



“TALK. THEY HEAR YOU.”[®]
CAMPAIGN



Age-Appropriate Conversations About Alcohol and Other Drugs

Although it may not always seem like it, kids really do listen to their parents' and caregivers' concerns, which is why it's important to talk with them about the risks and dangers of underage drinking and other drug use. Starting these conversations early will equip your child with the information and skills they need to feel prepared when confronted with difficult decisions about alcohol or other drugs. Having frequent chats, starting when they're young and continuing as they get older, will keep the lines of communication open and position you as a trusted source of information and support.

While you always want to be direct and honest when talking with kids, it's important to have conversations that they can understand and that are appropriate for their age. Here are some tips for making those conversations effective at different ages.

Under Age 8

- When your child is young, start explaining the importance of good health and taking care of their body—eating healthful foods, playing, and getting a good night's sleep.
- If they're given a vitamin or medication, explain that vitamins help their body grow and medicine helps their body get and stay healthy. Make sure they know that they should only take vitamins or medicine from their parent, caregiver, or doctor and that taking someone else's medicine or too many vitamins could hurt them or make them sick.
- Make sure they know to stay away from dangerous products that are commonly found in homes, such as cleaning products. Point out these household products, and explain that they're harmful to the body.
- Teach them early on how to say “no” if someone offers them something they think is dangerous or they're unsure about.



Ages 8–12

- As your child gets older, start asking open-ended questions, such as what they've heard about alcohol and other drugs. Listen to them. If they don't seem interested, make sure they know you're ready to talk whenever they are.
- Take advantage of “teachable moments”—for example, if they see alcohol, other drugs, or vaping devices mentioned in a movie, or on TV, on a billboard, or in a store. Explain that these substances are dangerous and can harm their body. Keep your tone calm, and use terms they can understand.
- Discuss the differences between the medicinal uses and illegal uses of other drugs and how they should only use prescription medicine as instructed by their doctor.
- Be open to their questions and concerns about alcohol and other drugs. Make sure they know that all questions are welcome.
- Remember that they are watching your actions. Be aware of your own behaviors and set a good example.
- Role-play with them so they can practice saying “no” if someone offers them alcohol or other drugs.

Ages 13–16

- Be aware that teens may have friends or peers who drink alcohol or use other drugs and that they may have already been exposed to substances themselves. Make sure you’re prepared to answer your teen’s questions based on their first-hand experiences.
- Be upfront and clear about your expectations regarding underage drinking and other drug use. Remind them that their brain is still developing through their mid-20s, which is why alcohol and other drugs are especially harmful for anyone under the age of 21.
- Consider using a written or verbal agreement that clearly outlines your family rules about drinking alcohol and using other drugs. Agree on a code word they can text you if they’re in a situation where alcohol or other drugs are present so you can help them get out of the situation without their friends or peers knowing.
- Try to understand their thoughts and feelings about alcohol and other drugs. By always listening and staying engaged, you’ll encourage them to continue to talk with you about these issues.

Ages 17–20

- Create clear rules for your teen or young adult to never drink alcohol or use other drugs and drive or get in a car if the driver has been drinking or using other drugs.
- Have conversations about “becoming an adult” and having “adult responsibilities.” Remind them that peer pressure doesn’t go away just because they’re getting older, and discuss how they can handle those situations.
- If they’re going away to college or joining the labor market, have talks about how to handle this increased independence and make healthy decisions that won’t negatively affect their grades, employability, and safety.
- Try to be their voice of reason. Help them come to their own conclusions by listening and asking questions. Be open-minded and logical when giving feedback. As they’re becoming adults, treat them as such.



Screen4Success

If your child needs more support at any age, use Screen4Success to better understand their health, wellness, and wellbeing and find resources to help address their needs.

HELPFUL RESOURCES



Use and share Screen4Success.



Download and use “Talk. They Hear You.” mobile app.



Subscribe and listen to “What Parents Are Saying” podcast.



Download and order “Talk. They Hear You.” materials online from SAMHSA Store.



Download and read “After High School: Talking With Your Young Adult About Underage Drinking” parent fact sheet.



Download and read “Talking With Your College-Bound Young Adult About Alcohol” parent guide.