

# A Parent's Role in Substance Use Prevention

## TIPS FOR TALKING TO YOUTH OF ALL AGES



Involvement and support of parents, guardians and other caregivers are critical in preventing youth substance abuse. Conversations are one of the most effective tools adults can use to connect with youth. **Youth of parents who talk to their kids about the dangers of substances early and often are 50 percent less likely to use drugs than those who do not receive these critical messages at home** (NCADD, 2015).

Tips for how to start the conversation and respond to children at every age are provided in this publication to help guide your discussion.

### How Do I Know if My Child is Using? Signs to watch for:

- Declining school performance
- Abrupt changes in friends
- Abnormal health issues or sleeping habits
- Deteriorating relationships with family
- Less openness and honesty



**9 OUT OF 10**  
PEOPLE WITH SUBSTANCE PROBLEMS STARTED USING BY AGE 18. (Center on Addiction, 2018)

Every year substance use is delayed during adolescent brain development, the risk of addiction and substance abuse **decreases 4 to 5 percent**. (SAMHSA, 2015)



### Brain development is not complete until about age 25

Early to late adolescence is a **critical risk period** for youth to begin using drugs (SAMHSA, 2015). Essential parts of a teenager's brain are forming, affecting the ability to make logical decisions. Teens are more likely to take risks, and impulsive behaviors may involve drug use. Developing brains are more prone to damage. As a result, teens become addicted more quickly with greater consequences. Side effects may include irreversible brain changes, increasing the risk of accidents, homicides, suicides, and serious physical and mental health conditions (Partnership for Drug-Free Kids, 2018). Talk to teens about how substance use impacts their brain health and overall wellness.

**7x** Youth who begin using addictive substances (tobacco, alcohol, illegal, over-the-counter or prescription drugs) before age 15 are nearly **seven times more likely** to develop a substance problem, compared with those who delay first use until age 21 or older. (Center on Addiction, 2018)

### Why Do Youth Use Drugs?

A child may be more or less likely to try drugs due to certain circumstances. Below are **risk factors** that may increase vulnerability to use drugs and **protective factors** that reduce those risks.



Risk Factors	Protective Factors
Lack of parental supervision	Parental support and strong family bonds
Poor attachment with caregivers	Presence of mentors or adult role models
Academic problems	School and community engagement
Undiagnosed mental health problems	Coping and problem-solving skills
Substance-using parents, siblings or friends	Healthy peer groups
Peer rejection	High self-esteem
Child abuse/neglect	Stable home environment

**Keep in mind:** Many youth with risk factors do not use drugs, and a risk factor for one person may not be for another.



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# START HERE: How do I talk with youth about drugs?



## Get in the right frame of mind

TOOLS	POSITIVE COMMUNICATION	TRY IT OUT
<b>Keep an open mind</b>	When youth feel judged or condemned, they are less likely to be receptive to your message.	Maintain a position of objectivity and openness. This may take practice.
<b>Put yourself in their shoes</b>	Consider the way you like to be talked to when speaking about a difficult subject.	Think about how you felt at their age.
<b>Set boundaries</b>	Be clear, direct and honest when setting limits. Let youth know you do not want them using drugs, and lay out the specific consequences if they break that rule.	Explain your reasons for not wanting them to use drugs and engage them in a discussion about the harmful consequences.
<b>Be clear about your goals</b>	After a conversation, you can review what went right, wrong, what goals were met and what to alter for next time.	Write down the goals to look back at after the discussion.
<b>Be calm and relaxed</b>	If you approach youth with anger or panic, achieving your goals will be challenging.	Find ways to relax before the conversation. Take a walk, call a friend or meditate.
<b>Be honest</b>	Approaching the situation with shame, anger or disappointment will be counter-productive. Be attentive, curious, respectful and understanding.	Stick to the facts; do not use scare tactics or make exaggerated claims. You want to build an environment of trust so they feel safe telling you the truth, even if it might be upsetting.
<b>Find teaching opportunities</b>	Use news, TV shows, movies, videos, social media or real-life situations as teachable moments.	Talk about the media's influence and encourage them to think critically about these messages.
<b>Don't lecture</b>	Lecturing about drugs likely will lead to youth shutting down, tuning out or becoming angry, or it could be misinterpreted as your disapproval of them instead of their actions. This could lead to shame and in turn, substance use behaviors.	Avoid pulling rank if you get frustrated. Saying "You can't because I'm your parent and I said so" is highly ineffective.
<b>Find a comfortable setting</b>	Announcing a sit-down meeting ("We need to have a talk after dinner") usually will be met with resistance, while a more spontaneous, casual approach will lower their anxiety and maybe even your own.	Take a walk or sit in the yard or park. Look for a place that feels less confined but not too distracting.
<b>Be aware of body language</b>	If your child is sitting, you want to be sitting as well. If the child is standing, ask the child to sit down with you.	Be mindful of finger-pointing and crossed arms; these are closed gestures, while uncrossed legs and a relaxed posture are open gestures.

## Try active listening



**Ask open-ended questions.** Ask questions to elicit more than just a "yes" or "no" response.  
*Tell me more about ...*



**Be positive.** Find positives in a situation, no matter how difficult it may seem.  
*Thank you for your honesty. I really appreciate it.*



**Let youth know you hear them.** Reflect back what you are hearing verbatim or just the sentiment.  
*I'm hearing you feel overwhelmed and believe drinking alcohol relaxes you. Is that right?*



**Sum up and ask questions.** Show you're listening the entire time and ask for their input.  
*Did I get everything? Do you have anything more to add?*



**Ask permission.** Ask if it is OK for you to speak with them about their concerns and to offer some feedback.  
*Are you OK with me asking you this? Do you mind if I give you some advice?*



**Offer empathy and compassion.** Demonstrate understanding.  
*I hear that you feel smoking pot helps your anxiety. I'm sorry you're feeling anxious; I know that's a really difficult feeling. Can we think of some other activities that can help you relax?*

# COMMUNICATION: What do I talk about?

## Conversation Starters

**It's never too early to start the conversation.** Discussions about alcohol and other drugs are ongoing conversations that begin early on and continue throughout the teenage years and young adulthood. As youth grow, your conversations may change, but they always will be centered on keeping them happy, healthy and safe.

The following discussion topics may help youth open up and talk about their knowledge and exposure to drugs. As a parent, you try to protect your children, but research shows most kids are exposed to substances at an early age through social media, the Internet, TV or friends.



### Perceptions and Understanding

- Do you know what vaping/binge drinking/overdosing is? What do you know about it?
- What do you know about why someone your age is more likely to get addicted to drugs?
- When you hear or see messages about drugs, how do you decide which are myths and which are facts?

### Friends and Peers

- What would you do if you saw friends taking prescription pills that aren't theirs? What if you saw them drunk or high?
- If you were with kids who were vaping, drinking or using drugs, how would you feel? How would you handle it?
- Besides family members, who do you feel most comfortable talking to about substances? Why?



- Visit **Parents Lead** for more communication tips.
- There's an app for that! Use the **"Talk. They Hear You"** app by SAMHSA as an online role-play tool to practice and build skills.

## Words to avoid when talking about substances (or any issue)

AVOID	INSTEAD, USE
<b>BUT</b> You did well on your report card, <b>but</b> I know you can work even harder.	<b>AND</b> You did well on your report card, <b>and</b> I know you can work even harder.
<b>SHOULD</b> You <b>should</b> stop drinking alcohol.	<b>WANT</b> I <b>want</b> you to stop drinking alcohol, and I'm here to help you.
<b>BAD</b> Smoking pot is <b>bad</b> for you.	<b>HARMFUL</b> Smoking pot is <b>harmful</b> for your health and brain.
<b>STUPID</b> Vaping is a <b>stupid</b> choice.	<b>UNHEALTHY</b> Vaping is <b>unhealthy</b> for you, and that's why I'm concerned.
<b>DISAPPROVE</b> I <b>disapprove</b> of you hanging out with that group of friends.	<b>CONCERNED</b> I am <b>concerned</b> about your group of friends and worry they may not be the best influence.
<b>DISAPPOINTED</b> I am <b>disappointed</b> in you for breaking curfew.	<b>WORRIED</b> I am <b>worried</b> about your decision to come home past curfew.
<b>CAN'T</b> You <b>can't</b> come home at 11 p.m. on weeknights.	<b>DON'T WANT</b> I <b>don't want</b> you to come home this late at night anymore.

# WHAT TO SAY: How do I respond?

There is no script available for talking about substances. However, these samples can guide you with ways to integrate prevention messages and positive parenting.



## YOUR CHILD SAYS: “I know, I know. You’ve talked with me about this before.”

YOU CAN SAY	HERE’S WHY
“I know we’ve had conversations about drugs before, and I’m sorry you feel like I’m being a nag.”	Taking responsibility and acknowledging youth’s feelings are effective ways to reduce resistance.
“I want us to be able to discuss topics because I love you and want to help during these years when you’re faced with a lot of difficult choices. Talking about them is important. Would that be OK?”	This statement shows compassion for what they are going through. Asking permission helps youth feel empowered in the dialogue. Be prepared for a possible response of “No, I don’t want to talk.” If this happens, ask why. Then have them suggest a time when they would be willing to talk.

## YOUR CHILD SAYS: “I don’t know what to say when other kids ask me to use.”

YOU CAN SAY	HERE’S WHY
“Let’s think of some ways you can turn down the offer that you are comfortable saying.”	Instead of telling them what to say or do in an uncomfortable situation, ask them. Help youth brainstorm ways to turn down offers for their own reasons, such as, “I’m not into that,” “I can’t,” “I don’t feel like it” or “I have a big game tomorrow and don’t want to be groggy.”

## YOUR CHILD SAYS: “Marijuana is a plant. It’s natural and even legal in some states. Why would they make something legal if it could hurt me?”

YOU CAN SAY	HERE’S WHY
“Not all plants are necessarily good for you. Think about poison ivy.”	This helps youth rethink their point.
“Let’s look at alcohol and cigarettes; they are legal but cause damage such as health problems, DUIs, car accidents and addiction. Just because something is legal and regulated doesn’t mean it is good for you.”	This includes examples to redirect youth back to your goal of helping them understand harmful side effects of substance use.

## YOUR CHILD SAYS: “All the kids in my class are vaping and they’re fine. It’s a lot safer than alcohol.”

YOU CAN SAY	HERE’S WHY
“Honestly, I don’t want you to be doing anything that can harm you. I’m wondering how you know all of your classmates are vaping and why you believe it is safer than alcohol.”	You can express genuine curiosity about their thought processes. If youth assume everyone else is taking drugs, they are more likely to engage in drug use. Challenging inaccurate beliefs of peer behaviors and providing accurate information helps debunk falsely held norms about peer drug use.

## SCENARIO: Your teen comes home smelling of alcohol/cigarette smoke/marijuana for the first time and reluctantly explains that other kids were experimenting on the ride home.

YOU CAN SAY	HERE’S WHY
“I’m upset because you were not honest with me. I need you to know you always can call me for a ride or use me as an excuse to remove yourself from a risky situation. I get you’re worried about being in trouble, but remember I love and care about you. Your health and well-being are very important to me. Let’s talk more about what happened tonight.”	The response should be measured, quiet and serious; you shouldn’t yell or be overly emotional. Your child should realize this isn’t just a small, frustrating moment, such as when the youth doesn’t do a chore; it’s very serious due to the dangerous consequences of riding with individuals under the influence.

# Talking to Youth About Substances at Every Age

Ages	Keys to Prevention	Tips for Conversation and Communication
6-9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach facts so they see you as a credible source.</li> <li>• Help them develop decision-making skills. Explain that just because someone tells them to do something doesn't mean it is always "right."</li> <li>• Discuss how to avoid and escape dangerous situations that make them feel uncomfortable.</li> <li>• Keep your child active in the community.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk about drug-related messages they see and hear through TV, news, movies, social media and at school.</li> <li>• Discuss short-term consequences. Children are interested in how their bodies work, so focus on maintaining good health and avoiding things that might harm the body.</li> <li>• Note the differences between medical/illegal use of substances.</li> </ul>
10-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empower them to make good decisions and resist pressures to try drugs.</li> <li>• Get to know your child's friends and caregivers. Check in by phone or visit once in a while to make sure they are on the same page about prohibiting drug use.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporate their curiosity. Preteens love to learn facts, especially strange ones, and want to know how things work.</li> <li>• Note the difference between fantasy and reality while watching TV and movies.</li> <li>• Let them know they can always use you as an excuse during peer pressure: "No, my mom [or dad, grandma, etc.] would ground me forever if I vaped."</li> </ul>
13-15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remind your teen you disapprove of all drug use.</li> <li>• Emphasize family values, expectations and consequences.</li> <li>• Provide praise for making positive decisions and avoiding substances.</li> <li>• Help build their self-esteem and self-image.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk about their choices of friends; substance use in teens starts as a social behavior.</li> <li>• Assist them in creating a list of assertive tactics and prepared responses that are helpful in saying "no" to peer pressure.</li> <li>• Discuss the immediate and unpleasant effects of drugs.</li> <li>• Note the negative effects drugs can have on physical appearance because teens are typically concerned with how they look.</li> </ul>
16-18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage participation in healthy activities with peers.</li> <li>• Monitor and supervise their activities.</li> <li>• Encourage volunteering where they can see the impact of drugs on your community (homeless shelters, hospitals or victim services centers). Teens enjoy hearing ways they can contribute and make a difference.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk to them about how to stand up for their beliefs so they will be empowered to take a stand when someone is pressuring them to make high-risk choices.</li> <li>• If they resist, be willing to back off and try another time. This shows you respect their privacy.</li> <li>• Emphasize consequences of abusing drugs, such as decreasing the chances of getting into college or getting a job.</li> </ul>
19-on	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reach out periodically and keep the lines of communication open as your child leaves home.</li> <li>• Stay alert to mental health issues related to drug use and campus/community resources available.</li> <li>• Review the legal, academic and employee penalties for underage drinking, using a fake ID, public intoxication, DUI and drug use.</li> <li>• Be an at-home resource. Respect their privacy and independence while expressing the desire to help.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be specific about the behavior you expect ("I expect you to wait until you are 21 years old to drink.").</li> <li>• Talk about over-the-counter and prescription medicine abuse; nonmedical, unsupervised use can be very harmful.</li> <li>• Discuss risks associated with binge drinking.</li> <li>• Encourage them to intervene when roommates or friends are in trouble with substance abuse (passed out, unconscious) by calling 911.</li> </ul>
All Ages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have meaningful, ongoing conversations about substance use. Repetition is key!</li> <li>• Model appropriate behaviors to promote healthy living.</li> <li>• View the <b>Parent Drug Guide</b> to learn and stay up to date on drug trends.</li> <li>• Be aware of your family history of substance abuse and discuss any potentially elevated risks.</li> <li>• Get to know your child's friends.</li> <li>• It is never too late to start talking about drugs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offset feelings of insecurity and doubt with positive comments about their character (not just when they get an "A" or do well in sports).</li> <li>• Convey you care about and love your child, even when you're having tough conversations.</li> <li>• Use "I" statements to express yourself without youth feeling judged, blamed or attacked. Describe their behavior, how you feel about it and how it affects you, then spell out what you need.</li> </ul>

*I FEEL worried WHEN you come home past curfew and go straight to your room. BECAUSE I love you and want to keep you safe, I NEED you to follow our rules about communication and not doing drugs.*

## "I" Statement



I FEEL \_\_\_\_\_

WHEN \_\_\_\_\_

BECAUSE \_\_\_\_\_

WHAT I NEED IS \_\_\_\_\_

## Substance Use Fast Facts

- ✘ Youth are less likely to use substances if their parents have established a pattern of setting clear rules and consequences for breaking those rules. Those who are not monitored by their parents regularly are **four times more likely** to use drugs. (Partnership for Drug-Free Kids, 2018)
- ✘ **46 percent** of children live in a household where someone age 18 or older is smoking, drinking excessively, misusing prescriptions or using illegal drugs. (Center on Addiction, 2018)
- ✘ **75 percent** of all high school students have used addictive substances; two in five reported past-year use of vaping. (Center on Addiction, 2018; NIDA, 2018)
- ✘ **One in five** 12th graders vaped nicotine in the past month. (NIDA, 2018)
- ✘ The drug overdose death rate has **more than doubled** during the past decade among people aged 12 to 25. (TFAH, 2017)



## EVERY PARENT HAS THE POWER TO PREVENT ADDICTION

Research shows that teens are less likely to drink, smoke, or use drugs when they feel their parents are actively involved in their lives. (NIDA, 2019)

## Suspect Substance Abuse?

 You never can be too safe or intervene too early. Talk to youth as soon as your instinct tells you something is wrong or you spot signs of drug use.

 Express your concern and willingness to help, make observations, ask questions and listen to their answers.

 Get professional help. A family doctor or addiction specialist can screen for signs of drug abuse and other related health conditions.

 Call **SAMHSA's National Helpline** (1-800-662-4357) for referrals to local treatment facilities, support groups and community-based organizations.

 Be sure youth know that loved ones will stand by them and offer support.

**MEDICAL EMERGENCIES: Call 911**  
North Dakota is a Good Samaritan state and you won't be prosecuted for ingestion or possession if you seek help.

## Bottom Line: Adults Play a Key Role

You are the most important and powerful influence in your child's life. A majority of substance-free adolescents credit their parents for their decision not to use illegal substances. Even if you're not a parent, you still can play a significant role in a youth's life. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, older siblings, mentors, volunteers, teachers and coaches all can help guide youth toward healthy choices at every stage of life. Caring adults can take action by having frequent conversations with the youth in their lives about the dangers of substance use. Let youth know YOU are a resource.



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