

SUGGESTED HEADLINE

Make ‘the drug talk’ an ongoing conversation with your kids

By Emily Moser

Lots of messages in the media about raising children free of alcohol and other drugs recommend that parents talk with their kids, early and often, about substance use. But what do those conversations actually look like?

As parents, the most effective way to connect with our kids and help them make the healthy choice not to use alcohol and other drugs is to make the conversations ongoing, casual and comfortable. Rather than approaching the subject as a one-time *drug talk*, consider capitalizing on teachable moments – like cooking together, taking a walk, shooting baskets in the driveway, or talking about a television show or movie. These are opportunities to listen to your child’s perspective, help them understand the facts and clearly communicate where you stand.

Weaving the subject into everyday life not only helps keep a focus on youth alcohol and drug prevention amid a family’s often demanding schedule, but it also helps you make alcohol and other drug use prevention relevant to your child’s perspectives as they mature. Here are a few other tips:

- *Ask questions.* Kids are a wealth of information about the influences young people face today, who and what’s popular and why, and other subjects. Ask open-ended questions, listen without interruption and encourage them to share by using phrases such as, “Tell me more about that.”
- *Be flexible about the direction of the conversations.* Remember that the conversation with your child revolves in large part around what they have to say and their perspectives. You can then tailor your messages accordingly.
- *Be prepared to field difficult questions.* Many parents who experimented with alcohol or other drugs when they were young find it tough to know how to respond when their kids ask if they ever used drugs. Help your child understand that, thanks to advances in science, more is known today about the dangers of substance use, including use at younger ages. In addition, help them understand that you don’t want them to make the same mistakes you did. Communicate the facts about the harms of substance use; for instance, share the fact that recent research shows regular drinking can make it harder for adolescents to learn and remember. And use the opportunity to find out what your kids know about alcohol and other drugs. For example, do they understand why it’s illegal for people younger than 21 to drink? Such questions can open the door to sharing your family’s rules and consequences about drinking and other drugs. If you don’t know an answer to one of their questions, let them know you’ll find it.
- *Involve your kids in establishing family rules and consequences about youth substance use that reflect your family’s beliefs.* Research clearly shows that kids whose families have clear rules and consistent consequences about not drinking or using other drugs are less likely to use. Possible rules include not staying at teen

parties where alcohol is served, not drinking until age 21 and not riding in a car with a driver who has been drinking. Consider talking with your son or daughter about the fact that they can contact you, a family friend or relative to pick them up if they inadvertently find themselves in a risky situation, but that they may face family consequences nonetheless.

- *Frame conversations about alcohol and other drug use around your family's shared values, your child's activities and goals, and what they learn in school.* Again, it's helpful to make the topic relevant to your child's life. If your son or daughter plays sports, for example, encourage a conversation about how good eating and sleep habits can help them on the field, and conversely how drinking and other drug use harms their mind and body.

Parents can't be everywhere. That's why a major goal should be to keep the lines of communication open with your child, be firm about where you stand, and educate them so that they are equipped to make the healthy choice not to use alcohol and other drugs.

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Some of these concepts are adapted from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and theantidrug.com.