
Talking to kids about drugs

Summary

- You can start talking to your children about drugs from when they are in primary school -- from the age of about eight, or sooner if necessary.
- Explain what drugs are, their functions, and which drugs are harmful or illegal.
- Stick to the facts. Don't make drugs sound glamorous or fun, and don't over exaggerate the harms.
- Always consider what is age-appropriate information for your child.
- By explaining how drugs affect our bodies and our minds, you have a good chance of discouraging your child from wanting to use drugs.
- It will take time for your child to really understand the risks of drug use.
- Other people (particularly peers) will talk to your child about drugs, so it is important to learn what your child knows and clear up any misconceptions.
- Your child will form attitudes about drug use from what they see at home, among their friends and in the media.

All children will eventually be exposed to drugs – prescription medication, alcohol and tobacco, and sometimes hard drugs too – or to messages about drugs.

It is important for adults to clearly explain to children what drugs are, their functions and which drugs are harmful or illegal.

You can start talking to your children about drugs from when they are in primary school (the **ADF suggests 8 years old**, but respond to your child's cues - they may need to talk sooner than this). Talking to children about drugs will help to equip them with the information and skills to think critically when they are first confronted with alcohol and drug use.

Another benefit of starting the conversation early is that you create an environment that facilitates the sharing of information. You are showing your child that no topic is off limits – and that you are happy to talk about drugs and peer pressure. You are also showing that you have useful information to help your child understand drugs.

If you feel you don't know the answers, or don't know enough, you are not alone. Many parents feel lost in knowing where to start the drug conversation and what to cover.

This article will help you feel more confident in talking to your children about drugs.

Getting ready to talk to your child about drugs

To feel more confident about starting the conversation with your child, it is important for you to obtain the facts regarding drugs and alcohol. The following websites are great resources:

- **ReachOut** clearly describes the different types of drugs (stimulants, depressants, hallucinogens).
- **The Other Talk** provides facts and evidence for you to explain drugs to your child.
- The Australian Government's **National Drug Campaign** has useful responses to teenagers' reasons for using drugs.

When preparing what you will discuss with your child, consider the questions that they might have.

In particular, your child is likely to ask whether you have used drugs. **You do not need to tell your child details about your experiences with alcohol and drugs.** But it is better for you to be honest about whether you have used drugs than to lie.

Your story could be a cautionary tale. Or it could be an experience that you look back on as a mistake because

you saw drugs harm others.

Once you have established the facts about drugs, it is important to be clear on your personal view of alcohol and drugs. Explain what you think is a responsible use of legal drugs, and why you think your child should not use illegal drugs. Be clear on what you consider acceptable alcohol consumption, and prepare what you will say to your child about when it is okay to start drinking.

The Australian alcohol guidelines state that the safest approach is to avoid alcohol until a person is 18 years old.

It is important to remember to be consistent with your messaging. Demonstrating responsible drinking behaviour around your child is a key aspect of this. You can ensure this by:

- not drinking excessively
- not drink driving
- showing that you can have fun and relax without drinking
- refusing a drink if you don't feel like it or you've had enough.

It is important not to perpetuate myths about drugs and alcohol, and to ensure that your children understand the risks and harms associated with drug and alcohol use. Discuss the harms realistically without exaggerating. Always consider what is age-appropriate information for your child. For example, a teenager might want all the detail, but a younger child may be terrified to learn about the potential for violence when people are under the influence of ice.

It is also important to be clear and consistent around rules and the consequences associated with breaking these rules, and to help your children develop strategies to navigate situations that might involve drugs and alcohol with their peers.

Tips for talking to children aged 4–7 about drugs

- When you use medicine in the house, talk about why you are using the medicine, how it can be used by only the person who is unwell, and how sticking to the correct dose is important (that is, we can't take too much).
- Repeat simple information about the dangers of drugs, smoking and alcohol, but also about the benefits of nutritious food. In other words, take a two-pronged approach: some things are not good for our body, and some things are great for us.
- When you know your child has heard a hard drug (such as heroin) mentioned in the media or in conversation, ask your child if they know what it is. Tell them that the drug is addictive and severely harms our bodies.
- If your child sees someone smoking in a movie or on television, talk about smoking, nicotine addiction and the effects of smoking on your lungs and overall health.
- If your child sees someone drinking heavily in a movie or on television, talk about alcohol, alcohol addiction and the effects of excessive drinking on your health.
- Be specific about the effects of a drug, but keep it simple. You can talk about a person getting very angry, for example, rather than more extreme violence.
- If your child asks for more information, give it to them.
- Talk calmly and use terms that your child can understand.

Tips for talking to children aged 8–12 about drugs

- Begin by asking them what they think about drugs. If you ask in a casual, unjudging way, your child is more likely to be honest with you.
- If your child is uncomfortable talking to you about drugs, or seems disinterested, let them know that you are ready to talk whenever they are. They will come to you with questions eventually.
- Pay attention to their concerns and questions. Don't say that any ideas or questions are silly: be open to all questions, whether they are detailed or general.
- If your child shows they have false information, gently give them the correct information. Explain that they may come across more wrong information, but they can check everything with you.
- Be aware of drug-related news that your child may hear, such as drug use by professional cyclists or footballers. And check that your child understands what has happened, and the consequences of the drug use.

Tips for talking to children aged 13–17 about drugs

- Be aware that your child may know other kids who use alcohol or other drugs. So, be prepared to answer more specific questions about drugs.
- Try to understand your child's thoughts and feelings about drug-related issues (such as drink driving), but also be sure to talk about real risks of drug use. For example, explain that drink driving is illegal (so a person who drives under the influence may go to jail) and that someone drink driving could end up killing or severely injuring a pedestrian, a passenger, another road user or themselves.
- Consider making a written or verbal contract containing the family rules about going out or using the car. As part of the contract, make your child promise to call you if the person responsible for driving has been drinking or using drugs.
- Be clear about your expectations of your child. The idea is to be completely upfront about how you want your child to behave in situations that involve alcohol and other drugs.
- Stay up to date with drug street names and how different drugs affect the body, so you can give out the right information. If you don't have the answers, let your child know that you will find out what they want to know.

Getting the drug conversation started

Plan a quiet time with your child when neither of you will have other distractions. You may go for a walk, plan a milkshake at a café, or chat in the car on the way home from school. It might also be useful to use cues from relevant topics on the TV or in the media.

You can start the conversation with some basic information.

Explain that a drug can be natural (such as cannabis or tobacco) **or manufactured** (such as ecstasy and ice). Let your child know that every drug changes our physical and psychological state in some way.

Explain that drugs fall into three groups:

- everyday substances such as coffee or prescription medication
- legal recreational drugs such as cigarettes and alcohol
- illegal drugs such as speed, cocaine, ice and ecstasy.

Explain that people use drugs (or medications) for different reasons:

- to treat illness
- to feel relief from pain
- to feel 'up' and energetic
- to feel relaxed and calm
- to fall asleep.

From this information, your child will probably have questions. Let the conversation flow from those questions.

In other words, let the conversation go in whatever direction your child wants to take it. You can always come back to your prepared information on another day. Remember it is also important to gauge your child's views about drugs and alcohol, and to talk about what they would do in different situations.

Stuck for an answer about drugs?

You may not have all the answers to your child's questions. They may ask about a drug that you've not heard of, or drug side-effects that you don't know, or drug-related statistics that you don't have.

This situation is a chance to research drugs together. If you already know some reliable websites, look for the information online. By looking together, your child knows you are happy to help them, and the conversation is open and honest.

If your child doesn't want to bother looking for answers, then do the research yourself. If you don't supply the answers for your child's questions, then someone else probably will, and their information may be wrong.

In other words, you can keep more control of what your child knows about drugs by being their main source of information. Research shows that children see their parents as a credible source of information.

Further, by talking to your child, you can at least learn more about what is happening in their life. And, by talking with you, your child can work out their choices and make healthy decisions.

Where to get help – parents

The Other Talk

Drug Help Tel. 1800 250 015 – for information for parents

Alcohol and Drug Foundation Tel. 1300 85 85 84 – for general information and **help and support services by state**

Health.Vic

DirectLine Tel. 1800 888 236 for treatment pathways and telephone support services

Family Drug Support – for help with a family member with a drug problem

Ted Noffs Foundation – for services for young people and their families who are experiencing drug and alcohol problems

ReachOut – for general information about **drugs** and **binge drinking**

Raising Children Network – for **warning signs of drug and alcohol use** and for a **video on family rules on using alcohol and other drugs**

Where to get help – kids

Kids Helpline

Victoria's Youth Drug and Alcohol Advice service (YoDAA)

ReachOut

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

Alcohol and Drug Foundation

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