

How to talk to your kids about using drugs and alcohol (before there is a problem)

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- Don't lecture but Do talk and talk often. Information is more likely to be absorbed when you give it over time and in small doses. Repetition is important. One day they may hear your message, another day it might be tuned out. So find opportunities to repeat the message. Setting is important. Don't say, "let's sit down and have a chat about drugs", instead incorporate these "mini chats" into relaxed activities that you are doing together like playing a board game, cleaning the garage, riding in the car, eating at the dinner table, etc. In addition, you can use observations from TV shows that you are watching together to bring up the subject.
- Listen first, talk later. Kids are dying to be heard. Often they will "confess" and/or open up to you if you are just available and listen to them without judgment or interruption. After you have heard their "whole story" then use the opportunity to break it down and discuss various aspects of what they shared with you.
- Don't use fabricated scare tactics. Always use facts. Kids know when what you are saying is truthful. If you exaggerate the effects of alcohol and drug use, they will dismiss your whole argument. If you give them facts, they will sense that it is the truth and will be more likely to hear the message and retain it when faced with choices about using.
- Don't forbid but do try to delay their experimentation. Kids are rebellious by nature. If a parent says "don't do this" many will do it just to exert their independence. Do try to delay their experimentation by sharing that there are greater risks to developing teenage brains and bodies than for young adults which is why the drinking age is 21. There are also greater risks from people taking advantage of them while they are under the influence. Teenage girls are more likely to be sexually assaulted. Teenage boys are more likely to be involved in more aggressive physical altercations. Both are likely to be involved in auto accidents caused by drinking and driving or drugging and driving.
- Tell the truth about your own experiences when asked. Kids will instinctively know if you are lying to them. Know that if you lie, you will lose their respect and the ability to educate them about this important issue. Share your experiences and your values around this issue. Say, "I did do this but this is what I learned from doing it which is why I feel this way about it now."
- Take an active role in discussing this issue. Don't leave it up to the schools. And don't risk them learning it from their friends. No one will give them the most accurate information like you will. Prevention starts at home. Studies have shown that many teenagers when faced with these difficult choices have said that their parents' opinions mattered to them and/or that they could hear their parents' voices in their heads when deciding whether or not to accept a drink or drug. If you need help starting the conversation with your kids, seek help from a licensed alcohol and drug counselor ("LADC") in your community. They will know the habits of the teenagers in the area and can assist you with how to talk about it, what to look for if you suspect it, and how to treat your child if there is a usage problem.

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