

How to Talk to Your Child About Drugs and Alcohol

It can be hard to know when and how to talk to kids about alcohol and drug use. What's more, with all the other difficult conversations parents have with kids, this one might not be the most pressing on the agenda, but how your child approaches alcohol and drugs can have a life-long effect and serious consequences. We talked to a panel of experts for their advice.

“The average age that many children start being exposed to alcohol is 13, some at 12; and now evidence is showing that this might be much earlier,” says Stephen Wallace, director of the Center for Adolescent Research and Education. “It’s important for parent to talk about these issues at different junctures, especially when these behaviors typically occur.” In recent years, though, the age of when a child starts to explore is beginning younger than 13.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, 19% of high school students admitted to drinking more than a few sips of alcohol before the age of 13. When asked if they’d had at least one drink of alcohol in their lifetime, that number jumps to 66%. Our experts overwhelmingly recommend talking about alcohol as soon as possible, and many recommend starting in the later elementary years.

“There really is no guarantee that your child will not drink,” says parenting expert Dr. Michele Borba. “But you can produce a child who is less likely to binge drink or abuse alcohol at a younger and younger age. And here’s the secret – it’s called hands-on parenting.”

Part of that hands-on parenting is identifying your family’s values and making sure that, as a role model, you stick to those values, says Borba. Children will learn from you at an early age, whether you need a drink after a rough day at work, or have to stock the fridge before having company come over. And beyond simply modeling responsible behavior, you should also communicate your values with your child. Just because you talked to them once, Borba says, doesn’t mean it’s going to stick. It needs to be an on-going conversation.

Try to work the conversations into everyday interactions so they feel more natural. Wallace says a car ride is a perfect time to start a conversation; you essentially have a captive audience. Before bed works well too---- anytime when you have more than five minutes to actually talk to each other. You can use lyrics in songs, or other things you pick up from your child’s culture, as a jumping off point for the conversation.

Often, kids don’t see the risk involved with drugs that have recently been made legal in some states. And nationwide, according to the CDC, 41% of high school students have tried marijuana at least once. Even in those states that have legalized marijuana, there’s still an age requirement for use.

Above all, the conversation needs to continue as your child ages and starts experimenting. Sometimes just remembering what it was like when you were growing up can have a profound effect on your ability to relate to your child. It’s likely that even if you didn’t experiment growing up, you had friends who did. When having the talk with your child, the overall agreement among our experts is that “just say no” isn’t a realistic conversation.



“If you close the door, and just say no, you run the risk of them saying yes,” explains education consultant Jennifer Miller. “Co-creating social rules together is the best policy. You want to respect your teen enough to want them to formulate their thoughts, but at the same time you need to set limits on what they should and shouldn’t do.”

And don’t forget the power of speaking with your child’s friends’ parents and guardians. If you all share similar values about your children’s use or abstinence of alcohol and drugs, you can work together to monitor each other’s kids and even enforce the same rules across the board so your child can’t say “everyone else’s parents let them do it.”

While there may be a temptation to be the “cool” parent, at the end of the day you’re still the parent, reminds Borba. Not only do your choices and strictness or lenience affect your child, but it can also affect you. Borba recommends monitoring what happens in your home, meaning no closed doors, and if you suspect a child’s been drinking, take their car keys. They may ultimately be your responsibility whether or not they’re your child.

When it comes to talking with your child, one of the best approaches is to frame the conversation in a way that focuses on you and the family, and not just overtly preventing your child from using alcohol or drugs.

“These talks should be brief and to the point,” says Wallace. “Parents should use ‘I’ statements instead of ‘you’ statements. Instead of ‘you seem like you’re going out with your friend a lot,’ say ‘I notice that there are a lot of nights that you are out late with your friends.’”

Wallace explains that “you” statements can seem accusatory whereas “I” statements are about coming from a place of concern. Kids will often respect the conversation more if it is born out of your care and concern, rather than feeling like a lecture.

At the end of the day, the most important thing is to continue to talk with your child. Keep the lines of communication open and sometimes just listen when your child needs someone to confide in. And if they don’t confide in you, try to make sure there’s an older sibling, family member, or trusted friend that they can go to. Having a support system will help your child navigate the difficult adolescent years and will help to keep them out of trouble.

If you or someone you know would like more information about the issue, please visit <http://www.drugfree.org/>.

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