

How to talk to your Children about Drugs and Alcohol

Ages 5 to 8

As children enter **school** and spend more time around their peers, they become more influenced by the media and world around them. They're open now to new ideas and messages but definitely need your help to make sense of all this information. Between the ages of 5 and 8:

1. **Let your child know how you feel about tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs.** Keep your discussions factual and focused on the present. (Future consequences are too distant to have any meaning.) Let them know, for instance, that being high on alcohol or drugs makes it harder to play ball, finish a puzzle, or do other things they enjoy, and that smoking causes bad breath.
2. **Talk to your child about drug-related messages in the media.** Some TV shows, movies, music videos, and ads glamorize the use of tobacco, alcohol, or drugs. Ask your child whether these vehicles make drugs seem cool and acceptable, or whether they also show their downside. Encourage your child to ask questions or share concerns about the things he's seeing and hearing.
3. **Set clear family rules about drug use, and examine your own actions.** Tell children why you don't want them to take drugs, smoke, or drink. And always try to be a good role model. Your actions speak louder than words.
4. **Help kids build problem-solving skills.** If your child is having trouble with homework, a friendship, or a bully at school, help her pinpoint the problem and find long-term solutions. Point out that "quick fixes" don't work. If it's hard for your child to have a one-on-one conversation with you, have her paint or draw a picture, write a story, or send an e-mail to a trusted friend or relative.
5. **Get to know your child's friends and their parents.** Check in by phone or visit every once in a while to make sure that these families share the same values as you do about tobacco, alcohol, and drugs. (This is a good rule to follow when your child gets older as well.)

Ages 8 and Up

During the tween and preteen years, children may begin to assert their independence and question your authority, but they need your input and advice more than ever. In fact, when it comes to the issue of drug use, this is one of the most important times in a child's life. Beginning at age 8:

1. **Make sure your child knows your rules about drug use and the consequences if they're broken.** Kids this age can understand the reason for rules and appreciate having limits in place (whether or not they'll admit it!). What's more, research shows that children are less likely to use tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs if their parents have established a pattern of setting clear rules and consequences for breaking them.
2. **Teach your child how to say "no" to drugs.** Kids who don't know how to respond when offered alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs, or who don't know how to get out of sticky situations, are more likely to give in to peer pressure. Act out some real-life situations with your child and brainstorm solutions for what she can say. For instance: "My mom (or dad) would kill me if I smoked a cigarette," or "No thanks. I don't do drugs." Also, be sure your child knows that she shouldn't continue friendships with kids who have offered her drugs.
3. **Help build your child's self-esteem.** Puberty can erode your child's self-confidence and cause him at times to feel insecure, doubtful, and vulnerable to peer pressure. During these years, give your child lots of positive reinforcement and praise him for both his efforts and his successes.
4. **Give your child the power to make decisions that go against his peers.** Encourage your child to pick out the sneakers that he likes, for example, rather than the pair that many of his friends have. Or urge your daughter to hang out with true friends rather than with kids in the cool crowd.
5. **Base drug- and alcohol-related messages on facts -- not fear.** Kids this age love to learn facts (even strange ones) about all kinds of things. You can take advantage of their passion for learning to reinforce your message about drugs.
6. **Keep your conversations in "present tense."** Tweens and preteens aren't concerned with future problems that might result from experimenting with tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs. On the other hand, they are concerned about

their appearance, sometimes to the point of obsession. So if they believe that drug use will impair their looks or health, they might be likely to avoid these practices. You can also tell them that cigarettes can cause smelly hair and "ashtray breath" or that their performance in the school play or on the football team will suffer if they are high on marijuana.

7. **Help children separate reality from fantasy.** Watch TV and movies with your kids, and ask lots of questions to reinforce the distinction between what is real and make-believe. Remember to talk about advertising, too, as those messages are especially powerful.
8. **Encourage healthy, creative activities.** Look for ways to get your child involved in sports, hobbies, school clubs, and other activities that reduce boredom and excess free time. Encourage positive friendships and interests, and look for activities that you and your child can do together.

Sources: Partnership for a Drug-Free America; The Nemours Foundation; American Academy of Pediatrics