



TIPS FOR TALKING TO PRESCHOOLERS

Young children ask many questions. Your response lets them know you can be trusted to provide honest answers.

- Do not worry that talking about drugs will give your child ideas about using drugs or tempt them to experiment.
- The early attitudes your children form help them make healthy decisions when they are older. Talk often with preschoolers and listen to what they say.
- Young children mimic adults, so use every opportunity you can to share your feelings about substance use.
- Caution them never to take a drug unless you, a grandparent, caregiver, or medical professional like a nurse or doctor gives it to them.
- Preschoolers have short attention spans, so give short, honest answers.
- Teach your child to make their own good choices. If they love a fictional character or famous athlete, encourage them to eat healthy foods so they will grow up to be strong like their idol.
- Let them make decisions (for example, what to wear in the morning) that build confidence in their ability to do so.

For more information, go to Chapter 4 of [*Growing Up Drug Free: A Parent's Guide to Substance Use Prevention*](#).





HOW DO I TALK TO MY CHILD ABOUT DRUGS? – CONVERSATION STARTERS

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These conversations are not a one-time event. Start talking with your children when they are young; continue as they grow older and their level of interest and understanding changes. Your willingness to talk (and listen) tells them you care about what they are interested in, and it provides you with insight into their world.

DO	DON'T
Explain the dangers using language they understand.	React in anger—even if your child makes statements that shock you.
Explain why you do not want them to use the substance(s). For example, explain that substances can mess up their concentration, memory, and motor skills and can lead to poor grades.	Expect all conversations with your children to be perfect. They won't be.
Be there when your child wants to talk, no matter the time of day or night or other demands on your time.	Assume your children know how to handle temptation. Instead, educate them about risks and alternatives so they can make healthy decisions. Encourage them to practice saying no ahead of time so they're prepared.
Believe in your own power to help your child grow up without using drugs, including alcohol.	Talk without listening.
Praise your children when they deserve it. This builds their self-esteem and makes them feel good without using drugs, including alcohol.	Make stuff up. If your child asks a question you can't answer, promise to find the answer so you can learn together. Then follow up.

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Talking to your children about alcohol and other drugs does not have to be hard. The following opportunities can serve as teaching moments:



If you see a young person smoking, talk about the negative effects of tobacco.



If you see an interesting news story, discuss it with your child. Ask how your child feels about situations and the potential consequences.



While watching a movie or TV show with your children, ask if they think it makes using drugs, including alcohol, look fun. Talk about what happens to those characters, or what happens in reality.



If you read, hear about, or know someone affected by substance use, remind your child almost anyone can develop a substance use disorder. Discuss the importance of treatment and supporting people in recovery from their substance use disorder.



TIPS FOR TALKING TO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS (6-10 YEARS OLD)

- Children this age are eager to learn. You can talk to them about the consequences of using substances, such as how it can lead to misuse and a substance use disorder. You can continue to teach and encourage good choices around healthy living.
- Establish rituals that afford uninterrupted conversations with your child. Having dinner or other meals together provides a rich opportunity to listen and talk.
- Explain good drugs versus bad drugs. Let them know that children should only take medication when the adult in charge tells them to.
- Repeat your message regularly. Remind children that some drugs can harm the brain or cause life-threatening overdoses.
- Children crave praise, so give it out freely when deserved. Tell them that you trust their ability to avoid peer pressure and make good decisions.
- If your child does not start conversations about alcohol or other drugs with you, take the lead. Begin discussions using real-life events in the news or in your own lives. This is true no matter your child's age.

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TIPS FOR TALKING TO MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS (11-14 YEARS OLD)

- Starting middle school (or junior high) is a big step. If you began talking with your children about alcohol or other drugs at a young age, they probably know how you feel and have a good foundation of information. If you did not start earlier, this is a great time to begin.
- As with children at earlier ages, encourage your middle school-aged children to share their dreams. Ask what activities they enjoy and help them nurture those interests in positive ways, such as participating in art, music, sports, community service, and academic clubs.
- At this age, young teens start to care more about how they look. Find ways to help boost their confidence and manage stress and talk about how drugs can harm them.
- Friends become very influential at this age, so get to know your children's friends. If you drive them somewhere or carpool, for example, you can listen in to learn current issues and trends, as well as learn how your child interacts with others.
- When you meet your child's friends, let them know your rules about underage drinking, smoking/e-cigarettes, and other drug use. Get to know their parents and share with them your desire to raise a child who understands the risks of substance use.
- Discuss what they would do or say if they saw alcohol or other substance use at a party. Work with them to come up with phrases they could say if someone offered alcohol or other drugs to them, such as "No thanks, it's not my thing."
- Tell your children often that you will come get them any time if they need to leave a place where alcohol or other drugs are being used—even if it's the middle of the night. You can also decide on a "code word" they can text you if they need your help and calling is not an option.
- Your child may be on social media by this point. Emphasize the dangers of buying pills or any medicine through social media, which is where criminal drug networks are advertising deadly fake pills.
- You might have to assume the role of a teacher. For example, your child may think it is okay if they only drink alcohol but stay away from other drugs. Discuss with them the risks of using all kinds of substances, including alcohol.

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**ONE
PILL CAN
KILL**



TIPS FOR TALKING TO HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS (15-18 YEARS OLD)

- By this age, most youth have had many opportunities to try alcohol or other drugs. Even if they haven't tried, they have probably seen others do it, sometimes to excess and perhaps with serious consequences, whether in person or on social media.
- Teens this age typically understand what can happen if they use drugs. As they think about their future, remind them that substance use can jeopardize their dreams.
- Teens want independence but still need appropriate limits. Have them help you set those limits (such as curfews). Ask them what consequences they think are fair for breaking the rules.
- Tell your children often that you care about them, and they are important to you. A strong bond will make your child more likely to come to you with questions or concerns about drugs, including alcohol, or other issues.
- Know what's trending. Ask your teen about drugs that are an issue at their school, in friends' homes, and at parties.
- Emphasize the dangers of buying pills or any medicine through Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, X, YouTube, or other social media platforms. Visit [DEA.gov/onepill](https://www.dea.gov/onepill) with your teen to learn more about the prevalence of fake pills.
- Your children may try to draw you into a debate about marijuana use for medical or other reasons. Use this opportunity to have an informed conversation with them. Make sure your child knows that marijuana use in any form is illegal for youth and young adults under 21, has harmful effects on the developing teen brain, and is prohibited by federal law.
- As with youth at any age, praise them for making good choices. If they know you support them and care about their health and well-being, it can motivate them to stay drug free. Parenting does not stop when your child goes to college or moves out. Many colleges have programs for first-year students that cover the school's alcohol and other drug misuse prevention policies, programs, and services. If so, attend with your child; if not, find out which office is responsible for providing that information and go with your child to obtain it.

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TIPS FOR TALKING TO YOUNG ADULTS (18-21 YEARS OLD)

- At this age, your young adult may be finishing high school and facing important decisions about the rest of their life, such as whether to pursue a college degree immediately, join the workforce or military, or follow another path. This can be a stressful time for many young adults and can often lead to an increase in substance use. It can also be an exciting time when young adults may have more freedom and opportunities to meet new people and have new experiences—which may involve being offered certain substances for the first time.
- Conversations with your young adult may look significantly different as they mature and gain independence. They may not be living at home anymore, or they may be working a job with hours that keep them from seeing you often. When you do see them, look for everyday opportunities to raise the topic of substance use.
- By this point in their lives, young adults may have witnessed substance use disorders in some way, whether it's seeing a friend go through recovery, observing binge drinking in college, or having a coworker who died from a fentanyl overdose. Talk with your young adult about their experiences and how glad you are that they have chosen not to drink or use other drugs.
- If they are already in college, remind them that avoiding drugs can help them keep their studies and future career options on track. If they are already in the workforce, discuss job loss due to infractions and safety concerns.
- Young adults entering the workforce may be exposed to older coworkers who drink or use other drugs. Talk to your child about their career choices, coworkers, and workplace challenges. In these conversations, look for openings to discuss the pressure to drink and use other drugs.
- Whether they're away at college, working, or seeking another pursuit, your young adult may be making new friends, different from the childhood and high school friends they grew up with (and whose parents and values you might have known). If your child still lives nearby, encourage them to invite their friends over for a meal. If your child is away from home, take them and some of their friends out to eat the next time you visit. This can be a great way to get to know your young adult's new friends and stay connected to their life.

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