

# An Age by Age Guide for Talking to Kids about Substance Abuse

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It's never too early to start talking to your children about substance abuse. Start when they are curious and begin to ask questions. By late elementary school, children begin to see classmates smoking, drinking, and trying drugs.

## Pre-Kindergarten

Teach your child that he/she should not drink out of random glasses. What looks like apple juice or orange juice at a party where adults are present could contain alcohol. You can also be very clear about who they should take medication from. Explain that even though some medication may taste like bubble gum or look like candy, it is only acceptable for mom or dad or grandma/ grandpa (and other approved caregivers) to give it to them.

## Kindergarten through Third Grade

Keep your discussions about tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs factual and focused on the present.

- Future consequences are too distant to have any meaning. Let them know that it's not as easy to shoot a hoop or finish a puzzle while high on marijuana or that smoking causes bad breath.
- Talk to your kids about the drug-related messages they receive through advertisements, the news media, and entertainment sources. These messages may conflict with what you've taught them. Some TV shows or movies may even glamorize drinking/drug use.
- Encourage your kids to ask you questions about the messages they learn in other places. And remember to ask them how they feel about what they've heard – you'll learn a great deal about what they're thinking.
- Don't put your child's friends down. Underscore your child's values and the importance of making decisions that are consistent with these values.

## Fourth Grade through Sixth Grade

Make sure your child knows your rules – and that you'll enforce the consequences if rules are broken.

- Pre-teens can understand the reason for rules and appreciate having limits in place. This applies to no-use rules about alcohol as well as bed-times and homework. Research shows that kids are less likely to use alcohol/drugs if their parents have established a pattern of setting clear rules and consequences.
- Act out scenes with your child where people offer him/her drugs.
  - Offer tools that help them out of a sticky situation and it's more likely they will actually get out of that situation. Kids who don't know what to say or how to get away are more likely to give in to peer pressure. Let them know to use you as an excuse and say: "No, my mom would kill me if I smoked." Urge them not to continue friendships with kids who have encouraged alcohol and drug use.
  - Tell your child what makes him so special.
    - Puberty can play tricks with a child's self-esteem. At times, your child may move from having good feelings about himself and his life to some feelings of insecurity, doubt, and pressure. Kids need to hear a lot of positive comments about their life and who they are as individuals – not just when they bring home an A.

## Seventh through 12<sup>th</sup> Grade

We encourage you to repeat the tactics from fourth through sixth grade. You can also add these additional age appropriate strategies:

- It's never a good idea to volunteer information about your past drinking experiences; however, if your teen asks and you did drink alcohol underage, respond honestly by saying that you wish you had made a different decision. Do not go into details about your escapades.
- Talk to your child about how drinking alcohol is an adult privilege and responsibility. Also explain that as an adult, it's okay for you to enjoy a glass of wine with a meal as long as it's in moderation. Clarify that it's never alright for adults to abuse alcohol – even though it's legal for them to drink.
- Tell your teen that alcohol is a drug and reinforce what it can do to their mind and body.
  - Teens are extremely concerned with their physical appearance. If they believe a substance will impair their looks and health, they may be less likely to be tempted. Tell them about a time you saw a friend or acquaintance get sick from alcohol – reinforce how completely disgusting it was.
  - Don't just leave your child's substance abuse prevention to his school.
    - Topics you might want to talk about with your teen include: the connection between alcohol, tobacco, and other drug consumption during pregnancy and birth defects in newborns; the potentially deadly effects of combining drugs; that anyone can become a chronic user or addicted and that even trying a drug or using it occasionally can have serious and permanent consequences.
    - Emphasize what alcohol/drug use can do to your teen's future. Teens look ahead and think about their future. Discuss how substance use can ruin your teen's chance of getting into the college she's been dreaming about, landing the job she's perfect for etc.
    - Use the news. If you see a news story about an alcohol-related car accident, talk to your teen about all the victims that an accident leaves in its wake.
    - Positive reinforcement matters. Compliment and encourage your teen for all the things she does well and for the positive choices she makes. Let them know they are seen and appreciated. And let them know how you appreciate what a good role model they are to siblings or for other kids in the community. Teens still care what their parents think. Let them know how deeply disappointed you would be if they used alcohol underage.

### Keep Talking

- Talk often about the dangers of drug and alcohol use and about your expectations.
- Every day, they may be faced with “re-deciding” about substance abuse. Talking about substance abuse should continue through the teen years even into college.
- Scenarios change as your child ages. Continue to discuss different possible scenarios so they are prepared with an action plan if any arise.

### Review the Following Additional Links for More Support

- Above The Influence: <http://www.abovetheinfluence.com/facts/drugs-alcohol.aspx#>
- Partnership For Drug Free Kids: <http://www.drugfree.org>
- The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration's (SAMHSA) Too Smart to Start: <http://www.samhsa.gov/too-smart-to-start>
- The Search Institute: <http://www.search-institute.org/>
- CASA at Columbia's Study on Importance of Family Dinners <http://www.casacolumbia.org/addiction-research/reports/importance-of-family-dinners-2012>
- Caron Treatment Centers: [www.caron.org](http://www.caron.org)