge or attempt to subvert your rules about alcohol and other drugs, the teen years are the most likely time for this attempted coup to occur. Claiming that "everybody's doing it," arguing that a little drinking isn't all that dangerous, or asking the infamous question "like you never tried this when you were a teenager?" are among the more common teen attempts to throw off their parental shackles. Stand your ground and stay strong in your efforts to keep your teenager away from alcohol and other drugs.

Be understanding – Your teen may come under fairly intense pressure to use alcohol or other drugs. Conversely, they may actively seek out opportunities to indulge. If they slip up (either due to external "motivators" or a simple desire to experiment), don't overreact. Some of the most effective teachable moments come in the aftermath of failures, and if your child fails to stay away from alcohol or another drug, use the opportunity to help them stay sober in the future.

Get help – If your child's behavior has exceeded your ability to influence or control, then get whatever help is necessary. From a few meetings with a counselor to more formal outpatient therapy to participation in a recovery support group or residential recovery program for teens, you have a number of options. Take advantage of the help that is available.

Young Adults (College)

Regardless of what your child's commencement speaker says, high school graduation does not mark the start of adulthood. Your "child" may look like a young man or young woman, but that doesn't mean that your work is done. College is a time of significant growth and experimentation (some of it good, some not so positive). If your child does not live at home while attending school, your ability to observe and influence behavior is extremely limited, but this doesn't mean that you are powerless to remain a positive influence.

Encourage honesty – If you've built a trusting relationship with your child during the years that they lived at home, college is the chance for you to reap the rewards of that openness. If you've been less than successful at developing the relationship you'd like, the added distance may provide the breathing room that will allow such a relationship to blossom. Either way, do what you can to address important matters with openness and honesty.

Establish and enforce rules – Talk to your child clearly and directly about your expectations regarding their use of drugs and alcohol, and be just as clear about how you plan to respond should your wishes go unfulfilled. For example, if your child is living at home while going to school, let them know that the free housing will come to an end if they continue to disobey your rules regarding drugs and alcohol. And if you are paying for their tuition, let them know that you have no desire to fund a four-year party.

Keep in touch – Regardless of the physical or emotional distance between you and your child, make the effort to stay in touch. Weekly phone calls, regular e-mails and the occasional get-together are important for both of you, and will help establish healthy patterns for the future.