

Talking with your kids and teens: discussing the dangers and consequences of drug and alcohol use



Kinship caregivers have a tremendous amount of influence, and preventing underage drinking or drug usage can start with discussions as early as preschool. It's important. Children who come from homes in which parents were addicted to drugs or alcohol are more likely to start using drugs earlier in their lives and become addicted more quickly than peers from homes without substance abuse. Parental substance abuse can set an unspoken norm of the role substances play in being an adult. Genetic factors can increase children's likelihood of having addiction at some point in their lives.

Talking with children as a means of prevention can start with discussions with children as young as preschool age, and every conversation can be catered to each specific child. What you say to a 9-year-old is different from what you say to a 15-year-old. Overall, a clear no-use message is the most effective way for parents to keep their kids safe.

Talk, and keep talking. Children can't learn all they need to know from a single discussion. A lot of little talks are more effective than one "big talk."



Preschool:

By preschool, most children have seen adults drinking alcohol, either in real life, on TV, or online. The attitudes they form at this age have an impact on the decisions they make when they are older. At this age, they are eager to know and understand rules, and they form their opinion on what's "good" and what's "bad" based on what they see adults do around them.



Ages 5 to 9:

Children this age have an increasing interest in the world outside. Now is the best time to explain what alcohol and drug misuse are, and the consequences. If you and your child see someone who is drunk on TV or on the street, talk about it. Explain that getting drunk is dangerous. The same goes for drug usage or gambling.



Ages 10 to 12

Kids assert their independence and question authority, but they need your input and advice more than ever. Tweens understand the reason for rules and appreciate having limits in place. Be sure they know your rules and the consequences if they break these rules.

Talk out some real-life situations and brainstorm solutions for what they can say. Together, you can come up with a list of “refusal skills.” For instance: “I can’t touch it; addiction runs in my family.” Give

them a way out if they are in a bind by allowing them to call or text you.

Base alcohol and drug -related messages on facts, not fear. This is a tough time for your tweens. It is a time of change when they are not as confident and they feel insecure, doubtful, and vulnerable to peer pressure. During these years, give your tween lots of positive reinforcement and praise them for their efforts and successes.



Ages 13 to 18

Your teen will most likely know other kids who use alcohol and/or drugs. Most teens are still willing to express their thoughts or concerns with parents about it. Use these conversations not only to understand your teen's thoughts and feelings, but also to talk about the dangers of alcohol and drugs as these can relate to violence, sex, driving under the influence, and possible addiction. Talk about the legal issues and the possibility that they or someone else might be killed or seriously injured.

Abstinence is important, and underage drinking or drug use should not be considered a "rite of passage" nor something "they're going to do anyway."

Teenagers tend to be idealistic and want to help make the world a better place. Explain to teens that underage drinking and drug use is not a victimless crime, and the effects on our society. Make it clear that drinking and drug use are not permitted under any circumstances, and let your teen know that you trust them not to drink alcohol or use drugs.

Help your child build self-reliance by asking them how they plan to deal with situations such as being offered alcohol or drugs. What would they say if they were invited to ride in a car with a driver who has been drinking or using drugs?

Wait for your teen to return from being out with friends so you can chat about what happened. Strive to convey love and concern, not mistrust.

The first time you have evidence that your teen has been drinking or using drugs, talk about it, don't minimize it, and don't ignore it.



Ages 18 and older

The child is no longer a child, but you still care, and your influence can make the difference. College students will encounter drinking on and off campus. Find out about a college's record of drinking-related incidents and drug abuse before your young adult enrolls. Talk about your findings with your child. Remind your young adult about the dangers of binge drinking, alcohol poisoning, and the consequences of drug use.

These conversations can help children, teens, and young adults make good choices. As always, stay connected with your child to learn how best to help him or her.

