

## Caregiver Guide:

# How to Talk to Your Child about Alcohol & Substance Use

- **Be a good role model** in your own behaviors around alcohol, tobacco, and other substance use.
- **Ground yourself first.** Take a deep breath, go for a walk, or engage in an activity that you find calming before starting a conversation with your child.
- **Start early** in having open conversations with your child. *Children as young as 10* may have tried or may be regularly using alcohol, tobacco, or other substances. It is vital that you talk to your child before their first exposure.
- It can be helpful to **go for a walk, take a drive, or do an activity together** while having these conversations.
- **Speak to your child in a respectful manner.** Try to remain open and non-judgemental. Give them space to ask you questions and to tell you what they already know. **Validate their feelings and perspective.**
- If they share that they have used alcohol or substances, **try to understand why** and explore these reasons rather than focusing on the alcohol or substance use itself.
- **Praise your child** for the good choices that they are making.
- **Honestly and rationally explain the dangers** of alcohol, tobacco, and other substance use.
- **Clearly define rules and boundaries** in your home and what will happen if rules are broken. Evidence shows that, even if rules are broken, children who have clearly defined rules engage in fewer high risk behaviors.
- Pay close attention. **Let your child know that you are monitoring** their online presence and paying close attention to their daily activities.
- **Practice and role play** how to navigate difficult situations. Let them know that they can **always reach out to you for help** if they get into a situation that feels unsafe.
- **This is an on-going process**, not a one-time conversation; look for opportunities to continue to weave these conversations into daily life.

- **Monitor even young children for signs that they might be using alcohol, tobacco, or other substances.** Early warning signs may include:
  - sudden change in mood;
  - changing friend group;
  - behavioral issues at home or school that are abnormal;
  - frequently requesting money without a clear reason;
  - changes in appetite or health;
  - or finding paraphernalia in their belongings.
  
- **If you suspect that your child is already using** alcohol, tobacco, or other substances:
  - **have a direct conversation** with your child about their behavior;
  - **implement consequences** that limit their access to future use;
  - **connect to your child's school team** to let them know about your concerns and to work together to provide additional support;
  - **connect to your PCP** to monitor your child's health;
  - and, if needed, **connect your child to a therapist** for further treatment.

When looking on a website such as [psychologytoday.com](https://psychologytoday.com), look for a provider who is a Licensed Drug and Alcohol Counselor (LADC) who provides evidence-based treatment such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT), and family-based work. **Family engagement is critical to effective treatment for children and adolescents.**

- **ParentUp** (<https://parentupvt.org/>) is a guide created by the Vermont Department of Health for caregivers to find resources and support in talking to their children about substance use.

**Adapted from:**

How to talk to your teen about substance use. Child Mind Institute. (2022, July 28).  
From: <https://childmind.org/article/talk-teenager-substance-use-abuse/>

Levy, S., & Sundaram, S. (2018, August 16). *Teens and drugs: 5 tips for talking with your kids*. Harvard Health.  
From: <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/teens-and-drugs-5-tips-for-talking-with-your-kids-2018081614565>

Vermont Department of Health. (n.d.). *How can I prevent my teen from misusing substances?* ParentUp.  
From: <https://parentupvt.org/how-do-i-prevent>

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