

How To Talk to Your Children About Drug and Alcohol Awareness

For many parents of teens, drug and alcohol use is high on the list of concerns.

If this is an issue for you, it is important to know that what you do matters. Parents are their children's most important role model and their best defence against drug and alcohol abuse.

Think prevention first.

By talking openly with your teen about drugs and alcohol, you can strengthen your relationship with them and make communications easier for everyone. In doing so, remember:

- ▶ **As teens grow they need to be able to speak their mind.** If your teen talks back and argues with you, it does not mean they are rejecting you. By asserting their independence, your teen is just behaving in an age appropriate way.
- ▶ **It may often seem like teens are not listening to their parents, even though they really are.** Talking about difficult issues requires patience and perseverance.

There are a number of factors that can decrease or increase the chances that teens may experiment with drugs and alcohol.

Some key factors that can help teens make positive choices include:

- ▶ strong attachment to their family
- ▶ a strong sense of identity and connection to their traditional values and beliefs
- ▶ positive involvement in the community
- ▶ positive connections at school
- ▶ good social skills
- ▶ strong self-esteem
- ▶ positive friendships

What often causes a teen to use drugs or alcohol?

- ▶ Curiosity – when they see others using things, teens generally want to try drugs or alcohol to find out what they are like.
- ▶ Many teens are inclined to take risks but have little understanding of possible consequences.
- ▶ Peer pressure is a strong motivator for teens. They may want to be seen and accepted as a member of the group.
- ▶ Using drugs or alcohol may seem to offer an escape valve or a way to dull stress and pain caused by problems or pressures at home, at school, or with peers.

This final point is often the reason behind chronic use or addiction.

You can help empower your teen to avoid drug and alcohol misuse by:

- ▶ nurturing their self-confidence and pride in who they are as a First Nations person
- ▶ supporting them to be a good student
- ▶ sharing a sense of hope and optimism
- ▶ ensuring they grow up in a safe environment and are involved in extracurricular activities
- ▶ making sure they have the supports they need

It is useful to talk about drugs and alcohol before you are worried, ideally well before your child enters their teen years. Here are a few tips to keep in mind to maintain open communications with teens.

- ▶ **Think first. Act second.** Try to stay clear and focused and don't get too emotional. Keep an open mind.

- ▶ **Keep an eye on your children’s behaviour.** Ask them every day what they are doing. Don’t be afraid to set limits. Teens need boundaries.
- ▶ **Encourage your teen to work with you to set rules,** but don’t be afraid to adopt a strong position when you need to.
- ▶ **Enforce the boundaries you have set.** Let your teen know that you are enforcing rules because you love them and want to keep them safe.
- ▶ **Focus on building trust and understanding.**
- ▶ **Talk regularly and talk often.** Many “mini-conversations” about drugs are better than long boring lectures.
- ▶ **Keep the conversation positive** rather than waiting for an opportunity to criticize your teen for bad behaviour.
- ▶ **Take advantage of “teachable moments,”** like driving in the car together, discussing a situation at school, or talking about a current event in the news.
- ▶ **Eat dinner together as often as possible.** Family meals provide excellent opportunities for dialogue.
- ▶ **Focus on messages about how drug and alcohol use affects** sports performance, health and appearance. These messages have more impact on teens.
- ▶ **Have a two-way conversation.** Listen to your teen and respect their opinion.
- ▶ **Provide information that is meaningful and balanced,** so that your teen feels empowered to make healthy choices about drugs.

Signs of possible alcohol or drug use may include:

- ▶ bloodshot eyes
- ▶ listless, unhealthy appearance
- ▶ weight loss
- ▶ changed sleeping or eating habits
- ▶ increased anger or aggression
- ▶ greater susceptibility to sickness
- ▶ skipping school, poor grades
- ▶ acting emotionally withdrawn and secretive
- ▶ increased requests for money
- ▶ theft from the home of money or articles that could be sold

Signs of alcohol or drug overdose requiring emergency hospital treatment may include an inability to speak or walk properly, severe vomiting, loss of consciousness, or a threat to harm themselves or others.

If you've just discovered or have reason to believe your child is misusing alcohol or drugs, the first thing to do is sit down and take a deep breath. Pause and prepare yourself for the important conversations ahead.

- ▶ **Talk with anyone else who shares parenting responsibilities with you.** Make sure you agree about how you will work together to address the situation. Remind each other that no one is to blame and the focus should be on helping your child.
- ▶ **Expect the discussion with your child to be difficult.** Prepare yourself to respond to any anger with patience. If the conversation becomes heated, take a break and pick it up again later. Remind your child you love them and you are concerned for their welfare. Involve a family member to help you and your child with difficult discussions.
- ▶ **Be honest.** If your teen points to your habits as a defense, don't shut down. Talk calmly about how you want to help your child avoid making mistakes.
- ▶ **Talk about clear rules and realistic consequences that you will be able to enforce.** Involve your child so they understand the reasons.

Remember to keep the lines of communication open with your teen. Start early and get ahead of the drug questions. Teens should learn about drugs and alcohol awareness from their parents first.

Sources:

Talking to Teens About Drugs and Alcohol. 2021. Lifeworks. <https://wellbeing.lifeworks.com/ca/newsletter-content/talking-to-teens-about-drugs-and-alcohol/>

How to Talk with Your Teen about Drugs - Communication Tips for Parents.
<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/health-concerns/reports-publications/alcohol-drug-prevention/talk-your-teen-about-drugs-communication-tips-parents.html>

See also a companion to the booklet Talking with Your Teen about Drugs and Web site for parents: drugprevention.gc.ca

How to Talk with Your Teen about Drugs - Communication Tips for Parents is available on Internet at the following address: drugprevention.gc.ca