

# Helping your child avoid tobacco, drugs and alcohol

The best thing parents can do to help prevent drug and alcohol misuse by their children is to get involved before a problem begins. Starting when your child is age five or six, talk with him or her about how these substances are harmful to kids. Talk honestly and openly about all kinds of tobacco, drugs, and alcohol as well as other things kids may do to cope with stress in their lives. Using any kind of substance is just one way that children try to deal with things that bother them.

## Focus on the positive

- Discuss ways for your child to make responsible choices, no matter what his or her friends are saying or doing.
  - Praise achievements. Never miss a chance to praise your child and build his or her self-esteem.
  - Set a positive example. If you smoke, try to quit. Cigarettes tend to be a "gateway" drug for kids. If you drink alcohol, drink only in moderation. Never drink alcohol and drive. Also, take medicines only as prescribed by your doctor.
  - Help your child get involved in sports, clubs, hobbies, and other activities. These activities can help teach kids that they can have fun without drugs and alcohol.
  - Spend time with your child. When you take part in your child's life, you show you care. You also get to know your child's routines and can more easily recognize when he or she may get in situations involving drugs or alcohol.
- ## Explain the dangers and consequences of tobacco, drug, or alcohol use
- Tell your child how the body gets addicted to nicotine and other drugs. Explain withdrawal symptoms that happen when a person tries to quit. Tell your child it may take only one cigarette to start a dependence on tobacco.
  - Talk about the legal problems that can result from using drugs or alcohol. For example, a person younger than 18 can lose his or her driver's license or be sentenced to community service or time in a detention center.
  - Discuss how people who are using drugs or alcohol can say or do things that they normally would not. It is easy to make bad choices, get hurt, and get into trouble. For example, people may end up driving while drunk or riding with someone who is drunk, or they may find themselves in an unsafe place.
  - Set clear limits about what will happen if your child uses drugs or alcohol. Follow through if those rules are broken. Don't make promises you will not keep. The prospect of parental disapproval is often one of the most powerful disincentives. Remind your child that you set these rules because you love your child and don't want him or her to be hurt.
  - Explain that inhalants are dangerous. Glue, shoe polish, and gasoline are the most common substances that adolescents inhale.
  - Make sure your child knows that these and other inhalants are harmful. Inhalant abuse can cause sudden serious health problems, such as seizures, or death from sudden heart failure. It can cause lasting brain damage or other lifelong problems.

Talk with your child about the dangers of misusing prescription medicines, such as using ADHD medicines to concentrate better or stay up later to study. Misusing these medicines can cause heart problems and psychological effects such as anxiety, mood swings, paranoia, seeing or hearing things that are not present (hallucinations), and believing things that are not true (delusions). If your child takes these medicines for ADHD, talk with him or her about using them as prescribed and never giving or selling them to other children.

Be aware that some adolescents and teens try to get a rush by cutting off oxygen to the brain, such as through choking or strangling each other. Talk to your child about these dangerous behaviors. Explain that they can result in lifelong problems or even death.

### Peer pressure

Many adolescents feel pressured to use alcohol or drugs because some of their friends are using them. Here are some tips to teach your child on how to deal with peer pressure.

Encourage your child to:

- Hang out with people who do not use drugs or alcohol. Then, if your child is asked to use drugs, he or she can take a stand and walk away, knowing that there is support from the group.

- Skip parties where your child knows drugs or alcohol will be present.
- Practice or role-play things to say to friends who might try to get your child to use drugs or alcohol. This helps your child consider in advance what might happen and think about ways to say "no." Practice responses, such as:
  - "No, thanks. I've got too much to do today."
  - "I'll just end up embarrassing myself."
  - "I've got to stay clean for basketball practice."
  - "My parents told me that they would ground me for 3 weeks if I use, and I don't want to take the chance of missing my friend's party."
- Get involved in drug-free activities. Talk about ways to ask friends to join too.
- Call you for a ride if he or she is in trouble or feels pressured by others to use drugs or alcohol. Let your child know that you want to help no matter what the situation is.

Look for a peer-led prevention program in your area to help reinforce what you are teaching.

**Help is available. For additional information, visit [MagellanHealth.com/MYMH](https://www.MagellanHealth.com/MYMH)**

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