

Talking with Kids about Drugs & Alcohol

Talking with Kids about Tough Issues

The issue of drugs can be very confusing to young children. 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. National studies show that the average age when a child first tries alcohol is 11; for marijuana, it's 12. And many kids start becoming curious about these substances even sooner. So, let's get started!

Listen carefully

Student surveys reveal that when parents listen to their children's feelings and concerns, their kids feel comfortable talking with them and are more likely to stay drug-free. Role play how to say "no".

Role play ways in which your child can refuse to go along with his friends without becoming a social outcast. Try something like this, "Let's play a game. Suppose you and your friends are at Andy's house after school and they find some beer in the refrigerator and ask you to join them in drinking it. The rule in our family is that children are not allowed to drink alcohol. So, what could you say?"

If your child comes up with a good response, praise him. If he doesn't, offer a few suggestions like, "No, thanks. Let's play video games instead," or "No thanks. I don't drink beer. I need to keep in shape for basketball."

Encourage choice

Allow your child 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.

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 Mom or Dad gives 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

Children 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 behavior 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 youngster. Setting aside at least 15 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 child feel better.

Repeat the message

Information and lessons about drugs are important enough to repeat frequently. So be sure to answer your children's 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 child and reach out to any one of the organizations listed here. You'll be helping your youngster to a healthier, happier future.

Questions & Answers

Why do people take bad or illegal drugs?

There are lots of reasons. Maybe they don't know how dangerous they are. Or maybe they feel bad about themselves or don't know how to handle their problems. Or maybe they don't have parents they can talk to. Why do you think they do it?

Why are some drugs good and some drugs bad for you?

When you get sick, the drugs the doctor gives you will help you get better. But if you take these drugs when you're healthy, they can make you sick. Also, there are some drugs, like marijuana or crack, that are never good for you. To be safe, never ever take any drugs unless Mom, Dad or the doctor says it's okay.