

# ADULT GUIDE: Youth Substance Use Prevention



## Tips for talking with youth of all ages

Involvement and support of parents/guardians, caregivers, and other adults are critical in preventing youth substance use. Adults can significantly reduce the likelihood that youth will use substances by setting clear expectations and having early, frequent, and open conversations about the risks of alcohol and other drugs.

**In 2018, over 70% of Medfield High School students reported that when deciding whether or not to drink alcohol, it was "very important" or "somewhat important" if their parents did not approve of them drinking** (MWAHS, 2018).

Tips for how to start the conversation and respond to children at every age are provided in this publication to help guide your discussion.

**7x** Research shows that adolescents in the United States who initiate substance use before age 15 are **nearly seven times** more likely to develop a substance use disorder than those who delay first use to age 21 or older. (Feinstein et al., 2012)

## Why Do Certain Youth Use Alcohol and other Drugs?

Youth may be more or less likely to try substances due to certain circumstances. Below are a few of the **risk factors** that may increase vulnerability to use substances and **protective factors** that reduce those risks. (CDC, 2022)



# 9 OUT OF 10

**PEOPLE WITH SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS STARTED USING ALCOHOL OR OTHER DRUGS BEFORE AGE 18.**

(Partnership to End Addiction, 2011)

Risk Factors	Protective Factors
Availability of alcohol and/or other drugs	Lack of access to alcohol and/or other drugs
Belief that most teens use alcohol and/or other drugs	Accurate perceptions of youth substance use
Belief that alcohol and/or other drugs are not harmful	Awareness of risks associated with alcohol and other drugs
Undiagnosed mental health challenges	Treatment for mental health and coping strategies for stress
Peer rejection	Community acceptance and high self-esteem

**Keep in mind:** Many youth with risk factors do not use substances, and a risk factor for one person may not be for another.



## Brain development is not complete until about age 25

Early to late adolescence is a **critical risk period** for youth to begin using alcohol and other drugs (SAMHSA, 2019). Essential parts of a teenager's brain are forming, affecting the ability to make logical decisions. Teens are more likely to take risks, and impulsive behaviors may involve alcohol and other drug use. Developing brains are more prone to damage. As a result, teens become addicted more quickly and with greater consequences. Side effects may include irreversible brain changes, increased risk of accidents, homicides, suicides, and serious physical and mental health conditions (CDC, 2022). Talk to teens about how substance use impacts their brain health and overall wellness.

# START HERE : How do I talk with youth about substances?

## Get in the right frame of mind

TOOLS	POSITIVE COMMUNICATION	TRY IT OUT
<b>Keep an open mind</b>	When youth feel judged or condemned, they are less likely to be receptive to your message.	Maintain a position of objectivity and openness. This may take practice.
<b>Put yourself in their shoes</b>	Consider the way you like to be talked to when speaking about a difficult subject.	Think about how you felt at their age.
<b>Set boundaries</b>	Be clear, direct and honest when setting limits. Let youth know you do not want them using substances, and lay out the specific consequences if they break that rule.	Explain your reasons for not wanting them to use substances and engage them in a discussion about the harmful consequences.
<b>Be clear about your goals</b>	After a conversation, you can review what went right, what went wrong, what goals were met, and what to alter for next time.	Write down the goals to look back at after the discussion.
<b>Be calm and relaxed</b>	If you approach youth with anger or panic, achieving your goals will be challenging.	Find ways to relax before the conversation. Take a walk, call a friend or meditate.
<b>Be honest</b>	Approaching the situation with shame, anger or disappointment will be counter-productive. Be attentive, curious, respectful and understanding.	Stick to the facts; do not use scare tactics or make exaggerated claims. You want to build an environment of trust so they feel safe telling you the truth, even if it might be upsetting.
<b>Find teaching opportunities</b>	Use news, TV shows, movies, videos, social media or real-life situations as teachable moments.	Talk about the media's influence and encourage them to think critically about these messages.
<b>Don't lecture</b>	Lecturing about alcohol and other drugs will likely lead to youth shutting down, tuning out, or becoming angry. It could also be misinterpreted as your disapproval of <i>them</i> instead of their <i>actions</i> . This could lead to shame and in turn, substance use behaviors.	Avoid pulling rank if you get frustrated. Saying "You can't because I'm your parent and I said so" is highly ineffective.
<b>Find a comfortable setting</b>	Announcing a sit-down meeting ("We need to have a talk after dinner") usually will be met with resistance, while a more spontaneous, casual approach will lower their anxiety and maybe even your own.	Take a walk or sit in the yard or park. Look for a place that feels less confined but not too distracting.
<b>Be aware of body language</b>	If your child is sitting, you want to be sitting as well. If the child is standing, ask the child to sit down with you.	Be mindful of finger-pointing and crossed arms; these are closed gestures, while uncrossed legs and a relaxed posture are open gestures.

## Active listening techniques



**Ask open-ended questions.** Ask questions to elicit more than just a "yes" or "no" response.  
*Tell me more about ...*



**Be positive.** Find positives in a situation, no matter how difficult it may seem.  
*Thank you for your honesty. I really appreciate it.*



**Let youth know you hear them.** Reflect back what you are hearing verbatim or just the sentiment.  
*I'm hearing you feel overwhelmed and believe drinking alcohol relaxes you. Is that right?*



**Sum up and ask questions.** Show you're listening the entire time and ask for their input.  
*Did I get everything? Do you have anything more to add?*



**Ask permission.** Ask if it is OK for you to speak with them about their concerns and to offer some feedback.  
*Are you OK with me asking you this? Do you mind if I give you some advice?*



**Offer empathy and compassion.** Demonstrate understanding.  
*I hear that you feel smoking pot helps your anxiety. I'm sorry you're feeling anxious; I know that's a really difficult feeling. Can we think of some other activities that can help you relax?*

# COMMUNICATION : What do I talk about?



## Conversation starters

It's never too early to start the conversation. Parents and other caring adults often try to protect their children, but research shows that most kids are exposed to substances at an early age through social media, the Internet, TV or friends. **As youth grow, your conversations may change, but they always will be centered on keeping them happy, healthy and safe.**

The following discussion topics may help youth open up and talk about their knowledge and exposure to substance use.

### Perceptions and Understanding

- Do you know what vaping/binge drinking/overdosing is? What do you know about it?
- What do you know about the effects of substance use on your brain development and how it can increase your risk of future addiction?
- When you hear or see messages about substances, how do you decide which are myths and which are facts?

### Friends and Peers

- What would you do if you saw friends taking prescription pills that aren't theirs? What if you saw them drunk or high?
- If you were with kids who were vaping, drinking or using other drugs, how would you feel? How would you handle it?
- Besides family members, who do you feel most comfortable talking to about substances? Why?
- Do you have a plan if someone under the influence of alcohol or other drugs offers you a ride?



- Check out SAMHSA's online **"Talk. They Hear You."** campaign for resources, conversation starters, and tips for speaking with youth about alcohol and other drug use.
- Visit [kidshealth.org](http://kidshealth.org) for tips for talking about alcohol to youth aged preschool-17 years old.

## Words to avoid when talking about substances (or any issue)

AVOID	INSTEAD, USE
<b>BUT</b> You did well on your report card, <b>but</b> I know you can work even harder.	<b>AND</b> You did well on your report card, <b>and</b> I know you can work even harder.
<b>SHOULD</b> You <b>should</b> stop drinking alcohol.	<b>WANT</b> I <b>want</b> you to stop drinking alcohol, and I'm here to help you.
<b>BAD</b> Smoking pot is <b>bad</b> for you.	<b>HARMFUL</b> Smoking pot is <b>harmful</b> for your health and brain.
<b>STUPID</b> Vaping is a <b>stupid</b> choice.	<b>UNHEALTHY</b> Vaping is <b>unhealthy</b> for you, and that's why I'm concerned.
<b>DISAPPROVE</b> I <b>disapprove</b> of you hanging out with that group of friends.	<b>CONCERNED</b> I am <b>concerned</b> about your group of friends and worry they may not be the best influence.
<b>DISAPPOINTED</b> I am <b>disappointed</b> in you for breaking curfew.	<b>WORRIED</b> I am <b>worried</b> about your decision to come home past curfew.
<b>CAN'T</b> You <b>can't</b> come home at 11 p.m. on weeknights.	<b>DON'T WANT</b> I <b>don't want</b> you to come home this late at night anymore.

# WHAT TO SAY: How do I respond?



There is no set script for talking about substances. However, these samples can guide you with ways to integrate prevention messages and positive parenting/mentoring.

**It's likely that not every conversation go will well, and that's okay.**

## YOUR CHILD SAYS: "I know, I know. You've talked with me about this before."

YOU CAN SAY	HERE'S WHY
"I know we've had conversations about alcohol before, and I'm sorry you feel like I'm being a nag."	Taking responsibility and acknowledging youth's feelings are effective ways to reduce resistance.
"I want us to be able to discuss topics because I love you and want to help during these years when you're faced with a lot of difficult choices. Talking about them is important. Would that be OK?"	This statement shows compassion for what they are going through. Asking permission helps youth feel empowered in the dialogue. Be prepared for a possible response of "No, I don't want to talk." If this happens, ask why. Then have them suggest a time when they would be willing to talk.

## YOUR CHILD SAYS: "I don't know what to say when other kids ask me to drink."

YOU CAN SAY	HERE'S WHY
"Let's think of some ways you can turn down the offer that you are comfortable saying."	Instead of telling them what to say or do in an uncomfortable situation, ask them. Help youth brainstorm ways to turn down offers for their own reasons, such as, "I have to drive later," "I'm allergic," "I don't feel like it" or "I have a big game tomorrow and don't want to be groggy."

## YOUR CHILD SAYS: "Marijuana is a plant. It's natural and legal. Why would they make something legal if it could hurt me?"

YOU CAN SAY	HERE'S WHY
"Not all plants are necessarily good for you. Think about poison ivy."	This helps youth rethink their point.
"Let's look at alcohol and cigarettes; they are legal but cause damage such as health problems, DUIs, car accidents and addiction. Just because something is legal and regulated doesn't mean it is good for you."	This includes examples to redirect youth back to your goal of helping them understand harmful side effects of substance use.

## YOUR CHILD SAYS: "All the kids in my class are vaping and they're fine. It's safer than cigarettes."

YOU CAN SAY	HERE'S WHY
"Honestly, I don't want you to be doing anything that can harm you. I'm wondering how you know all of your classmates are vaping and why you believe it is safer than cigarettes."	You can express genuine curiosity about their thought processes. If youth assume everyone else is using substances, they are more likely to engage in substance use. Challenging inaccurate beliefs of peer behaviors and providing accurate information helps debunk falsely held norms about peer alcohol and other drug use.

## SCENARIO: Your teen comes home smelling of alcohol/cigarette smoke/marijuana for the first time and reluctantly explains that other kids were experimenting on the ride home.

YOU CAN SAY	HERE'S WHY
"I'm upset because you were not honest with me. I need you to know you always can call me for a ride or use me as an excuse to remove yourself from a risky situation. I get you're worried about being in trouble, but remember I love and care about you. Your health and well-being are very important to me. Let's talk more about what happened tonight."	The response should be measured, quiet and serious; you shouldn't yell or be overly emotional. Your child should realize this isn't just a small, frustrating moment, such as when the youth doesn't do a chore; it's very serious due to the dangerous consequences of riding with individuals under the influence.

# Talking to Youth About Substances at Every Age

Ages	Keys to Prevention	Tips for Conversation and Communication
6-9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teach facts so they see you as a credible source.</li> <li>Help them develop decision-making skills. Explain that just because someone tells them to do something doesn't mean it is always "right."</li> <li>Discuss how to avoid and escape dangerous situations that make them feel uncomfortable.</li> <li>Talk to them about managing their emotions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discuss short-term consequences. Children are interested in how their bodies work, so focus on maintaining good health and avoiding things that might harm the body.</li> <li>Note the differences between medical/non-medical use of substances. ex: Dr.'s prescribe medication for specific reasons.</li> <li>Talk about drug and alcohol-related messages they see and hear through TV, news, movies, social media and at school.</li> </ul>
10-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Empower them to make good decisions and resist pressures to try alcohol and other drugs.</li> <li>Get to know your child's friends and caregivers. Check in by phone or visit once in a while to make sure they are on the same page about prohibiting alcohol and other drug use.</li> <li>Keep your child active in the community.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Incorporate their curiosity. Preteens love to learn facts, especially strange ones, and want to know how things work.</li> <li>Note the difference between fantasy and reality while watching TV and movies.</li> <li>Let them know they can always use you as an excuse during peer pressure: "No, my mom [or dad, grandma, etc.] would ground me forever if I vaped."</li> </ul>
13-15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remind your teen of the risks of substance use.</li> <li>Emphasize family values, expectations and consequences.</li> <li>Provide praise for making positive decisions and avoiding substances.</li> <li>Help build their self-esteem and self-image.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Talk about their choices of friends; substance use in teens often starts as a social behavior.</li> <li>Assist them in creating a list of assertive tactics and prepared responses that are helpful in saying "no" to peer pressure.</li> <li>Discuss the immediate and unpleasant effects of substance use.</li> <li>Note the negative effects substances can have on physical appearance b/c teens are typically concerned with how they look.</li> </ul>
16-18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourage participation in healthy activities with peers.</li> <li>Monitor and supervise their activities.</li> <li>Encourage volunteering where they can see the impact of alcohol and other drugs on your community (homeless shelters, hospitals or victim services centers). Teens enjoy hearing about ways they can contribute and make a difference.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Talk to them about how to stand up for their beliefs so they will be empowered to take a stand when someone is pressuring them to make high-risk choices.</li> <li>If they resist talking, be willing to back off and try another time. This shows you respect their privacy.</li> <li>Emphasize consequences of misusing alcohol &amp; other drugs, such as decreasing the chances of getting into college or getting a job.</li> </ul>
19-on	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reach out periodically and keep the lines of communication open as your child leaves home.</li> <li>Stay alert to mental health issues related to substance use and campus/community resources available.</li> <li>Review the legal, academic and employee penalties for underage drinking, using a fake ID, public intoxication, DUI and other drug use.</li> <li>Be an at-home resource. Respect their privacy and independence while expressing the desire to help.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Be specific about the behavior you expect ("I expect you to wait until you are 21 years old to drink.").</li> <li>Talk about over-the-counter and prescription medicine misuse; nonmedical, unsupervised use can be very harmful.</li> <li>Discuss risks associated with binge drinking.</li> <li>Encourage them to intervene when roommates or friends are in trouble with substance use (passed out, unconscious) by calling 911. Remind them of Good Samaritan Laws.</li> <li>Discuss risks of buying drugs in the community (e.g. fentanyl, etc)</li> </ul>
All Ages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have meaningful, ongoing conversations about substance use. Repetition is key!</li> <li>Model appropriate behaviors to promote healthy living.</li> <li>Be aware of your family history of substance use and mental health challenges and discuss any potentially elevated risks.</li> <li>Get to know your child's friends.</li> <li>It is never too late tor early to start talking about drugs.</li> <li><b>Not talking also sends a message.</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offset feelings of insecurity and doubt with positive comments about their character (not just when they get an "A" or do well in sports).</li> <li>Convey you care about and love your child, even when you're having tough conversations.</li> <li>Use "I" statements to express yourself without youth feeling judged, blamed or attacked. Describe their behavior, how you feel about it and how it affects you, then spell out what you need.</li> </ul>

*I FEEL worried WHEN you come home past curfew and go straight to your room. BECAUSE I love you and want to keep you safe, I NEED you to follow our rules about communication and not doing drugs.*

## "I" Statement



I FEEL \_\_\_\_\_

WHEN \_\_\_\_\_

BECAUSE \_\_\_\_\_

WHAT I NEED IS \_\_\_\_\_

# Key Takeaways & Additional Resources

## Bottom Line: Adults Play a Key Role

Adults can be a powerful influence in a child's life. A majority of substance-free adolescents credit their parents/guardians for their decision not to use substances. Even if you're not a parent, you can still play a significant role in a youth's life. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, older siblings, mentors, volunteers, teachers and coaches all can help guide youth



toward healthy choices at every stage of life. Caring adults can take action by having frequent conversations with the youth in their lives about the dangers of substance use. Let youth know YOU are a resource.

## DID YOU KNOW?

Under the Massachusetts Social Host Law (M.G.L. c. 138, s. 34), anyone who furnishes alcohol to people under the age of 21 or allows alcohol to be consumed by people under the age of 21 on their premises is subject to a fine up to \$2,000, imprisonment for up to a year, or both.

## Additional Resources

### Medfield Outreach Services

<https://www.town.medfield.net/403/Medfield-Outreach>

### Medfield Outreach Prevention Programming

<https://www.town.medfield.net/2061/Prevention-Programming>

### Massachusetts Substance Use Helpline

<https://helpline.ma.org/> OR (1-800-327-5050)

### Kid's Health - Tips 4 Talking About Alcohol (preschool-17)

<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/alcohol.html#catbody>

### Facts for Adults about Alcohol and Other Drugs

<https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/parents-educators>

### "Talk. They Hear You." Campaign

<https://www.samhsa.gov/talk-they-hear-you>

### Massachusetts Young Adult Mental Health and Substance Use Resource Directory

<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/department-of-mental-health-youth-adult-resource-guide-substance-abuse-resources>

### Support for Families Dealing with Addiction & Recovery

<https://learn2cope.org/>

## Concerned About Substance Use?



You never can be too safe or intervene too early. Talk to youth as soon as your instinct tells you something is wrong or you spot signs of substance use.



Express your concern and willingness to help, make observations, ask questions and listen to their answers.



Get professional help. A family doctor or addiction specialist can screen for signs of substance use and other related health conditions.



Call the **Massachusetts Substance Use Helpline** (1-800-327-5050) for free and confidential support in substance use treatment, recovery, and problem gambling services.



Be sure youth know that loved ones will stand by them and offer support.

## MEDICAL EMERGENCIES: Call 911

In the case of medical emergency, the **Massachusetts Good Samaritan Law** protects victims and those who call 911 for help from charge, prosecution, and conviction for possession of controlled substances.

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