PREVENTION STARTS with you®

Conversation Guide

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INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW

WHY IT MATTERS

For parents, caregivers, and trusted adults, building connection is one of the strongest tools to prevent youth substance misuse. Everyday conversations help adults and children develop trust, shared expectations, and strategies to handle situations where not everything goes according to plan.

> *Children who discuss the risks of using drugs and alcohol with their parents are **50% less likely** to use than their peers.*

Prevention isn't about the perfect moments or one big "talk". It's the things we do every day to make ourselves and those we love a little bit safer. The same way we brush our teeth daily, change the batteries in our smoke detectors, and buckle our seatbelts every time we get in the car, building connection is rooted in the little, everyday moments.

WHERE TO START

Checking in often about everything from school, to activities, and friends helps build trust and create natural opportunities for your child to come to you when it matters. Not every conversation has to circle back to drugs or alcohol.

When having conversations with children, parents should remember to:

- **Ask open-ended questions.** Open-ended questions invite dialogue. Questions like "How was your day?" are often met with a one-word answer. Try something more specific, like "What was the best part of your day?" Questions that invite stories, opinions, and feelings help turn everyday check-ins into meaningful conversations.
- **Be honest and open.** If questions about drugs or alcohol come up, give an honest, age-appropriate answer that doesn't go beyond what they've asked.
- **Share clear expectations.** Parent expectations play a major role in young people's choices surrounding drugs and alcohol. Be clear that you do not want them using these substances.
- **Engage in everyday moments.** Use the things that happen every day to check in: school, sports, activities, and friends.
- **Show them that you care.** Remind them that you love and care about them, and that you're always available for questions or if they need to talk.

REMEMBER, THEY'RE WATCHING

Your actions are part of the conversation, too. Children learn from how you make choices, handle challenges, and keep yourself and others safe. What you do can be just as important as what you say. It's not about being perfect; it's about showing them what making healthy choices looks like in everyday life.

AGE-SPECIFIC GUIDELINES & QUESTIONS

TODDLERS AND PRESCHOOLERS

Goal: *Build trust and open communication. Develop an understanding of what medicine is, why it matters, and that it should only ever be taken from a trusted adult.*

It's never too early to start

Toddlers are naturally curious and beginning to interact with the world around them. At this age, conversations should be quick and simple to understand. The focus should be on healthy choices and safety with medicine, rather than heavier conversations about drugs and alcohol.

Opportunities to connect:

- **When they take medicine:** Young children taking medicine is a natural opportunity to talk about what it is and proper use. Explain what it is and what it's for. Talk about only using medicine given to them by you or another trusted adult and never taking medicine that belongs to someone else.
- **When they ask questions:** Young children are likely to ask questions about things they see, including medicine. It's important to be open to these topics, answer in simple, honest terms, and not go beyond what they've asked.
- **During routines:** Normal routines like dinner, bath time, or brushing their teeth can be a good opportunity to discuss the things we do to keep our bodies healthy.
- **Bedtime:** The end of the day is a quiet, calm time to check in and ask questions.

Questions to build connection:

- What was the best part of your day?
- What made you happy today?
- What is something you want to do tomorrow?

Topic-specific questions:

- Who helps you when you need medicine?
- What should you do if you find a pill on the floor?
- Why do we ask a grown-up before taking medicine?
- What are the best things about being healthy?

Scenarios

Your child finds a pill on the floor

Open with: “Good job telling me. We don’t know what that is, so let’s leave it alone and get a grown-up.”

Your child sees you take medicine

Open with: “Medicine can help us when we need it, but it’s only safe when we take the right kind and the right amount.”

Your child has medicine

Open with: “This is medicine for [reason]. Medicine can help us feel better, but it’s only safe to take when we get it from a grown-up.”

Remember, they’re watching

When you take your own medication, make it a teachable moment. Explain that medicine has a specific purpose, that it should only be taken by the person it's intended for, and that you follow directions to take it safely. Show them how you put medication away securely when you're finished.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Goal: *Build basic knowledge around drugs and alcohol. Increase awareness of risks, develop skills to make safe choices, and build confidence to say no to peer pressure.*

Start with connection

If they don't hear about drugs and alcohol from you, they're likely hearing it (or seeing it) somewhere else. At this age, children are starting to hear information from different sources. Use conversations to share accurate information, help them understand safe choices and peer influence, and let them know that they can always go to you with questions.

Opportunities to connect:

- **After-school:** After-school is a great time to check in and get a sense for how things are going. Asking open-ended questions can help parents see what's most pressing in their child's mind and identify any concerns.
- **Watching TV:** TV shows and movies present many scenarios that can be used as teachable moments. When drugs or alcohol or present, use the opportunity to discuss what's happening with your child.
- **Talking about friends:** Conversations about friends are a chance to ask questions about whether topics such as drugs and alcohol have come up, and what they've heard.
- **Setting family rules:** Conversations about household rules and expectations should include only taking medicine from a trusted adult.

Questions to build connection:

- What made you happy today?
- What's something that challenged you today?
- Who did you eat lunch with today?
- What's something kids are talking about at school?
- Has anyone ever told you something that didn't sound quite right?
- What would you do if someone told you a secret that made you feel uncomfortable?

Topic-specific questions:

- What have you heard about drugs or alcohol?
- Why do you think we have rules about drugs and medicine[1]?

[1] It's natural to assume that families have rules about drugs, but too often families may not consider setting safe guiderails around the proper use of medication.

- Do you have any questions about drugs or alcohol?

Scenarios

Your child mentions that kids at school are talking about vaping

Open with: “That’s interesting. What have you heard about it?”

Your child feels left out

Open with: “It’s normal to want to fit in. What helps you feel comfortable being yourself around your friends?”

Your child mentions that their friends are doing something unsafe

Open with: “I’m proud of you for realizing that isn’t safe. What are some things that make it easier to say no?”

Remember, they’re watching

Children notice how the adults around them make decisions. Whether you're following directions on medication, choosing not to drive after drinking, or finding healthy ways to manage stress, your everyday choices set an example. Take a moment to explain the why behind what you do.

MIDDLE SCHOOL

Goal: *Keep open lines of communication as children become more independent. Share accurate information, establish clear expectations and talk through scenarios they may encounter in their peer group.*

Keep the conversation open

At this age, children become more independent and are increasingly influenced by peers, social media, and the world around them. Avoid lecturing, and use conversations to help them distinguish accurate information from myths and understand the negative consequences of drugs and alcohol.

Opportunities to connect:

- **Driving:** The car is an opportunity to talk privately, and the side-by-side setting can help make difficult conversations more comfortable.
- **Social Media:** When posts that involve vaping, alcohol, or other drugs come up, ask your child what they think about what they see.
- **Sports and Activities:** Conversations about sports and activities can include the importance of staying healthy and the negative effects of drugs and alcohol.
- **When something happens in the community:** Whether it's at school or on the news, talk to your child about what happened and their thoughts.

Questions to build connection:

- What's something adults don't really understand about being your age?
- When do you feel most like yourself?
- What makes someone a friend you can really count on?
- What's something you've been thinking about lately that we haven't talked about?
- What would make it easier for you to come to me when something is bothering you or you have a question?

Topic-specific questions:

- What are you hearing (or seeing) about vaping, alcohol, or other substances from people your age?
- Why do you think some people your age might be curious about trying alcohol or other substances?
- When you see vaping or drinking on social media, what do you think about how it's portrayed?
- What might make it difficult to say no or leave a situation where someone is doing something you're uncomfortable with?
- If you or a friend were in a situation involving alcohol or other substances and

needed help, what would you want an adult to do?

Scenarios

A video or post makes drinking or vaping look fun

Open with: “What do you think about that? Do you think they’re leaving anything out?”

Your child says a friend has tried using a substance

Open with: “How do you feel about that? What do you think made them want to try that?”

Your child seems overwhelmed

Open with: “I noticed you have a lot going on lately. How can I support you?”

Remember, they’re watching

Your child is paying attention to how you handle stress, social pressure, and difficult situations. Do you reach for alcohol after a hard day, or do you show them other ways to unwind? Do you set boundaries when something doesn't feel right? Let them see you make thoughtful decisions and be willing to talk about why you make them.

HIGH SCHOOL

Goal: *Maintain open communication and clear expectations as teens navigate peer influence. Support safe choices and ensure that your child knows that you'll help them out of an unsafe situation.*

Stay connected as independence grows

In high school, teens develop greater independence and make more decisions on their own. Conversations should reinforce expectations while acknowledging real-world situations they may encounter. Avoid judgment and develop strategies to make safe choices.

Opportunities to connect:

- **Before a social event:** The time before a party or other social event is an opportunity to talk through situations they may encounter. Talk through safe decisions and remind them that they can always call you – no matter what.
- **Talking about school:** Additional schoolwork often leads to greater stress in teens. Talking about school can be a good opportunity to discuss healthy ways to handle stress.
- **Developing a safety plan:** With more social freedom, developing a safety plan is an important step for parents and teens. Assure them that they can call for help. See the safety plan section of this guide for more details.

Questions to build connection:

- What's the best thing that happened this week?
- When do you feel the happiest?
- What's something you're looking forward to right now?
- Is anything stressing or worrying you?
- When you need advice, who are people you can go to?
- If you had a free day, what would you want to do?

Topic-specific questions:

- Why do you think people your age try drugs or alcohol?
- What are things that make it harder for people your age to say no?
- If you were at a party and needed to leave, what could you do?
- What would you do in a situation where someone you know was too drunk or high?

Scenarios

Your teen is going to a party where alcohol may be present

Open with: “I want you to have fun and be safe. Let’s talk through what that looks like.”

Your teen talks about friends using alcohol or other drugs

Open with: “Thank you for telling me. If you’re ever concerned about them, what would you do?”

Your teen mentions a friend taking a pill that wasn’t prescribed to them

Open with: “What do you think about that? Do you think people your age understand the risks of that?”

Remember, they’re watching

Teenagers may be making more decisions on their own, but they're still learning from yours. Whether it's planning a safe ride home, making responsible choices around alcohol, or acknowledging when you've made a mistake, your actions reinforce the expectations you've shared. Show them that making healthy decisions is something we continue practicing throughout our lives.

YOUNG ADULTS

Goal: *Reinforce healthy habits and safe choices with growing independence. Discuss personal boundaries and plans to handle all situations safely.*

Your support still matters

Entering young adulthood comes with a newfound sense of independence, often including going to college, joining the workforce, and living away from home for the first time. With more freedom and less time with family, young adults need connection and support in navigating stress, social dynamics, and safe choices.

Opportunities to connect:

- **As they plan for the future:** As young adults decide what their next step is after high school, this is a good time to discuss things they may encounter and how they plan to respond.
- **Before a night out:** Ahead of a night out, check in and discuss their plans for transportation, drinking, cannabis, and other things they may encounter. Remind them that you're always available if they need to call.
- **Talking about friends or roommates:** Talking about friends or roommates is a natural chance to discuss peer influence and the choices that their friends make.
- **When they are struggling:** When feelings of stress or loneliness come up, young adults may feel more inclined to try compensating with substance use. This is a great opportunity to discuss their feelings and healthy coping strategies.

Questions to build connection:

- How do you feel about living away from home?
- Has anything been harder than you expected?
- What kind of support is most helpful?
- What have you been doing for fun lately?
- What's your go-to show, movie, or podcast right now?

Topic-specific questions:

- What are the biggest pressures around drugs and alcohol for people your age?
- How do you stay safe when going out?
- What do you think helps people keep substance use from becoming a problem?
- If you were concerned about someone else's safety, who would you feel comfortable talking to?

Scenarios

Your young adult seems isolated or stressed

Open with: “How have you been doing lately? What are the best ways for me to support you now?”

Your young adult describes a situation that became uncomfortable or unsafe

Open with: “That sounds like a lot to deal with. How did you handle it?”

Your young adult is worried about someone else’s substance use

Open with: “I’m glad you’re there for them. What have you been noticing?”

Remember, they’re watching

Your role may be changing, but your influence doesn't disappear when your child becomes an adult. How you approach alcohol, manage stress, respect boundaries, and ask for help when you need it continues to set an example. Model the kind of choices you hope they'll make, while recognizing that they're learning to make their own. Keep the conversation going without judgment and remind them that growing independence doesn't mean they have to navigate everything alone.

ADDRESSING SPECIFIC SITUATIONS

DEVELOPING A SAFETY AGREEMENT

Goal: *Have a clear plan between you and your teen/young adult for parties, social events, or other situations where drugs or alcohol may be present.*

As older children and young adults become more independent, parents can't rely on the assumption that everything will go according to plan. Safety plans help young people and parents remember that their priority is safety above all else.

Safety agreements should cover the following:

- **General safety:** Teens and young adults should know general safety rules, including never accepting or leaving a drink unattended, staying with a friend throughout the event, and never getting into a vehicle with a driver who's under the influence.
- **No questions asked:** Agree that you will always pick them up from a dangerous or unsafe situation. Consider having a code word or emoji that means "come get me". Agree that there will be no immediate questions, lectures, or consequences, and that a calm discussion will take place at a later time.
- **Alternative contacts:** Come up with a list of two or three nearby adults (or an older sibling) that can be called if you don't respond quickly.
- **Medical emergencies:** Remind your teen/young adult to always call 911 if someone is unconscious, showing signs of an overdose, or is otherwise having a medical emergency. Discuss your state's medical amnesty or Good Samaritan laws for people who seek medical help for themselves or someone else.

WHEN THE SPOTLIGHT TURNS TO YOU

Goal: *Help your child understand the differences in expectations for children and adults around substance use, explain how adults make decisions about their own health, and remind your child that their wellbeing matters to you even if your choices haven't been perfect.*

Young people notice what the adults in their lives do. Sometimes, they'll ask a question that catches you off guard, or one that you don't feel prepared to answer. One of those questions might be, "If you drink alcohol or smoke, why can't I?"

It's a fair question. And how you respond matters. Remember that you don't have to be a flawless example to be a trusted adult. Above all else, your child needs someone who will tell them the truth, listen without judgment, and care enough to have the conversation. Even the most difficult questions present an opportunity to connect.

How to approach the conversation:

- **Acknowledge the question:** Avoid immediately shutting down the conversation. Rather than saying "Because I'm the adult," recognize that what your child is asking is reasonable.
- **Explain why expectations are different:** Alcohol and nicotine carry risks for everyone, but young people's brains and bodies are still developing. Explain that the rules aren't simply about age or authority. They're about health, safety, and protecting their future.
- **Be honest about your own choices:** If you drink or smoke, you don't need to defend your behavior or pretend it doesn't have risks. Acknowledging your choices can help build trust.
- **Reinforce your expectations:** While acknowledging your own choices, you can still be clear on the boundaries you have and explain that they exist to keep your child healthy and safe.
- **Keep the conversation going:** Instead of ending with an explanation, invite your child to share what they're thinking. Remind your child that they can always talk to you or ask questions, even if they're uncomfortable.

Questions to ask:

- What made you think about that?
- What do you think makes alcohol or smoking risky for someone your age?
- What have you noticed about how people talk about drinking or smoking?
- What do you think adults sometimes get wrong when they talk to kids about these things?

Suggested reminders:

- Just because I do something doesn't mean it's always the healthiest choice.
- Adults have to make decisions about their health, too. Some choices are better than others.
- Nicotine is addictive, and quitting can be really difficult. That's something I don't want you to have to experience.

IF YOUR CHILD OPENS UP ABOUT SUBSTANCE USE

Goal: *Make sure they're safe and receive any necessary medical attention. Discuss what happened in a way that avoids judgment, preserves trust, and helps reinforce positive choices going forward.*

If your child tells you that they've tried drinking, smoking, vaping, or other substances, you might feel unsure of what to say. But if your child decides to

share this, remember something important: They're talking to you. That's a good place to start.

You don't have to ignore what happened or pretend you're okay with it. But how you respond can make a difference in whether your child feels comfortable coming to you again.

How to approach the conversation:

- **Make sure they're safe:** Find out what they took, when, and whether they're feeling okay. If they're currently under the influence or experiencing concerning symptoms, focus on getting medical help rather than having a conversation about consequences.
- **Stay calm:** Thank them for telling you and avoid an immediate reaction. You can take what they're saying seriously without making them feel ashamed.
- **Understand what happened:** There's a difference between trying something once, feeling pressured, and using something regularly. Ask questions to better understand what happened.
- **Remind them of your expectations:** Acknowledge their honesty, express concern, and maintain boundaries going forward.
- **Make a plan together:** Help your child think through what they might do differently next time. Discuss situations where they might feel pressured, how to leave, and who they can turn to for help.

Questions to ask:

- Can you tell me a little more about what happened?
- What made you decide to try it?
- How did you feel about it afterward?
- Is this something that's happened before?
- How are you feeling about it now?
- What would you do if you found yourself in that situation again?
- What could I do to help you feel more prepared?
- Who could you reach out to if you needed help and I wasn't available?

Suggested reminders:

- The most important thing right now is making sure you're safe. We can talk about everything else after that.
- I appreciate you sharing this with me. I know that might not have been easy. I'm glad we can talk about it.
- I'm really glad you told me. I also want you to understand why I'm concerned. Alcohol, vaping, and other substances can affect your health and safety, especially while you're growing. I want us to talk about how we can keep this from happening again.

FINAL REMINDERS

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

If you or a loved one is struggling with substance use, 24/7 help is available at **800.563.4086**

For more prevention resources and information, visit **PreventionCT.org**

SAFETY FIRST

If your child is unresponsive, having trouble breathing, experiencing a seizure, or cannot be awakened, call 911 immediately. If an opioid overdose is suspected, give naloxone (Narcan) if available.