

Many youth use alcohol and other drugs. Some develop serious problems which require professional treatment. The younger kids start using drugs and alcohol, the more likely they are to develop a substance use disorder later on. And, other psychiatric disorders often co-exist with substance use problems and need assessment and treatment. Fortunately, there are excellent resources for parents who want to prevent their kids from using drugs, and for those who believe their children may have a substance use problem.

## How it affects my child

Drugs and alcohol contribute to a host of problems for our children, including:

- Poor academic performance
- Memory and learning problems
- Truancy and absenteeism
- Problems with family and peer relationships and lack of empathy for others
- A tendency to engage in other risky activities and to feel invulnerable
- An increased risk for moving on to more dangerous drugs, and developing dependency

**While all children are at risk of using drugs and alcohol, the following risk factors significantly increase the chance that a child will develop a serious alcohol or drug problem:**

- Having a family history of substance use or dependency
- Depression or low self-esteem
- Social isolation; inability to fit into the mainstream

## What can we do about it?

Research has documented that family involvement and classroom-based prevention programs are the most effective means of addressing substance use among youth.

**Watch for signs of a substance problem:**

- Sudden moodiness or irritability
- Becoming more secretive

- Argumentative, disruptive, rule-breaking behavior
- Low self-esteem or depression
- Poor judgment; irresponsible behavior
- Social withdrawal; pulling away from family
- Withdrawal from former activities or friends; change in friends; general lack of interest

**Spend time with your children.** Show them how much you love them and are concerned about their safety and well-being.

**Educate your children about drugs and alcohol.** Try to give them information that is appropriate for their age and level of development. Younger children can be told that drugs and alcohol can hurt their bodies, while older children can benefit from information about specific drugs and their effects.

**Think about the structure and discipline you provide.** Make sure that it is appropriate to your child's age and development, and that you consistently reinforce the behavior you expect.

**Let your child know—directly and firmly—that you disapprove of drug and alcohol use.** Remember that you are your child's most important role model. Do not smoke, drink to excess or use drugs yourself.

**Try to listen carefully to your children, and stress the importance of open, honest communication.** Kids whose parents talk to them regularly about the dangers of drugs are much less likely to use drugs than kids whose parents don't have these conversations.

**Help your child recognize their own feelings, by sharing your feelings (e.g. I feel lonely),** and by commenting on how your child appears to be feeling. Remember that children who can express their feelings are more likely to receive support from others, and are less likely to turn to drugs and alcohol to try to get rid of bad feelings.

**Take care of yourself.** It is difficult to help your child if you are becoming overwhelmed. Keeping yourself healthy will also allow you to present as a healthy role model for your child.

**Be aware of your child's friends, as kids are most likely to use drugs and alcohol with friends** (at parties, in cars, etc.).

**Encourage your child's positive interests.** Activities such as sports, exercise, art, community service and part-time employment provide positive alternatives to using drugs, and help your child feel good about themselves.

**Remember that parental monitoring and supervision are critical for drug use preventions.** Try to be an active, consistent presence in your child's life, and let them know that you will do whatever it takes to ensure their safety and well-being. Checking in with your child's teachers, coaches and other adults in their life is a good idea.

**If you suspect that your child is using drugs, you should voice your suspicions openly—avoiding direct accusations, when they are sober or straight and you're calm.** This will show that your child's well-being is crucial to you and that you still love them, but are most concerned with what they are doing to themselves. Take action. Don't assume that your child is experimenting or that it is a one-time incident.

**Seek counseling from a certified mental health professional with experience in youth and substance use and treatment.** Meeting with school counselors and/or your family doctor can lead to the right intervention and support for your child and family.

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## Resource Links

### The AntiDrug.com

A website of the National Youth AntiDrug Media Campaign, provides parents and caregivers with information on proven prevention strategies and information about what to do if you suspect that your adolescent is using drugs or alcohol.

<https://drugfree.org/resources/>

### Building Blocks for a Healthy Future

A website developed by the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) geared toward caregivers of younger children (age 3 to 6). You will find basic information about helping your children make good choices and develop a healthy lifestyle.

<https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/samhsa-2014-prevention-resources.pdf>

### SAMHSA

How To Tell If Your Child Is Drinking Alcohol: A list of specific signs that your child may be in trouble with alcohol: <https://www.samhsa.gov/underage-drinking/parent-resources/how-tell-if-your-child-drinking-alcohol>

### National Institute on Drug Abuse

NIDA provides links to facts on specific drugs for parents and teachers as well as age-appropriate curriculum regarding drug education.

<https://www.drugabuse.gov/parents-educators>



Coordinated by



The Children's Mental Health Matters! Campaign is a collaboration of the Mental Health Association of Maryland (MHAMD) and the Maryland Coalition of Families (MCF) with support from the Maryland Department of Health - Behavioral Health Administration. The Campaign goal, with School and Community Champions across the state, is to raise public awareness of the importance of children's mental health. For more information, please visit [www.ChildrensMentalHealthMatters.org](http://www.ChildrensMentalHealthMatters.org)