

Help Reduce the Chances Your Child Will Develop a Drug or Alcohol Problem

Substance use and addiction can strike any family regardless of ethnicity, affluence, age or gender. But parental engagement can be a simple and effective tool to help prevent substance use and addiction in kids. Children of hands-on parents are far less likely to smoke, drink or use drugs. Highly engaged parents are more likely to notice some of the warning signs of substance use.

Here are six research-supported ways to help reduce the chance that your teenage child will drink, use drugs or engage in other risky behavior.

1. Build a warm and supportive relationship with your child

Children who have a warm and supportive relationship with their parents are less likely to use drugs or alcohol. An effective parenting strategy is to be warm and supportive but to also set and stick to clear boundaries and limits, so children can learn to be responsible for their actions.

2. Be a good role model when it comes to drinking, taking medicine and handling stress

Your attitude and behaviors about drugs and alcohol can influence your child's attitude and about drugs and alcohol and his or her future behavior.

Three ways to be a good role model for your child:

- If you choose to drink alcohol, consume small amounts with a meal or for a celebratory occasion. Don't use alcohol as a coping mechanism or to relieve stress (Example: Letting your kids hear you say "I had a rough day and need a beer/drink to relax.")
- Follow prescription medication instructions properly. Don't save prescribed medications for when they may come in handy, use it later without a doctor's consent, or share the medications with others.
- When you are overwhelmed, try exercising or using other stress management techniques in order to teach your children that they do not need to drink or use drugs to cope with life's problems.

3. Know your child's risk level

Several decades of research shows that some teens are more at risk for developing a substance abuse problem than other teens.

4 Common Risk Factors Associated with Teen Drug and Alcohol Abuse:

- Family history of drug or alcohol problems
- Mental or Behavioral Disorders
- Trauma
- Impulse Control Problems

4. Know your child's friends

Your child's friends can influence him to take part in risky behaviors. This is especially true if your child is more reliant on his friends than he is on you. Knowing who your child's friends are and what they are like helps you to be more prepared to intervene if a problem occurs.

5. Monitor, supervise and set boundaries

Research shows that when parents monitor, supervise and set boundaries their teens are at a lowered risk for using drugs and alcohol.

To Monitor Your Child:

- Know where your child is at all times
- Be aware of your teen's activities, especially during the after-school period, which is a high-risk period for teen drug use.
- Know who your child is hanging out with.
- Keep track of your child's academic performance. Studies have shown that problems in school are a possible marker for alcohol and drug problems and that school involvement and academic achievement can protect against drugs and alcohol use.

To Supervise Your Child:

- Be present during recreational events and parties or at least make your teen aware that there is another adult supervising.
- Help your child with her homework or other school-related projects. This will not only give you quality time with her and reinforce the importance of achievement, but also helps you recognize any difficulties she may be having with school or other activities.

To Set Boundaries:

- Explain to your child why you are setting boundaries. (Example: "I'm doing this to keep you healthy and safe.")
- Firmly establish a rule that any drug or alcohol use will not be tolerated. Explain the risks of drinking while his or her brain is still developing.
- Set firm but reasonable rules and be clear about the consequences if the rules are not followed in advance and follow through consistently.
- Don't establish unreasonable rules or be overly harsh in punishment or consequences if they break rules. This might push your child away and prevent him or her from opening up to you.

6. Have ongoing conversations and provide information about drugs and alcohol

Have conversations with your child on all topics such as his or her activities, friends, school, job, hobbies, etc. This has been shown to protect against risk for teen tobacco use and the transition to drug and alcohol use. If you feel uncomfortable striking up these conversations with your teen, one way to begin is to ask your child, "Have you ever been offered drugs or alcohol?" In this way, your child might be more likely to open up than if you asked about his or her own personal use. This can then lead to a discussion about:

- Why people might drink or use drugs
- Your child's own feelings about the risks and benefits of use
- The reasons to avoid use, even though some people might not be outwardly experiencing consequences
- Refusal skills and alternatives to drinking and using

Source: Treatment Research Institute and Partnership for Drug-Free Kids.

For more information call Prevention Services Coordinator Jessica Wildfong at 781-275-7727 ext. 262 or email at jessicaw@bedfordma.gov