



TALK CONNECT PREVENT

A Parents Guide to Addressing Drug Use

CONVERSATION STARTERS FOR PARENTS

Conversation is one of the most powerful and effective tools parents can use in preventing substance use and misuse by their children. Research has shown that regular, meaningful conversations between parents and their children help to reduce risky behaviors by children and can ultimately save lives. This is why New Jersey YMCA State Alliance, The Horizon Foundation for New Jersey and Partnership for a Drug-Free New Jersey have collaborated to create strategies for parents as they try to navigate the challenges of tackling difficult topics. Empowering children with the skills and confidence to make healthy choices starts with a simple conversation.



The following material, informed by experts in the fields of pediatrics, childhood development, child psychology and addiction prevention, while not exhaustive, are intended to provide a starting point for parents in beginning to address substance use and misuse with their children. This material should be considered complementary to any support and counsel parents may receive from other trusted sources. As always, parents should consult their healthcare professionals regarding any concerns with their children.

OPENING THE LINES OF COMMUNICATION WITH YOUNG CHILDREN



The ability for parents to tackle the more difficult topics is greatly helped if patterns of meaningful conversation with children are established at an early age. Even the most mundane topics can help to establish free and open lines of communications that may come in handy when the tougher topics need to be addressed. Some of those conversation starters could be as simple as:

- If your day at school today was a **movie**, what would it be?
- If you could have a **superpower**, what would it be, and why?
- What are the **three** most interesting things about you?
- What's the **best thing** about our family?
- What are you most **proud** of?
- What's the best way for me to **help** you when you feel grumpy?

And, it's most effective if parents also share their own answers on these topics. In that way, a true two-way dialog begins.

ADDRESSING THE DANGERS OF RISKY BEHAVIOR: PRE-TEEN YEARS

As pre-teens reach "double-numbers" they begin to test boundaries and question their parents' opinions. This is healthy and can be an opportunity to provide an introduction to the more serious discussion topics. In addition to explaining why drugs and alcohol are dangerous, parents should ensure that their children clearly understand the rules about such issues. Research shows that kids are less likely to try tobacco, alcohol and other drugs if their parents have established a pattern of setting clear rules and consequences for breaking those rules. While perhaps hard to initiate, children are more likely to respond to, and respect, that they are being treated as young adults.



- **What would you say** if someone tried to pressure you and your friends to use drugs or alcohol?
- **How do you feel** when you hear about kids taking cough medicine when they aren't sick, or taking some of their parents' medications without permission?
- **Why do you think** kids take risks or use drugs?

Oftentimes, the key to starting the conversation begins by leveraging current events or news, or opening a discussion around a likely scenario that a child may encounter during his or her day.

Scenario: Your child is just starting middle school and you know that eventually, he/she will be offered drugs and alcohol.

What to say:

"I know we talked about drinking and drugs when you were younger, but now is when they're probably going to be an issue. I'm guessing you'll at least hear about kids who are experimenting. I just want you to remember that I'm here for you and the best thing you can do is just talk to me about the stuff you hear or see. Don't think there's anything I can't handle or that you can't talk about with me, okay?"

Scenario: You find out that kids are selling prescription drugs at your child's school. Your child hasn't mentioned it and you want to start the discussion about it.

What to say:

"Hey, you probably know that parents talk to each other and find things out about what's going on at school. I heard there are kids selling pills – prescriptions that either they are taking or someone in their family takes. Have you heard about kids doing this?" Let your child know that in the future, he/she can always blame you to get out of a bad situation. Say, "If you're ever offered drugs at school, tell that person, 'My mother would kill me if I took that and then she wouldn't let me play baseball.'"

Scenario: Your child's favorite celebrity—the one he or she really looks up to—has been named in a drug scandal.

What to say:

"Being in the public eye puts a ton of pressure on people, and many turn to drugs because they think drugs will relieve that stress. The thing is, when a person uses drugs and alcohol—especially a young person because he's still growing—it changes how his brain works and makes him do really stupid things. Most people who use drugs and alcohol need a lot of help to get better. I hope the celebrity has a good doctor and friends and family members to help him/her."

NAVIGATING THE TEEN YEARS



Most people agree that the teenage years are the most challenging to navigate, for children, as well as their parents. Teens are experiencing an incredible amount of pressure at this time: school grades, college expectations, peer acceptance, emotional and physical development, the list goes on. Though teens do not respond in the same way, it is important to realize that these stresses are present. And risky behavior is often an outlet for teens in dealing with them. Parents can help alleviate some of the stress by encouraging their teen to share any burdens, troubles or issues with the following conversation starters.

- How would you **rate your day** on a scale of 1 to 5?
- Describe your **ideal day** of chilling out and relaxing.
- Describe your **proudest** moment.
- Do you feel you are able to **talk** to me when you are upset?
- What do you do to **cheer** yourself up when you feel down?
- What is the best way for me to **help you** when you feel stressed? Sad?

Most importantly, parents need to communicate reality-driven messages and clear boundaries, but always in the context of open dialog. Listening attentively, without judgment, is vital to encouraging teens to open up. The following scenarios may help jump start those conversations.

Scenario: Your teen is starting high school — and you want to remind him/her that he/she doesn't have to give in to peer pressure to drink or use drugs.

What to say:

"High school is going to be a ton of fun, and we want you to have a great time. But we also know there's going to be some pressure to start drinking, abusing medicine, smoking pot or taking other drugs. A lot of people feel like this is just what high school kids do. But it's actually not. Many high schoolers don't drink or use drugs, which means it won't make you weird to choose not to drink or use drugs, either.

You can still have a lot of fun if you don't drink or use drugs. It is important to seek out these other kids who are making good choices, and be brave about trying new activities or making new friends.

You'll have a lot of decisions to make about what you want to do in high school and you might even make some mistakes. Just know that you can talk to us about anything, anytime — even if you DO make a mistake or feel stuck in a situation that you need help to get out of. We won't freak out. We'll figure out a way to help you. We want you to count on us to help you make smart decisions and stay safe, okay?"

Scenario: Your teen has started to hang out with kids you don't know — and dropped his/her old friends.

What to say:

"It seems like you are hanging with a different crowd than you have in the past. Is something going on with your usual friends? Is there a problem with your old friends, or are you just branching out and meeting some new kids? Tell me about your new friends. What are they like? What do they like to do? What do you like about them?"

Scenario: Your high schooler comes home smelling of alcohol or cigarette smoke for the first time.

What to say:

The response should be measured, quiet and serious — not yelling, shouting or overly emotional. Your child should realize that this isn't just a small frustrating moment like when he/she doesn't do a chore you asked for; it's a very serious moment.

"I'm really upset that you're smoking/drinking. I need to get a handle on how often this has been happening and what your experiences have been so far. I get that you're worried about being in trouble, but the worst part of that moment is over — I know that you're experimenting. I love you and care about you. Your health and well-being are very important to me. Let's talk about this. I need you to be honest with me. So for starters, tell me about what happened tonight."

As with pre-teens, establishing the rules with teens around drug use and misuse, and the consequences for breaking those rules, is critical. Parents want to ensure that children know these rules well before any potential situation may arise as it's much easier and more effective to have the discussion when the problem is hypothetical, versus real.

CLOSING TIPS

In a world where everyone is time-pressed and questions can be answered by a click or voice-command, it is sometimes difficult to find the right moment to simply talk. Prioritizing the time to connect with their children can be one of the most important steps parents take in protecting their children and preventing drug use and misuse. Guidelines for effective communications include:



- **FIND** at least 10 minutes each day for uninterrupted conversation. On a walk or in the car is often an effective place for conversations with children as they tend to feel less conspicuous or under a microscope.
- **INITIATE** conversations by asking questions, probing further to counter one-word answers like "fine."
- **SET** an example for sharing by talking about your day, even if it wasn't all positive. Modeling how to handle frustration and disappointment is very effective.
- **LISTEN** with undivided attention, removing distractions, and without judgment. Children tend to share more if they do not feel they will be lectured at the outset.
- **VALIDATE** what your child says; all topics are important regardless of perceived significance. Oftentimes the real information or issue is buried and attentive listening may help uncover them.

Find more information on how to have conversations with children about drug and alcohol use at [drugfree.org](https://www.drugfree.org)