

Talk Kit

Whether you're a parent, relative, or mentor to a child, there are going to be times when you need help discussing issues both big and small. That's why we've created this Talk Kit. With ideas on how to start talking, scripts on what to say, and tips for answering tough questions, this kit can help you keep the child in your life healthy and drug-free.

Please visit www.TimeToTalk.org for more information.



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ANSWERING THE QUESTION: "DID YOU DO DRUGS?"

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HOW TO SAY IT

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Preschool

SCENARIO

Giving your child a daily vitamin.

WHAT TO SAY

Vitamins help your body grow. You need to take them every day so that you'll grow up big and strong like Mommy and Daddy—but you should only take what I give you. Too many vitamins can hurt your body and make you sick.

SCENARIO

Your kids are curious about medicine bottles around the house.

WHAT TO SAY

You should only take medicines that have your name on them or that your doctor has chosen just for you. If you take medicine that belongs to somebody else, it could be dangerous and make you sick.

SCENARIO

Your child sees an adult smoking and, since you’ve talked about the dangers of smoking, is confused. (Parenting expert Jen Singer says the same script applies to grade-schoolers.)

WHAT TO SAY

Grown ups can make their own decisions and sometimes those decisions aren't the best for their bodies. Sometimes, when someone starts smoking, his or her body feels like it has to have cigarettes—even though it's not healthy. And that makes it harder for him or her to quit.

Grade School

SCENARIO

Your child tells you he was offered prescription drugs by a classmate—but said no.

WHAT TO SAY

After praising your child for making a good choice and for telling you about it, let him know that in the future, he can always blame you to get out of a bad situation. Say, “If you’re ever offered drugs at school, tell that person, ‘My mother would kill me if I took that and then she wouldn’t let me play baseball.’”

SCENARIO

Your grade-schooler comes home reeking of cigarette smoke.

WHAT TO SAY

I know you’re curious and you wanted to see what smoking was like, but as you can see, it’s pretty disgusting and it probably made you cough and gag a lot. Your clothes and your breath and your hair all stink. Is that how you want to be known? As the kid who stinks?

SCENARIO

Your child has expressed curiosity about the pills she sees you take every day—and the other bottles in the medicine cabinet.

WHAT TO SAY

Just because it’s in a family’s medicine cabinet doesn’t mean that it is safe for you to take. Even if your friends say it’s okay, say, “No, my parents won’t let me take something that doesn’t have my name on the bottle.”

SCENARIO

One in five teens in America has tried huffing—inhaling the fumes from everyday items like nail polish remover, hair spray, and cooking spray. It’s probably been a while since you’ve talked to your child about the dangers of the products under the kitchen sink—but it’s important to reiterate the warning.

WHAT TO SAY

I know it’s been a while since I talked to you about the dangers of cleaning products and that they should only be used for cleaning. But I’ve heard that some kids are using them to get high. I just want to let you know that even if your friends say, “Hey, we can buy this stuff at the supermarket so it’s totally okay to sniff it,” it’s not. Inhaling fumes from cleaners or products like cooking spray and nail polish remover is as dangerous as doing all the drugs we’ve talked about, like marijuana.

Now, let’s talk about ways you can get out of the situation if that happens. What do you think you should say? Remember, you can always blame me and say, “My mom would kill me if I tried that!”

Middle School

SCENARIO

Your child is just starting middle school and you know that eventually, he will be offered drugs and alcohol.

WHAT TO SAY

There are a lot of changes ahead of you in middle school. I know we talked about drinking and drugs when you were younger, but now is when they're probably going to be an issue. I'm guessing you'll at least hear about kids who are experimenting, if not find yourself some place where kids are doing stuff that is risky. I just want you to remember that I'm here for you and the best thing you can do is just talk to me about the stuff you hear or see. Don't think there's anything I can't handle or that you can't talk about with me, okay?

SCENARIO

You find out that kids are selling prescription drugs at your child's school. Your child hasn't mentioned it and you want to get the conversation about it started.

WHAT TO SAY

Hey, you probably know that parents talk to each other and find things out about what's going on at school... I heard there are kids selling pills—prescriptions that either they are taking or someone in their family takes. Have you heard about kids doing this?

SCENARIO

Your child's favorite celebrity—the one he or she really looks up to—has been named in a drug scandal.

WHAT TO SAY

I think it must be really difficult to live a celebrity life and stay away from that stuff. Being in the public eye puts a ton of pressure on people, and many turn to drugs because they think drugs will relieve that stress. But a lot of famous people manage to stay clean—like [name others who don't do drugs]—and hopefully this incident is going to help [name of celebrity] straighten out his life. Of course, people make mistakes—the real measure of a person is how accountable he is when he messes up. It will be interesting to see how he turns out, won't it?

The thing is, when a person uses drugs and alcohol—especially a kid because he's still growing—it changes how his brain works and makes him do really stupid things. Most people who use drugs and alcohol need a lot of help to get better. I hope [name] has a good doctor and friends and family members to help him/her.

High School

SCENARIO

Your teen is starting high school—and you want to remind him that he doesn't have to give in to peer pressure to drink or use drugs.

WHAT TO SAY

You must be so excited about starting high school... it's going to be a ton of fun, and we want you to have a great time. But we also know there's going to be some pressure to start drinking, smoking pot or taking other drugs. A lot of people feel like this is just what high school kids do. But not all high school kids drink! Many don't, which means it won't make you weird to choose not to drink, either. You can still have a lot of fun if you don't drink.

You'll have a lot of decisions to make about what you want to do in high school and you might even make some mistakes. Just know that you can talk to us about anything—even if you DO make a mistake. We won't freak out. We want you to count on us to help you make smart decisions and stay safe, okay?

SCENARIO

Every time you ask your teen how his day was, you get a mumbled "Whatever, it was okay" in return.

WHAT TO SAY

Skip asking general questions like "How's school?" every day. Instead, ask more specific questions on topics that interest both you and your teen ("Tell me about the pep rally yesterday." "Are there a lot of cliques in your school?" "Fill me in on your Chemistry lab test.") You can also use humor and even some gentle sarcasm to get the conversation flowing. Try, "Oh, what a joy it is to live with a brooding teenager!" to make your child laugh and start opening up a bit.

SCENARIO

Your high-schooler comes home smelling of alcohol or cigarette smoke for the first time.

WHAT TO SAY

"The response should be measured, quiet and serious—not yelling, shouting or overly emotional," says parenting expert Marybeth Hicks. "Your child should realize that this isn't just a frustrating moment like when he doesn't do a chore you asked for; it's very big, very important, and very serious."

Say, "I'm really upset that you're smoking/drinking. I need to get a handle on how often this has been happening and what your experiences have been so far. I get that you're worried about being in trouble, but the worst part of that moment is over—I know that you're experimenting. The best thing you can do now is really be straight with me, so for starters, tell me about what happened tonight..."

SCENARIO

Your teen has started to hang out with kids you don't know—and dropped his old friends.

WHAT TO SAY

It seems like you are hanging with a different crowd than you have in the past. Is something up with your usual friends? Is there a problem with [old friends' names] or are you just branching out and meeting some new kids? Tell me about your new friends. What are they like? What do they like to do? What do you like about them?

Young Adults (18-25)**SCENARIO**

Your adult child is moving to her own apartment or into a college dorm.

WHAT TO SAY

I know you're off to start your own life but please know that I'm always here for you. I respect that you're old enough to make your own choices, but if you ever want another perspective on things, give a shout. I'll try my hardest to help you out without judging you for your decisions. Sound good?

Amelia Arria, senior research scientist at the Treatment Research Institute, also suggests: There are certain things that you can count on in life and one of the things you're going to be able to count on is me. As your parent, I am always here for you. Remember, I am your support. I'm the one who can guide you.

SCENARIO

After watching a movie portraying drug use together, you want to gauge your adult child's opinion on drugs.

WHAT TO SAY

I know you're going to think that I'm over-protective or meddling, and I'm sorry. But that movie really disturbed me and I just have to ask: is there a lot of drug use at your college/in your new town? Do the new friends that you've made dabble in drugs at all? How do you feel about it?

Script coaching was provided by parenting experts Jen Singer, author of *You're a Good Mom (and Your Kids Aren't So Bad Either)*, Marybeth Hicks, author of *Bringing Up Geeks: How to Protect Your Kid's Childhood in a Grow-Up-Too-Fast World* and Amelia Arria, Ph.D., senior research scientist, Treatment Research Institute.



FIVE TEACHABLE MOMENTS

Having trouble talking to your teen about the risks of drugs and alcohol? Here are five everyday examples of easy ways to bring up the topic.

1. Fictional Character

You just took your teen to a PG-13 movie in which one of the main characters drinks and smokes excessively. It's a good thing you insisted on tagging along, because now you have the opportunity to discuss the film—especially that lead character's addiction—with your teen. Did your son think the main character's drug use was cool or did he recognize that she had a problem?

2. Movie Star

Your daughter reads every magazine she's in, owns all her movies, and has her posters taped to her wall. So what happens when her magical movie star goes to rehab for the third time? When that famous face graces the cover of *Us Weekly*, ask your daughter why she thinks Britney or Lindsay or Paris or whoever it may be this week is such a cool person. If your daughter only cares about her expensive clothes and good looks, remind her that her role model should also be someone who drinks responsibly and either doesn't do drugs or has taken the initiative to get help for her drug problem.

3. Professional Athlete

For as long as you can remember, you've taught your daughter that "cheaters never win." Unfortunately, this holds true when her favorite athlete is in the news for taking drugs. Ask your daughter how she feels about professional athletes using illegal substances of any kind and point out how much it can hurt a person's career and reputation—especially when they get caught.

4. Classmate

You don't need a movie star to get the conversation going with your teen. Two kids in your son's school each received a DUI over the weekend—and they had other friends in their car when it happened. A lot can come out of this conversation—why drunk driving is so dangerous, the consequences of getting caught, and why you never want your son to get into a car with a friend who's been using—no matter what.

5. Relative

Substance abuse issues can often hit close to home, and it's important that we're open and honest with our kids when it happens. If you can, tell them all the details about your relative who is struggling. Explain why there's a problem and how you, as a family, are going to do what you can to support one another through this tough time. If your teen isn't asking a ton of questions, that's okay—he might be feeling uncomfortable about the topic. It might help to emphasize that while addiction can wreak havoc on a person's life, it is always possible for him or her to make a recovery with the support of friends and family. (For stories of people in recovery visit www.drugfree.org/LifeAfter.)

✓ HOW TO TEACH KIDS TO TURN DOWN DRUGS

There's no way you can shield your kids from finding out that illegal drugs, alcohol and tobacco exist—but you can help your child reject offers to try them.

Before you work with your child on this issue, there's one thing you need to know: kids don't usually get drugs from strangers. They get drugs from their friends. And that's the toughest issue of all: teaching your kids that it's okay to say no to their friends--the people they look to for validation, recognition, and fun. Strongly encourage your child to avoid friendships with kids who use drugs.

A great way to help kids prepare for drug-related situations is by acting out—also known as role playing—scenarios with them. It's important to practice these scenarios with your kids before these situations really happen.

Remember, teens rarely verbally pressure or chastise each other into drinking or doing drugs. Rather, the offer is usually casual. “Peer pressure” is more internal than you probably think. For example, your child sees other teens that she wants to be friends with enjoying a drink or a drug and she feels like she wants to be part of it too. Or, she may be afraid that the other teens will think she is less cool if she doesn't join them. Try to include this dynamic when you act out scenarios with your teens.



Use the following two scenarios as a starting point, but create new ones based on your child's life:

Scenario #1

Your son goes to a party at his friend's house and someone has brought a bottle of vodka or some beer. Some of the older high school guys are drinking and ask him, “You want some?” Take the role of the older teens or of your son's friends who casually offer beer or vodka to your son.

Help your child develop firm but friendly responses. Reassure him that his friends will respect his decision not to get involved. Remind him that people are pretty focused on themselves, which leaves much less brain space for them to be concerned with what others do.

Possible Answers:

“No. I gotta go in a bit.”

“No, thanks.”

“No, I'm not into that.”

“No, thanks. I'm on the _____ team and I don't want to risk it.”

“Nah man, I'm ok. Thanks.”

“Nah, I'm training for _____.”

Scenario #2

Your daughter is at her friend's house with a few close pals and one of them pulls out a joint. Take the role of her friend offering it to the group.

Help your child develop firm but friendly responses. Reassure her that her friends will respect her decision not to get involved. Remind her that people are pretty focused on themselves, which leaves much less brain space for them to be concerned with what others do.

Again, help her develop firm but friendly responses and reassure her that good friends will respect her decision not to try it.

Your kids will need to be prepared for protests from their peers. Suggest that they meet them with a "broken record" technique—just keep repeating the reason they don't want to drink, smoke, or do drugs. Then they can try to change the subject or, if all else fails, they should say they have to go home or ask their friend to leave the house.

Possible Answers:

"Nah. I get tested at work/school and I don't want to risk it."

"No, I'm trying to stay healthy for -----"

"No, that's not for me."

"No, thanks. I'm on the ----- team and I don't want to risk it."

"I'm an athlete and I can't do that stuff."

"I can't. If my dad ever found out, he'd be really upset."

"No, thanks. I don't like how it makes people not act like themselves."

➔ ANSWERING THE QUESTION: “DID YOU DO DRUGS?”

The issue isn't about your past. It's about your children's future. What's important now is that your kids understand that you don't want them to use drugs.

For many parents, a child's "Did you ever use drugs?" question is a tough one to answer. Unless the answer is no, most parents stutter and stammer through a response and leave their kids feeling like they haven't learned anything—or, even worse, that their parents are hypocrites. Yes, it's difficult to know what to say. You want your kids to follow your rules and you don't want them to hold your history up as an example to follow—or as a tool to use against you. But the conversation doesn't have to be awkward, and you can use it to your advantage by turning it into a teachable moment.



Some parents who've used drugs in the past choose to lie about it—but they risk losing their credibility if their kids ever discover the truth. Many experts recommend that you give an honest answer—but you don't have to tell your kids every detail. As with conversations about sex, some details should remain private. Avoid giving your child more information than she asked for. And ask her a lot of questions to make sure you understand exactly why she's asking about your drug history. Limit your response to that exchange of information.

The discussion provides a great opportunity to speak openly about what tempted you to do drugs, why drugs are dangerous, and why you want your kids to avoid making the same mistakes you made. The following are good examples of the tone you can take and wording you can use:

"I took drugs because some of my friends used them, and I thought I needed to do the same in order to fit in. In those days, people didn't know as much as they do now about all the bad things that can happen when you take drugs."

"Everyone makes mistakes and trying drugs was one of my biggest mistakes ever. I'll do anything to help you avoid making the same stupid decision that I made when I was your age."

"I started drinking when I was young and, as you can see, it's been a battle ever since. Because of my drinking, I missed a big part of growing up, and every day I have to fight with myself so it doesn't make me miss out on even more—my job, my relationships, and most importantly, my time with you. I love you too much to watch you make the same mistakes I've made."



FRIENDS, FAMILY AND BEYOND: HOW OTHER ADULTS CAN HELP

Even if you're not a parent, you can play a significant role in a child's life. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, older siblings, mentors and coaches can all help guide a child toward healthy choices at every stage of life.

For younger children, you can reinforce messages about eating healthy and staying active. And, as kids get older, your advice can help steer them toward positive decisions when they're up against tough choices.

Wondering how you can build a better relationship with the child in your life? Put the following tips to work—and enjoy the benefits for years to come.

Grandparents

You have a conversational leg up on most people in your grandchild's life; you have the inside scoop on what his parents were like as kids! Help take the pressure to be perfect off of kids by telling them stories of their own parents' shortcomings when they were younger. The fact that Dad didn't make the varsity soccer team but discovered he loved to draw soon after can be a big boost to your grandchild's own self-esteem.

Aunts and Uncles

As kids get older, they tend to think that their aunts and uncles are somehow just a bit cooler than their parents. After all, they usually get to stay up past bedtime at your house, and the no-soda rule? It's out the window. The cool factor you possess can help your niece or nephew feel comfortable opening up to you. Let your niece know that unless you think she's in danger, the things she talks to you about will stay just between the two of you. The best way to find out if something is bothering a tween or teen? "Keep it simple," says family therapist Dr. Jane Greer. An easy conversation starter: "You don't seem like yourself lately. Things going okay?"

Coaches and Mentors

Since coaches and mentors typically get to know kids in performance-related activities, from sports to the school newspaper to debate team, they can notice changes in behavior and motivation. Use those changes as an opportunity to talk to the child you know and find out what's going on in his or her life. If a child seems off his game or is just acting out of sorts, pull him and ask questions like "What's going on today?" or "How come you're not paying attention?" suggests Bob Caruso, CFO of the Partnership for a Drug-Free America and a basketball coach for teens. If you're not satisfied with the answer or your concerns continue, call the primary caregivers to see if they too have noticed any changes in their child.

From a Distance: Out-of-Town Relatives

You may not get to see your niece, nephew or grandchild every day, but for long-distance relatives, the conversational opportunities still abound. From the time kids are small, ask to speak to them on the phone, and as they grow, let them know they can always call you to talk. Once the child has an email address, write to him/her regularly with questions about his or her life. A simple “How was school today?” or “I love when you tell me stories about things you do with your friends” shows your young relative that you want to know what’s going on in his or her life. And don’t forget: kids of all ages love to get mail—especially if they’re too young for an email account. Let them know you’re thinking about them on a regular basis by sending a note their way that says, “Have a happy week,” “I’m proud of you!” or simply, “I’m thinking about you.”

If You’re Worried

Worried about the child in your life? Then it’s important that you talk to him, says Dr. Greer. “If you are concerned that there is something going on, be very genuine and very open and say, ‘Hey, how are you doing? Is everything okay? You seem a little not yourself. You seem a little low energy. Anything we can talk about?’ And then you might throw out a question or two, ‘How are things going with your friends?’ or ‘How are things going on the dating scene?’ depending on how much that niece or nephew has already shared with you.”

“If the child is not ready to talk,” says Greer, “continue by saying, ‘Okay, I’m just going to check in and, of course, you know I’m here.’ And then take the responsibility to make the phone calls, to send the emails, to stop by for the visits so that she not only hears that you’re there for her but really feels that you’re there for her and sees it.”

But if you’re truly worried and feel there’s a real problem, like drug use or depression, it’s better to be safe than sorry. While you want to maintain the trust you’ve developed with the child, his/her safety must come first. Contact his or her parent to share your concerns and see if there’s any way you can help.

- If you have regular interaction with a child, you’ll be able to observe changes in behavior that could signify a mental health issue or problem with drugs and alcohol.

For more information about signs and symptoms of drug and alcohol use, please visit the Partnership for a Drug-Free America website at www.drugfree.org.

“I think it’s a really essential part of children’s upbringing to have other significant adults—a teacher, extended family, older siblings—that they know they can be open and be themselves with. It gives them room to be real, to have the space to really express themselves, and to develop free from any judgment or fear of punishment.”

**— Jane Greer, Ph.D.,
marriage and family therapist**