

NACoA's Parent's Guide:
Talking to Kids and Teens About Alcohol and Other Substances

Engaging your kids and teens in age-appropriate, honest, open conversations about alcohol and other substances can be a powerful step in preventing substance use and fostering healthy decision-making. This guide provides practical advice and strategies to help you navigate these important discussions. Talk to your kids and teens often, so they know you are available for them when they have questions.

1. Be Honest and Informed

- **Provide Clear, Accurate Information**: Avoid vague or partially true statements. Share basic facts about the substances and their risks, ensuring you have credible sources to back your claims.
- **Acknowledge Questions You Don't Know**: If your child asks something you're unsure about, admit it and commit to finding the answer together, from a credible resource.

2. Model Positive Behavior

- **Demonstrate a Substance-Free Lifestyle**: Show your child that it's possible to have fun and socialize without alcohol, vaping, or other substances, particularly at children's parties or celebrations.
- **Use Designated Drivers**: Normalize responsible choices, such as using designated drivers, and start modeling these behaviors when children are young.
- **Host Substance-Free Events**: If hosting parties, especially for children, keep them free of alcohol and other substances, and have child focused activities adults are involved in.
- **Understand Low-Risk Drinking Guidelines**: For parents without a personal or familial history of substance use disorders:
  - Women: No more than 3 drinks on any single day and no more than 7 per week.
  - Men: No more than 4 drinks on any single day and no more than 14 per week.
  - No alcohol or marijuana is best for everyone's health.
- **For Families with Substance Use Disorders**: Highlight that any substance use may pose significant risks.

3. Choose the Right Timing

- Avoid discussing sensitive topics during busy or stressful moments (e.g., while getting ready for school).
- Use calm, reflective times to discuss family values, healthy habits, and the potential impact of substance use on goals and relationships. Try establishing a set time each week, or a specific dinner night, to discuss how family updates and dynamics where important topics like this one can be broached.

4. Set and Enforce Clear Rules

- **Establish No-Use Policies**: Clearly communicate that you expect your child to avoid alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and other substances because you care about their well-being.
- **Anticipate Testing of Limits**: Teens may challenge rules, so be prepared to enforce logical, consistent consequences tied to their actions.
- **Example of Logical Consequences**: If a teen breaks a no-use rule by vaping, a related consequence might involve researching the health risks of vaping and presenting their findings to the family

5. Use Teachable Moments

Using everyday scenarios can prompt meaningful discussions.

For example:

- **Ads or Media**: Ask guiding questions about alcohol or vaping ads.
    - "What message is this ad sending?"
    - "How does this compare to real-life consequences?"
    - "Why do you think this ad is placed here?"
    - "How will you respond if your friends pressure you to take drugs or drink alcohol?
- **Real-Life Events**: Use stories about people in your community to discuss consequences, choices, and risks.

6. Communicate Effectively

- **Share at Their Level**: Adjust your explanations to be age appropriate. Avoid oversimplifying or overloading them with technical details.
- **Use Comfortable Language**: Speak naturally. Teaching correct terms for substances and their effects can empower your child to understand and make informed choices.
- **Avoid Lecturing**: Keep the conversation engaging and interactive. Ask questions and listen actively.

7. Create a Safe Space for Conversations

- **Encourage Openness**: Let your child know they can talk to you without fear of judgment.
- **Validate Their Feelings**: Acknowledge their thoughts and concerns to foster trust and respect.
- **Be Patient**: They may not open up immediately, so maintain a supportive attitude.

8. Address Peer Pressure and Decision-Making

- **Discuss Peer Influence**: Talk about how peers might pressure them to use substances and help them brainstorm ways to say no.
- **Role-Play Scenarios**: Practice responses they can use when offered substances, such as:
    - "No, I'm good. I want to stay healthy for sports."
    - "No thanks, I have to be sharp for tomorrow's exam."

9. Highlight the Risks and Consequences

- **Health Risks**: Explain how substances can harm their developing brain, lungs, and overall health.
- **Legal and Social Consequences**: Discuss potential legal issues, loss of privileges, and how substance use can affect friendships and future opportunities.
- **Long-Term Effects**: Emphasize how early substance use can increase the likelihood of developing substance use disorders later in life.

10. Stay Involved and Connected

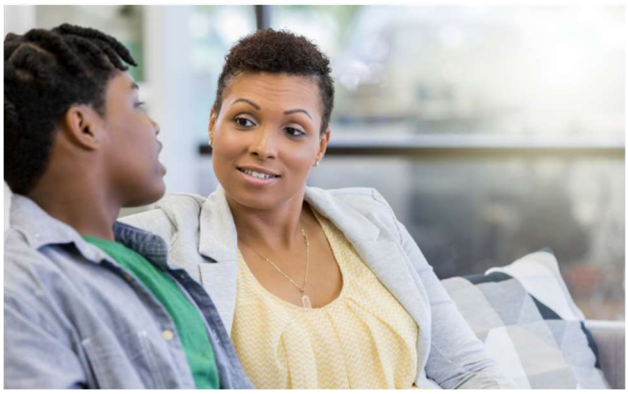
- **Monitor Their Activities**: Know where they are, who they are with, and what they're doing.
- **Strengthen Family Bonds**: Spend quality time together to build trust and open communication.
- **Engage in Healthy Activities**: Encourage hobbies, sports, and activities that foster self-esteem and resilience.

11. Addressing Reluctance to Talk

If your child resists talking about these topics:

- Start with general questions about their day or interests to ease into the discussion.
- Use media (a movie, book, or ad) as a segue to introduce the topic indirectly.
- Resources to use when talking with your kids

Resources When Talking with Your Teens



Straight Talk from Claudia Black: What Recovering Parents Should Tell Their Kids about Drugs and Alcohol

Alcohol use, substance use, and the disease of addiction are challenging topics for parents to discuss with children. These subjects are even more complex, and more urgent, for recovering parents to discuss with their children. Best-selling recovery author Dr. Claudia Black introduces readers to five different families and reveals how each of the parents talked with their kids about recovery, relapse, and the child's own vulnerability.

Discussion tips and clearly presented facts help parents focus on key issues. Age-appropriate strategies help reduce children's experimentation with alcohol and other drugs.

Alcohol and Your Brain - Take a rollercoaster ride through the brain to learn about alcohol's harmful effects on five different brain structures. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHmf-uxOcLc

NIAAA for Middle Schoolers - Informative and interactive activities to help parents, caregivers, and teachers introduce and reinforce key messages about peer pressure, resistance skills, and other important topics related to underage drinking.

https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohols-effects-health/niaaa-middle-school

Age Matters – An important way to protect your brain is to wait until you are older to experiment with alcohol and other substances. https://www.addictionpolicy.org/post/protect-your-brain-why-age-of-first-use-matters

Cannabis Talk Kit - https://drugfree.org/wpcontent/uploads/2017/02/Marijuana_Talk_Kit.pdf

How Naloxone Saves Lives in Opioid Overdose https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cssRZEI9ujY

Tips for Talking to Youth of All Ages

Get Smart About Drugs: A DEA Resource for Parents, Educators & Caregivers – Guidance for Youth, Preschool – Young Adults https://www.getsmartaboutdrugs.gov/publication/tips-talking-youth

Additional Important Resources When Talking With Kids and Teens Affected by Alcohol/Substance Misuse or Parental Substance Use Disorders

Tools for Kids https://nacoa.org/tools_for_kids/

Tools for Parents and Caregivers: Helping Families Impacted by Substance Use Disorders https://nacoa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Tools-for-Parents-and-Caregivers.NACoA2024.pdf

Language When Talking With Kids and Teens https://nacoa.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Stigma.LanguageWithKidsandTeens.2025.NACoA_.pdf