

# Parents' Guide to Talking with Kids about Drugs

Strong Voices.  
Smart Choices.

Talk with kids about drugs.

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# PARENTS ARE #1

*“Upsetting or disappointing my parents” is the #1 reason kids give for why they won’t use drugs. So start talking and keep the lines of communication open on this important issue.*

## Parents and other concerned adults make the difference:

In a survey conducted by the Coalition for a Drug-Free Greater Cincinnati, 47,000 Tri-State students said that parents are critically important in drug prevention:

- There is a 25% reduction in the use of all drugs among students whose parents talk to them about drugs.
- There is a 46% reduction in use among students whose parents set clear and consistent rules.
- The older the students get, the less frequent the talks are occurring and the less often clear rules are set. These decreases in parental involvement are directly reflected in increased use among older youth.

## Follow steps 1, 2 and 3...

- 1) Talk with children regularly. Look for teachable moments.
- 2) Set clear family rules.
- 3) Follow through when the rules are broken.

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# Talking with Preschoolers & Kindergartners:

*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.*

- Discuss why children need healthy food and explain the importance of making good decisions about what should and should not go into their bodies.
- Explain how medicines prescribed by a doctor for illness are drugs that can help the person for whom they are meant, but can be harmful if misused.
- Tell your children you love them and give them encouragement every day.

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## PARENTING TIP # 1

Point out poisonous and harmful household substances and explain why children should only put good things into their bodies.



# First through Third grades:

(6-8 years old)

*Young people are being exposed to alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs early on — even in elementary school. As your child shows increasing interest in the world outside the family and home, now is the time to begin to explain alcohol, tobacco and drugs.*

*Explain that some people use them even though they are harmful, and the consequences of using them.*

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**PRIMARY ISSUE:** At this age, it is essential to help kids understand what is harmful versus what is helpful. Alcohol, tobacco and other drugs are harmful when taken in a way that hinders the body's ability to function properly.

- Introduce concepts of legality and danger: People who use marijuana and cocaine can go to jail. People who use inhalants can die.
- Explain the idea of addiction — that drug use can become very difficult to stop.
- Establish the ground rules for your family and make sure your child understands them: “It is never okay for kids in our family to use illegal drugs or drink alcohol.”
- Explain why adults may drink alcohol but children may not: “It’s illegal for children and harmful to a child’s learning ability and developing social skills.”

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## PARENTING TIP # 2

Be a good role model and set a good example. Do not make drinking a focus of social gatherings when kids are present. It's never okay to ask your child to get you a beer or other alcoholic beverage.



TALK TALK TALK  
in the car TALK TALK TALK  
talk with kids about drugs

# Fourth through Sixth grades:

(9-11 years old)

*Research shows that the earlier children begin using alcohol, tobacco or other drugs, the more likely they are to experience serious problems. As a parent, you need to keep drugs away from your children as long as you can. It is essential that your child's anti-drug attitudes are strong before entering middle school or junior high.*

**PRIMARY ISSUE:** At this age it is important to nurture your relationship with your child as he grows and changes.

- Tell your children you expect them not to use.
- Keep communication lines open in all areas, even if it is difficult or embarrassing.
- Listen to what your children are saying and experiencing. At this age, children begin to experience different pressures with school and friends.
- Talk with your children about why they think young people might use. Talk to them about why it's not a good choice no matter what the reason.
- Brainstorm with your children about the consequences of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. Ask them, "what can happen to kids if they use drugs?"
- Set ground rules. "If you're going to a party, then I'd like to call the host's parents." Pay attention to where they are and with whom they spend time. Establish common free time, party and curfew rules with other parents.
- Establish daily family rituals for connecting with your children that will continue throughout adolescence. For example:
  - Eat dinner as a family at least four times per week.
  - Give your kids hugs when they come home.
  - Check in with your children at the high and low points of their days.
  - Hold family meetings or family game nights.
  - Find creative traditions that work for your family.

In a survey conducted among Greater Cincinnati students, 44% report having experimented with at least one drug by the end of seventh grade. Of those seventh and eighth grade students who report experimenting, 34% will become regular users before the end of the school year.

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**PARENTING TIP # 3**

Open your house as a safe and drug-free gathering place for young people. Get to know your child's friends and their parents.



# Seventh through Ninth grades:

(12-14 years old)

*Although teens often seem unreceptive to their parents as they struggle to become independent, teens desire and need parental support, involvement and guidance more than ever. Adolescence is often a confusing and stressful time, characterized by mood changes and deep insecurity. It's not surprising that this is the time when many young people try alcohol, tobacco and other drugs for the first time.*

**PRIMARY ISSUE:** This is a difficult time for adolescents. Listen and support your child. Continue to stay actively involved in your child's life.

- Point out the immediate consequences of tobacco and marijuana use — for example, that smoking causes bad breath, stained teeth and makes clothes and hair smell.
- Most children at this age are not concerned about the long-term consequences of drug abuse. They are concerned about embarrassing themselves, smelling bad, disappointing people they care for, getting in trouble and other short-term consequences.
- During this time, your child will likely encounter situations where they will need to make decisions regarding alcohol, tobacco and other drug use.
- Restate your expectation that they will not use.
- Decide together on the consequences your child will face if they break family rules regarding drug and alcohol use.
- Your child's friends will change as they enter new schools. Get to know the new friends, their parents and communicate with them often.
- Develop common free time, party and curfew rules with the parents of your child's new friends.
- Remember, at this age, critical social skill development is happening. Alcohol and/or marijuana use will seriously harm that development, causing lifelong challenges.
- Make alcohol, tobacco and other drug choices that help you serve as a good role model for your kids.

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## PARENTING TIP # 4

At this pivotal time, parents must monitor children closely, set clear rules, intervene early if you suspect use and enforce consequences when rules are broken. By all means, make a big deal if it happens.



# Tenth through Twelfth grades

(15-18 years old)

*Older teens have likely had to make decisions about whether or not to try drugs. They sometimes witness their peers using drugs — some without obvious or immediate consequences, others whose drug use gets out of control. To resist pressure to use, teenagers need more than a general message not to use drugs.*

**Alcohol-related car accidents are one of the leading causes of death among 15-24 year olds in the United States.** As he approaches driving age, let your child know that you expect he will not drink and drive NOR ride with someone who has been drinking.

Have more in-depth conversations.

- Anyone can become addicted to drugs and alcohol.
- Any use can have serious permanent consequences.
- A new federal law prohibits giving financial aid to a college applicant with a drug record.
- Impairment of abstract thinking caused by alcohol use leads to lower college entrance exam scores.
- Failing a pre-employment drug test will keep you from getting a job.
- Discuss your family history of addiction, if any, and let your children know they are four times more likely to become addicted if it runs in the family.
- Continue to communicate with other parents, particularly around events such as prom, spring break and graduation.
- There is no medicinal value to smoking marijuana. There are some medical conditions in which THC, a chemical contained in marijuana, can be helpful. THC is prescribed only by doctors, in pill form. The risk of smoking marijuana greatly outweighs the benefits of the chemical.
- Validate that when young people turn 21, they can choose to drink alcohol because it is legal and because their bodies are able to handle it.

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## PARENTING TIP # 5

Help your child deal with pressure and practice saying "NO!" Rehearse specific social situations in which friends offer drugs and have your children develop and practice comfortable ways to refuse the offer. Give them permission to use you as an excuse: "If my parents find out, I'll be grounded for a month. It's not worth it."



# Life after High School Graduation:

## (18 and older)

*As the parent of a young adult, you need to reinforce that it is illegal in all 50 states to purchase alcohol until they are 21. Because drinking rates among college students are considerably higher than those who join the workforce after graduating from high school, parents of college-bound teens need to be aware of the risks their children are likely to encounter away from home.*

*An unfamiliar atmosphere, large amounts of unstructured and unsupervised time, new friends and the pressure to make good grades all contribute to making this a difficult time. Students may turn to alcohol and other drugs to relieve stress and/or celebrate or unwind. Unfortunately, some parents make the mistake of accepting high-risk drinking on college campuses as a “rite of passage” into adulthood.*

*Attitudes toward impairment have changed over the past 20 years. For college students, high-risk drinking and impairment is often the desired outcome of a drinking session. Unfortunately, parents don't realize how very dangerous this change in attitude is.*

Before your child goes to college, take these precautions:

- Remind your child that education is their priority and you expect they will not drink alcohol.
- Many students on college campuses choose not to drink.
- Inform your student that when they choose to drink alcohol, poisoning can occur. Tell them to call 911 if the following signs are present:
  - Unconsciousness
  - Cold, clammy skin
  - Slowed, difficult breathing
- There are no mood-altering drugs that will enhance your academic performance.
- Be creative and help your child identify positive stress relievers.
- Even though they may be living away from home, they still need your love and guidance.

### Strong Voices. Smart Choices. PARENTING TIP # 6

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When selecting a college with your child, find out and discuss the school's policy regarding alcohol and other drugs. Share your expectations with school officials regarding their behavior.



# Be prepared for the “Did you do it?” question...

*Today’s parents are conflicted about their own drug use. Many parents may have used drugs in their youth, but gave them up long ago. The most important thing is that you don’t avoid talking about drugs, because you may be afraid to answer this question.*

*Research shows you can handle this discussion in a variety of ways. You will need to consider the situation, the age of your child, the tone of the conversation and, to some degree, your instincts to guide your decision. Be sure to listen, slow down the dialogue and ask for feedback throughout the conversation.*


*If you did not try drugs in your youth, the answer is simple — explain to your child why you chose not to take the risk. If you did experiment with drugs, think about why you decided to use and to quit so you will be ready to have this discussion with your child.*

To begin this conversation, before answering the question, ask your child why they’re asking. Based on what you hear, use the following guidelines to continue the conversation.

- Talk to them about why you no longer use.
- Discuss the negative effects of your usage.
- Be honest, do not glorify or glamorize the experience.
- Explain that you may have made some poor decisions during your youth. Based on what you have learned and better information, explain to your child that you want to help her stay healthy and drug-free, just like you want her to wear a bicycle helmet.
- Discuss how the drugs today are a lot stronger, so the risk is far greater today than when you tried them.
- This is an ideal time to discuss the genetic component of alcohol and other drug abuse and family history, if you have one.

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If you still have questions regarding this difficult issue, please call the Coalition for a Drug-Free Greater Cincinnati at **(513) 751-8000**.



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