

Chapter 4

Family Communication for Each Age

PARENT TALKING TIPS THROUGH STAGES AND AGES: Pre-K to Young Adult



Conversations are one of the most powerful tools parents can use to connect with and protect their kids.

When tackling some of life's tougher topics, especially those about drugs and alcohol, just figuring out what to say can be a challenge. These tips can help you figure out what to say depending on your child's age or stage of development.

Helpful to Note:

- ✓ Always keep conversations open and honest.
- ✓ Come from a place of love, even when you're having tough conversations.
- ✓ Balance positive reinforcement and negative consequences.
- ✓ Keep in mind that teachable moments come up all of the time, be mindful of natural places for the conversation to go in order to broach the topic of drugs and alcohol.



Preschool (2-4 YEARS OLD)

Since the foundation for all healthy habits – from nutrition to toothbrushing – is laid down during the preschool years, this is a great time to set the stage for a drug-free life.

Tips for Conversations:

- **Explain the importance of taking good care of our bodies** – eating right, exercising, and getting a good night's sleep. Discuss how good you feel when you take care of yourself – how you can run, jump, play, and work for many hours.
- **Celebrate your child's decision-making skills.**
- **Help your child steer clear of dangerous substances that exist in their immediate world.** Explain that they should only eat or smell food or a medicine from a doctor that you, or other known caregivers offered. Also, explain that drugs from the doctor help the person the doctor gives them to but that they can harm someone else.
- **Turn frustration into a learning opportunity.** If a tower of blocks keeps collapsing during a play session, work with your child to find possible solutions to the problem.





Early Elementary Aged Child (5-8 YEARS OLD)

Children in this age group are still tied to family and eager to please, but they're also beginning to explore their individuality.

Tips for Conversations:

- **Talk to your kids about the drug-related messages they receive** through advertisements, the news media and entertainment sources.
- **Keep your discussions about substances focused on the present.** Long-term consequences are too distant to have any meaning. Talk about the differences between the medicinal uses and illegal uses of drugs, and how drugs can negatively impact the families and friends of people who use them.
- **Set clear rules and explain the reasons for your rules.** If you use substances, be mindful of the message you are sending to your children.
- **Work on problem solving by helping them find long-lasting solutions** to homework trouble, a fight with a friend, or in dealing with a bully. Be sure to point out that quick fixes are not long-term solutions.
- **Give your kids the power to escape from situations that make them feel bad.** Make sure they know that they shouldn't stay in a place that makes them feel uncomfortable or bad about themselves. Also let them know that they don't need to stick with friends who don't support them.



Preteens (9-12 YEARS OLD)

Preteens, on their quest to figure out their place in the world, tend to give their friends' opinions a great deal of power, while at the same time starting to question their parents' views and messages.

Tips for Conversations:

- **Make sure your child knows your rules – and that you'll enforce the consequences if rules are broken.** Research shows that kids are less likely to use tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs if their parents have established a pattern of setting clear rules and consequences for breaking those rules.
- **Kids who don't know what to say when someone offers them drugs are more likely to give in to peer pressure. Let her know that she can always use you as an excuse** and say: "No, my mom [or dad, aunt, etc.] will be really upset with me if I smoke a cigarette."
- **Feelings of insecurity, doubt, and pressure may creep in during puberty. Offset those feelings with a lot of positive comments about who they are as an individual and their strengths** – and not just when they bring home an A.
- **Get to know your child's friends – and their friends' parents.** Check in by phone or a visit once in a while to make sure they are on the same page with prohibiting drug or alcohol use, particularly when their home is to be used for a party or sleepover.



Teens

(13-18 YEARS OLD)

This is a pivotal time for parents in helping kids make positive choices when faced with drugs and alcohol. Teens are a savvy bunch when it comes to this topic, and they need detailed and reality-driven messages from you.

Tips for Conversations:

- **Make sure your teen knows your rules and the consequences for breaking those rules – and, most importantly, that you really will enforce those consequences if the rules are broken.** Research shows that kids are less likely to use tobacco, alcohol and other drugs if their parents have established a pattern of setting clear rules and consequences for breaking those rules. Kids who are not regularly monitored by their parents are four times more likely to use drugs.
- **Make it clear that you disapprove of all alcohol, tobacco, and drug use.**
- **Share with your teen all the things you find wonderful about them.** They need to hear a lot of positive comments about their life and who they are as an individual – and not just when they make the team or do well on a test. Positive reinforcement can go a long way in preventing drug use among teens.

- **Show interest in and discuss your child's daily ups and downs.** You'll earn your child's trust, learn how to talk to each other, and won't take them by surprise when you voice a strong point of view about drugs.
- **Don't just leave your child's drug education up to the school.** Ask your teen what they've learned about drugs in school and then build on that with additional topics, such as how and why chemical dependence occurs, the unpredictable nature of dependency and how it varies from person to person, the impact of drug use on maintaining a healthy lifestyle, or positive approaches to stress reduction.
- **Be sure you explain the danger in mixing substances, such as opioids with alcohol.**
- **Help your teen create an "EXIT PLAN" in case he or she is offered or faced with a difficult decision about prescription opioids or other substances.** Peer pressure can be powerful, so coming up with realistic action steps and practicing them together in a safe environment will prepare and empower your teen to make good choices when it matters.

EXIT PLAN

for teens offered or faced with a difficult decision about prescription opioids or other substances:



- ✓ Practice ways of saying no firmly.
- ✓ Leave the situation.
- ✓ Create a code word if your teen calls you and would like to be picked up.
- ✓ Praise when your teen takes steps to leave a situation and communicates with you on the reasons, fostering trust.



Young Adult (18-24 YEARS OLD)

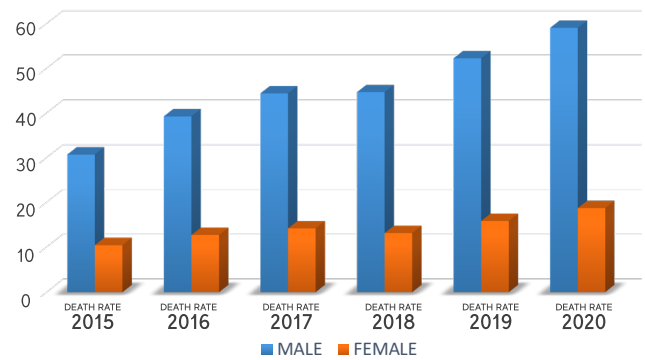


Whether your young adult child is heading to college, the military, or into the workforce, they are taking their first steps towards greater independence. As decisions are discussed it remains just as important to keep talking with them about substance use and the possible consequences to their well-being.

Tips for Conversations:

- **Keep in touch and talk overall about their choices and decisions.**
- **Point out the resources available to them wherever they are headed, who to contact for help from counseling staff or advisors, specific extra curricular groups, and housing choices.**
- **Point out the dangers of substances today being more concentrated, the dangers of mixing substances, and how substances' concentration can be obscured.**
- **Discuss how to handle situations where substances may arise in their new environments.**
- **Ensure they are aware of the employee benefits or programs and policies if going into the workplace.**
- **If headed to college, make sure they know the school's policies and resources on campus.**
- **If headed to the military, Military One Source provides family resources in prevention, treatment and counseling.**
- **If your child is injured or needs surgery, ensure they know what questions to ask around pain management options.**

Figure 3: Drug Overdose Mortality Rates, by Gender, Connecticut, 2015-2020
(Rate/100,000 Gender-Specific Population)



Young adults are at increased risk of substance misuse, with the most commonly misused substances being alcohol, marijuana, and tobacco or nicotine. They also have a much higher risk of overdosing than those under age 20.

Know that your young adult still needs guidance, support, and understanding as they make this transition and to be comfortable broaching these subjects with them on a regular basis.

Additional Supports and Resources:

Through your existing contact network you may find additional supports for questions, concerns, and resources. These include but are not limited to:

- ✓ **Pediatrician**
- ✓ **Teachers**
- ✓ **School Counselor**
- ✓ **Coach**
- ✓ **Faith Leaders and Youth Groups**
- ✓ **On Campus Counseling Centers**
- ✓ **School Based Health Clinics**
- ✓ **School and Community Social Work Services**
- ✓ **Youth Service Bureaus**
- ✓ **Local Community Coalitions and Prevention Councils**
- ✓ **Family and Friends**