

## **An Age-Appropriate Guide to Talking with Your Child About Substances**

**Source:** U.S. Department of Education Safe & Drug-Free Schools Program. *Growing Up Drug Free: A Parent's Guide to Prevention.*

### **Preschoolers**

It may seem premature to talk about drugs with preschoolers, but the attitudes and habits that they form at this age have an important bearing on the decisions they will make when they're older. At this early age, they are eager to know and memorize rules, and they want your opinion on what's "bad" and what's "good." Although they are old enough to understand that smoking is bad for them, they're not ready to take in complex facts about alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. Nevertheless, this is a good time to practice the decision-making and problem-solving skills that they will need to say "no" later on.

Here are some ways to help your preschool children make good decisions about what should and should not go into their bodies:

- Discuss why children need healthy food. Have your child name several favorite good foods and explain how these foods contribute to health and strength.
- Set aside regular times when you can give your son or daughter your full attention. Get on the floor and play with him; learn about her likes and dislikes; let him know that you love him; say that she's too wonderful and unique to do drugs. You'll build strong bonds of trust and affection that will make turning away from drugs easier in the years to come.
- Provide guidelines like playing fair, sharing toys, and telling the truth so children know what kind of behavior you expect from them.
- Encourage your child to follow instructions, and to ask questions if he does not understand the instructions.
- When your child becomes frustrated at play, use the opportunity to strengthen problem-solving skills. For example, if a tower of blocks keeps collapsing, work together to find possible solutions. Turning a bad situation into a success reinforces a child's self-confidence.
- Whenever possible, let your child choose what to wear. Even if the clothes don't quite match, you are reinforcing your child's ability to make decisions.
- Point out poisonous and harmful substances commonly found in homes, such as bleach, kitchen cleanser, and furniture polish, and read the products' warning labels out loud. Explain to your children that not all "bad" drugs have warnings on them, so they should only eat or smell food or a prescribed medicine that you, a grandparent, or a babysitter give them.
- Explain that prescription medications are drugs that can help the person for whom they are meant but that can harm anyone else — especially children, who must stay away from them.

### **Kindergarten through third grade (5 — 8 years old)**

A child this age usually shows increasing interest in the world outside the family and home. Now is the time to begin to explain what alcohol, tobacco, and drugs are, that some people use them

even though they are harmful, and the consequences of using them. Discuss how anything you put in your body that is not food can be extremely harmful. How drugs interfere with the way our bodies work and can make a person very sick or even cause them to die. (Most children of this age have had real-life experiences with a death of a relative or the relative of someone at school.) Explain the idea of addiction — that drug use can become a very bad habit that is hard to stop. Praise your children for taking good care of their bodies and avoiding things that might harm them.

By the time your children are in third grade, they should understand:

- how foods, poisons, medicines, and illegal drugs differ;
- how medicines prescribed by a doctor and administered by a responsible adult may help during illness but can be harmful if misused, so children need to stay away from any unknown substance or container;
- why adults may drink but children may not, even in small amounts — it's harmful to children's developing brains and bodies.

### **Grades four through six (9 — 11 years old)**

Continue to take a strong stand about drugs. At this age, children can handle more sophisticated discussion about why people are attracted to drugs. You can use their curiosity about major traumatic events in people's lives (like a car accident or divorce) to discuss how drugs can cause these events. Children this age also love to learn facts, especially strange ones, and they want to know how things work. This age group can be fascinated by how drugs affect a user's brain or body. Explain how anything taken in excess — whether it's cough medicine or aspirin — can be dangerous.

Friends — either a single best friend or a group of friends — are extremely important during this time, as is fitting in and being seen as "normal." When children enter middle or junior high school, they leave their smaller, more protective surroundings and join a much larger, less intimate crowd of preteens. These older children may expose your child to alcohol, tobacco, or drugs. Research shows that the earlier children begin using these substances, the more likely they are to experience serious problems. It is essential that your child's anti-drug attitudes be strong before entering middle school or junior high.

Before leaving elementary school, your children should know:

- the immediate effects of alcohol, tobacco, and drug use on different parts of the body, including risks of coma or fatal overdose;
- the long-term consequences — how and why drugs can be addicting and make users lose control of their lives;
- the reasons why drugs are especially dangerous for growing bodies;
- the problems that alcohol and other illegal drugs cause not only to the user, but the user's family and world.

Rehearse potential scenarios in which friends offer drugs. Have your children practice delivering an emphatic "That stuff is really bad for you!" Give them permission to use you as an excuse: "My mom will kill me if I drink a beer!" "Upsetting my parents" is one of the top reasons preteens give for why they won't use marijuana.

Teach your children to be aware of how drugs and alcohol are promoted. Discuss how advertising, song lyrics, movies, and TV shows bombard them with messages that using alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs is glamorous. Make sure that they are able to separate the myths of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use from the realities, and praise them for thinking for themselves.

Get to know your children's friends, where they hang out, and what they like to do. Make friends with the parents of your children's friends so you can reinforce each others' efforts. You'll feel in closer touch with your child's daily life and be in a better position to recognize trouble spots. (A child whose friends are all using drugs is very likely to be using them, too.) Children this age really appreciate this attention and involvement. In fact, two-thirds of fourth-graders polled said that they wished their parents would talk more with them about drugs.

### **Grades seven through nine (12 — 14 years old)**

A common stereotype holds that teenagers are rebellious, are ruled by peer pressure, and court danger even to the point of self-destructiveness. Although teens do often seem unreceptive to their parents as they struggle to become independent, teens need parental support, involvement, and guidance more than ever.

Young teens can experience extreme and rapid shifts in their bodies, emotional lives, and relationships. Adolescence is often a confusing and stressful time, characterized by mood changes and deep insecurity, as teens struggle to figure out who they are and how to fit in while establishing their own identities. It's not surprising that this is the time when many young people try alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs for the first time.

Parents may not realize that their young teens feel surrounded by drug use. Nearly nine out of ten teens agree that "it seems like marijuana is everywhere these days." Teens are twice as likely to be using marijuana as parents believe they are, and teens are getting high in the places that parents think are safe havens, such as around school, at home, and at friends' houses.

Although teens may not show they appreciate it, parents profoundly shape the choices their children make about drugs. Take advantage of how much young people care about social image and appearance to point out the immediate, distasteful consequences of tobacco and marijuana use — for example, that smoking causes bad breath and stained teeth and makes clothes and hair smell. At the same time, you should discuss drugs' long-term effects:

- the lack of crucial social and emotional skills ordinarily learned during adolescence;
- the risk of lung cancer and emphysema from smoking;
- fatal or crippling car accidents and liver damage from heavy drinking;
- addiction, brain coma, and death

### **Grades ten through twelve (15 — 17 years old)**

Older teens have already had to make decisions many times about whether to try drugs or not. Today's teens are savvy about drug use, making distinctions not only among different drugs and their effects, but also among trial, occasional use, and addiction. They witness many of their peers using drugs — some without obvious or immediate consequences, others whose drug use gets out of control.

To resist peer pressure, teens need more than a general message not to use drugs. It's now also

appropriate to mention how alcohol, tobacco, and other drug consumption during pregnancy has been linked with birth defects in newborns. Teens need to be warned of the potentially deadly effects of combining drugs. They need to hear a parent's assertion that anyone can become a chronic user or an addict and that even non-addicted use can have serious permanent consequences.

Because most high school students are future oriented, they are more likely to listen to discussions of how drugs can ruin chances of getting into a good college, being accepted by the military, or being hired for certain jobs. Teenagers tend to be idealistic and enjoy hearing about ways they can help make the world a better place. Tell your teens that drug use is not a victimless crime, and make sure they understand the effect that drug use has on our society. Appeal to your teen by pointing out how avoiding illegal drugs helps make your town a safer, better place, and how being drug-free leaves more energy to volunteer after school for tutoring or coaching younger kids — activities the community is counting on.

It is important that parents praise and encourage teens for all the things they do well and for the positive choices they make. When you are proud of your son or daughter, tell him or her. Knowing they are seen and appreciated by the adults in their lives is highly motivating and can shore up their commitments to avoid drug use. Your teen may also be impressed by the importance of serving as a good role model for a younger brother or sister.

### **Questions children frequently ask about drugs**

#### **Q. Why would people want to put bad things into their bodies?**

A. One answer might be that they might not realize how dangerous the bad things are; another is that they are not taking care of themselves. Sometimes people start using a drug just to see what it feels like, but it can turn into an addiction (like cigarettes) and it's very hard to stop.

#### **Q. Why are some drugs good for you and some drugs wrong for you to take?**

A. You can discuss how drugs are powerful chemicals that change the way you feel. Doctors prescribe medicine to make sick people better — these are "good" drugs. "Bad" drugs are ones that aren't given by doctors and don't make you better; in fact, they can harm your body. That is why it is wrong to take these "bad" drugs.

#### **Q. Why can't I taste that "grown-up" drink?**

A. A small amount of alcohol has a much greater negative effect on a child's body than on an adult's; even a small amount can sicken a child.

#### **Q. Did you smoke marijuana when you were young?**

A. Don't give your child more information than necessary. If the answer is "yes," give the reasons why you feel you made a mistake; for instance, it made you feel out of control, you missed schoolwork, messed up in sports, let down your friends or lost touch with them. Also explain that more is known about the harmful effects of marijuana and other drugs now.