

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"> Teach facts so they see you as a credible source. Help them develop decision-making skills. Explain that just because someone tells them to do something doesn't mean it is always "right." Discuss how to avoid and escape dangerous situations that make them feel uncomfortable. Keep your child active in the community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Talk about drug-related messages they see and hear through TV, news, movies, social media and at school. 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. Note the differences between medical/illegal use of substances.
10-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empower them to make good decisions and resist pressures to try drugs. 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incorporate their curiosity. Preteens love to learn facts, especially strange ones, and want to know how things work. Note the difference between fantasy and reality while watching TV and movies. 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."
13-15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remind your teen you disapprove of all drug use. Emphasize family values, expectations and consequences. Provide praise for making positive decisions and avoiding substances. Help build their self-esteem and self-image. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Talk about their choices of friends; substance use in teens starts as a social behavior. Assist them in creating a list of assertive tactics and prepared responses that are helpful in saying "no" to peer pressure. Discuss the immediate and unpleasant effects of drugs. Note the negative effects drugs can have on physical appearance because teens are typically concerned with how they look.
16-18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage participation in healthy activities with peers. Monitor and supervise their activities. 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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. If they resist, be willing to back off and try another time. This shows you respect their privacy. Emphasize consequences of abusing drugs, such as decreasing the chances of getting into college or getting a job.
19+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reach out periodically and keep the lines of communication open as your child leaves home. Stay alert to mental health issues related to drug use and campus/community resources available. Review the legal, academic and employee penalties for underage drinking, using a fake ID, public intoxication, DUI and drug use. Be an at-home resource. Respect their privacy and independence while expressing the desire to help. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be specific about the behavior you expect ("I expect you to wait until you are 21 years old to drink.>"). Talk about over-the-counter and prescription medicine abuse; nonmedical, unsupervised use can be very harmful. Discuss risks associated with binge drinking. Encourage them to intervene when roommates or friends are in trouble with substance abuse (passed out, unconscious) by calling 911.
All Ages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have meaningful, ongoing conversations about substance use. Repetition is key! Model appropriate behaviors to promote healthy living. Stay up to date on drug trends. Be aware of your family history of substance abuse and discuss any potentially elevated risks. Get to know your child's friends. It is never too late to start talking about drugs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offset feelings of insecurity and doubt with positive comments about their character (not just when they get an "A" or do well in sports). Convey you care about and love your child, even when you're having tough conversations. 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.

Adapted from: *A Parent's Role in Prevention - North Dakota State University (April 2019)*

