6 PARENTING PRACTICES

Help Reduce the Chances Your Child will Develop a Drug or Alcohol Problem

Here are 6 research-supported parenting practices to set you on the right path.

Get Started

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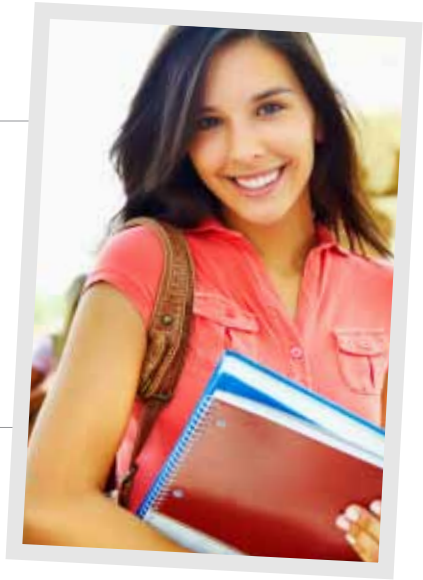

No one ever said parenting would be easy. When children hit the teenage years, the challenges are great. There are more significant threats that can affect their health and safety, like drugs and alcohol. And, unfortunately, helpful and reliable resources are scarce. So when you are nervously sitting on your couch at 1 a.m. waiting for your 17 year old to come home, please know that you are not alone. Most parents go through this angst.

One very common complaint from parents is, "We didn't know where to go for help" or "We were too ashamed to ask." An Internet search can provide thousands of websites offering parenting advice, but the information across these sites is not consistent or consistently good. So how do you know what advice to follow?

When raising a teenager, it is natural to feel that there is little you can do to change his or her behavior. But there is scientific evidence showing which parenting tips are most effective (and which are not).

Parents often think that friends are more important to their teenager than they are. But studies and clinical experience suggest that parents *can* influence their teens.

Here we share with you our expert opinions on parenting behaviors that are important in preventing your teenager from using drugs and alcohol. These recommendations are based on a sound review of scientific research. However, there are no guarantees — even the smartest, best-skilled, most caring parents in the world have problems with their children.

Information alone is unlikely to solve complicated problems and nothing takes the place of a good clinical opinion for serious issues. But getting reliable information is an important first step. Despite how powerless you may feel, we want to encourage you: **Don't give up on your teenager or your power as a parent.**

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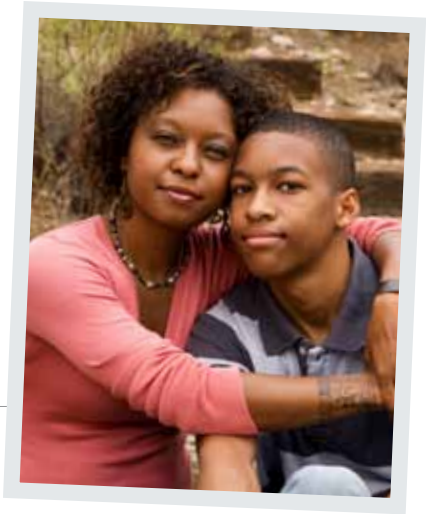
Here are 6 ways to help you reduce the chance that your teenage child will drink, use drugs or engage in other risky behavior.



1. Build a Warm & Supportive Relationship with Your Child
2. Be a Good Role Model When It Comes To Drinking, Taking Medicine & Handling Stress
3. Know Your Child's Risk Level
4. Know Your Child's Friends
5. Monitor, Supervise & Set Boundaries
6. Have Ongoing Conversations & Provide Information About Drugs & Alcohol

Read on to learn more »

PROVIDE BASIC NEEDS

We all know that the first job of any parent is to keep their child healthy, safe and developing properly. That means providing your child with the basics:

- Proper Nutrition
- Housing
- Clothing
- Health Care Monitoring (Ex: Regular checkups, dental care, etc.)
- Emotional Supports
- Home and Neighborhood Safety

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1 BUILD A WARM & SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR CHILD

Children who have a warm and supportive relationship with their parents are less likely to use drugs or alcohol.

Research shows it's especially important to have a supportive relationship when your child is young.[1] But it's also essential to maintain a close relationship with your child during the teen years. One reason is that by being close with your child, you'll face less conflict when it comes to monitoring his or her behavior and social life.[2]

Not surprisingly, studies show that families who argue, fight and treat each other badly and parents who are degrading and physically punish their children have unsupportive relationships with their children. This increases the risk for drug and alcohol use.[3]

7 Things You Can Do to Maintain a Close Relationship with Your Child:

1. Regularly discuss shared interests (Example: Sports, music, art, technology, movies). Take time to learn about your child's hobbies to help bond with him or her.

2. Engage in extracurricular activities with your child. (Example: Together, you and your teen train for a race; volunteer at a soup kitchen; cook dinner; attend a free concert.) For healthy teen extracurricular activities use our Idea Generator.

3. Maintain low levels of anger and emotion when talking with your teen (Example: Keep a cool head, speak calmly, try not to be defensive, give praise and positive feedback).

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7 Things You Can Do to Maintain a Close Relationship with Your Child:

4 Work through challenges together (Example: If your child had an argument with a close friend and feels his world has fallen apart, talk about how he feels, what might make him feel better, and what he can do to re-engage with his friend.)

5 Strive for honest and direct communication with your child. Find more tips for having a conversation regarding drugs and alcohol.

6 Offer encouragement for achievements — both large and small — and be sure to attend at least some of your child's activities so he knows what he's doing is important to you. If you miss your child's activities frequently, you might be sending him a message that what he does isn't important. If you miss your child's activities for reasons out of your control (Example: Your work schedule makes it impossible), then be sure to ask him about what happened.

7 Allow your child an appropriate degree of independence. Keeping your child sheltered or being a helicopter parent presents problems of its own. Let her go out with friends, but in the right settings. Let her negotiate with you about what is expected of her, her curfew, what her chores are, and when they need to be completed, etc. When there is a healthy two-way interaction between you and your teen and your expectations are clear it will help her learn to navigate the waters without you.

Remember: "Warm and supportive" does NOT mean "lax or lenient."

Just as research shows that parents who discipline by hitting and degrading their child have children at an increased risk for substance abuse, permissive/lenient parents who allow their children to do what they want when they want (because they either don't want to deal with a child's behavior or they don't want their child to be angry with them) also place their children at increased risk.

An effective parenting strategy is to be warm and supportive but to also set (and stick to) clear boundaries and limits, so children can learn to be responsible for their actions.

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2 BE A GOOD ROLE MODEL WHEN IT COMES TO DRINKING, TAKING MEDICINE & HANDLING STRESS

Research shows that when it comes to alcohol and other drugs, children are likely to model their parents' behaviors — both healthy and unhealthy ones. [4]

Your attitude about drugs and alcohol can also influence your child's attitude about drugs and alcohol — and have an effect on his or her future behavior. Here are three ways that you can be a good role model for your child.

1. If you choose to drink alcohol, consume small amounts with a meal or for a celebratory occasion.

Don't become intoxicated in front of your children. Drinking alcohol in excess around your children or using illicit drugs increases the likelihood they will develop alcohol or drug problems.

2. When it comes to prescription drugs, be sure to follow the instructions properly. Do not use leftover prescription drugs in your house for casual, non-medical use. It's also important not to share your prescription medications with other family members or friends. And be sure to dispose of unused prescription drugs properly (Example: Use a drug-take back program.)

Don't save prescribed medications for when they may come in handy, use them later without a doctor's consent, or share the medications with others.

3. Children learn behavior by observing their parents' behavior. That means your child picks up on the way you cope with stressful situations and how you manage your emotions. When you are overwhelmed, try exercising or using other stress management techniques in order to teach your children that they do not need to drink or use drugs to cope with life's problems. Here are tips on how to handle stress.

Don't use alcohol as a coping mechanism or to relieve stress. (Example: Saying to your kids, "I had a rough day — I need a few beers or a joint to relax.")

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3 KNOW YOUR CHILD'S RISK LEVEL

Several decades of research shows that some teens are more at risk for developing a substance abuse problem than other teens.

Why is that? Well, there is no single factor. However, the more risk factors a teen has, the more likely he or she will abuse drugs or alcohol. Conversely, the fewer the number of risk factors, the less likely he or she will develop a drug or alcohol problem. Also, it's important to recognize that even children raised in the same home may have varying levels of risk.

It is important to keep in mind that risk factors do not determine a child's destiny. Instead, they provide a general gauge as to the likelihood of drug or alcohol abuse.

Addressing risk factors early and paying careful attention to children at higher risk can reduce that child's likelihood of a future problem with drugs or alcohol. Understanding risk factors is also very important when a child with more risk has already experimented with substances or has a problem. In that case, you will have a clearer picture of why things might have happened and know how to get the right kind of treatment.

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Do: Think about your child's risk factors and review them at least annually (Example: On your child's birthday). If your child's risk factors are high or increase over time, watch more carefully for behavioral, psychological and social problems. Take action to address risk factors and don't hesitate to seek professional help if you cannot manage the problems yourself.

Don't: Ignore risk factors and assume your child will be okay or just ignore a problem because you think it is a stage of development. If you notice something, seek help.

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4 Common Risk Factors Associated with Teen Drug and Alcohol Abuse:

1 **Family History:** Family history of drug or alcohol problems, especially when it is the parent's history, can place a child at increased risk for developing a problem. Children can inherit genes that increase their risk of alcoholism, so having a parent or grandparent with alcohol problems may indicate increased risk for the child. Inheriting the gene does not mean the child will automatically become dependent on alcohol.

If there is a history of a dependence or addiction in your family, you should let your child know since he or she is at a higher risk for developing a drug or alcohol problem. These conversations should take place when you feel your child is able to understand the information.

2 **Mental or Behavioral Disorder:** If your child has a psychiatric condition like depression, anxiety or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), he or she is more at risk for developing a drug or alcohol problem. Although not all teenagers with these disorders will develop a substance abuse problem, the chances are higher when they have difficulty regulating their thoughts and emotions. Therefore, parents with children with psychiatric conditions should be vigilant about the possibility of their teen using drugs or alcohol.

It is also a good idea to talk with your health care providers about the connection between psychiatric conditions and substance use. Managing and treating underlying psychiatric conditions, or understanding how emotional and behavioral problems can trigger or escalate a substance use problem, is important for preventing or reducing risk.

3 **Trauma:** Children who have a history of traumatic events (such as witnessing or experiencing a car accident or natural disaster; being a victim of physical or sexual abuse) have been shown to be more at risk for substance use problems later in life. Therefore, it is important for parents to recognize and address the possible impact of trauma on their child and get help for their child.

4 **Impulse Control Problems:** Children who frequently take risks or have difficulty controlling impulses are more at risk for substance use problems. While most teens understand the dangers of taking risks, some have particular difficulty resisting impulses to engage in risky behavior.

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4 KNOW YOUR CHILD'S FRIENDS

You, as the parent, set the foundation for your child's interaction with his friends. As your child gets older, his friends play a more important role in the choices he makes.

Your child's friends can influence him to take part in risky behaviors.[5] This is especially true if your child is more reliant on his friends than he is on you.[6]

Remember: Knowing who your child's friends are and what they are like helps you to be more prepared to intervene if a problem occurs. For example, let's say your child calls and tells you that she will be late because she planned on riding home with her friend Julia who was supposed to meet her 45 minutes ago. It is helpful to know if Julia is a brainy bookworm who becomes engrossed in reading and loses track of time, or if she is someone who never has a curfew, sometimes behaves a bit wildly, and is obsessed with boys.

Here are some tips to help you be better aware of your child's friends and assist your child in developing healthy friendships:

- Ask questions about their friends (Example: "What's your new friend Jake like? What kind of activities is Kira into?")

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Should I host a party with alcohol or "teach" my child to drink so he or she will learn in a safe environment?

It's NOT advisable to host teen parties where alcohol is available (and thus, condone underage drinking.) Also, contrary to popular belief, there is NO evidence that parents can "teach their children to drink responsibly." Quite the opposite is true — the more exposure to drinking in adolescence and parental acceptance of substance use, the higher the risk of later problems with alcohol and other drugs.

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- Have direct conversations with your child's friends whenever the opportunity presents itself so that you get to know them and their household rules in a positive context. (Note: A great time to have these conversations is in a car; so if possible, offer to drive your child and his or her friends to various activities, events, games, etc.) Developing these ties will allow you to guide your child and make it easier to communicate if a problem arises later.
- Explain that it's normal to want to be accepted by others but it's best to focus on friends who are not engaging in substance use. Remind your child that most teens do not drink or use drugs regularly. Let her know that she has a choice in how she interacts with her friends and if she is disappointed by her friends she is free to make new friends. Guide your teen toward opportunities to meet new people.
- Discuss with your teen the importance of choosing supportive, healthy friendships — and what it means to be a good friend. For example, a good friend is someone who is:
  - Loyal
  - Wants what's best for you
  - Likes that you have different interests than he or she has
  - Roots for you
  - Celebrates your successes
- Share information about your own friends, colleagues and neighbors — describe your relationship with them, their interests, their personality traits, what you like about them, how they make you feel and how you resolve differences with them.

  Watch a video about teen friendships.

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If You Don't Like Your Teen's Friends, Follow Your Instinct.

Do you suspect they use drugs or alcohol? Do you think they treat your child badly? Do you have a personality conflict?

No matter what the reason is, remember this: If you suspect that a friend is a bad influence, don't wait. Keep a closer eye on him, talk to your teen and make your concerns and expectations clear. (Example: "I'm concerned because Tommy cuts school and has no curfew and I'm worried about these behaviors rubbing off on you.") If necessary, help your child connect with a wider social circle.

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- Encourage your child to recognize and step in when a friend might be having difficulties or is tempted to use drugs or alcohol. She can be a powerful influence on her friends and help her friends make healthy choices. Not only will this help her friends, it will protect your child from being drawn in by the wrong crowd and also set her apart as a proactive and independent thinker.
- Check in with your teen's friends and their parents to find out if their household rules are similar or different than yours, particularly when it comes to their rules on serving alcohol to minors.[7] If their household rules are different than yours (Example: The parents are okay serving alcohol to minors), you can speak with them directly about your rules. You can also make sure that most of the time spent with your child and his or her friend occurs in your home.

For more, read our Healthy Friendships Tipsheet.

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5 MONITOR, SUPERVISE & SET BOUNDARIES

Research shows that when parents monitor, supervise and set boundaries their teens are at a lowered risk for using drugs and alcohol.[8]

To Monitor Your Child

- Know where your child is at all times.
- Be aware of your teen's activities, especially during the after-school period, which is a high-risk period for teen drug use.[9]
- Know who your child is hanging out with.
- Keep track of your child's academic performance. Studies have shown that problems in school are a possible marker for alcohol and drug problems and that school involvement and academic achievement can protect against drug and alcohol use.[10]

To Supervise Your Child

- Be present during recreational events and parties — or at least make your teen aware that there is another adult supervising.
- Help your child with her homework or other school-related projects. This will not only give you quality time with her and reinforce the importance of achievement, but also helps you recognize any difficulties she may be having with school or other activities.

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NOTE

You don't want your "presence" to impinge on your child's need to develop a sense of independence, especially as your child grows older and needs to develop socialization skills. For example, simply being home when an older teen has friends over and periodically checking in and starting conversations with your child and his or her friends is better than constantly interrupting their time together.

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To Set Boundaries

Do

- Explain to your child why you are setting boundaries (Example: “I’m doing this to keep you healthy and safe.”)
- Firmly establish a rule that any drug or alcohol use will not be tolerated. Set a rule prohibiting underage alcohol consumption before age 21. Explain the risks of drinking while his or her brain is still developing. While teens will often discount that risks will actually happen to them, helping your children become future-oriented thinkers is an important lesson. You may have to try a number of different strategies or ideas before one sticks.
- Set firm but reasonable rules (Example: Setting a curfew; expecting to be notified when plans change). Be clear about the consequences if the rules are not followed in advance and follow through consistently.

Don’t

- Establish unreasonable rules (Example: Children have an 8 p.m. bedtime regardless of age or day of the week) or be overly harsh in punishment or consequences if they break rules (Example: Grounding children for a month for being late one time). This might push your child away and prevent him or her from opening up to you.

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6 HAVE ONGOING CONVERSATIONS & PROVIDE INFORMATION ABOUT DRUGS & ALCOHOL

Having ongoing conversations with your child can help build a healthy, supportive relationship.

It can also help you and your child avoid or reduce conflict as situations arise throughout their teen years.

Here are tips for talking with your child:

- Talk regularly with your child about the risks of drug and alcohol use – especially in opportunistic situations (Example: Seeing someone intoxicated; a news story about addiction; before your child starts a new school.)
- State your disapproval of underage drinking and drug use. Research shows that this can decrease the chance that your child will try drugs or alcohol,[11] and reduce the likelihood that he or she will transition from experimenting with drugs and alcohol to more regular or heavy use.[12]
- Instead of a boring lecture, let your child know about the health and safety risks of teen drug and alcohol use. Teens who perceive alcohol and drugs as harmful are less likely to engage in underage drinking.[13] [See our Drug Guide for Parents (pdf) to learn about the latest drugs.]

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6 Skills to Practice When Talking to Your Teen: [16]

1 BE BRIEF:
Avoid long comments and conversations that might be seen as lecturing. Allow your teen to speak and let him know that he is being heard. Giving him the floor by asking brief open-ended questions such as, "What are some of the reasons you think those kids were drinking?," can produce much more effective and interactive conversations than simply telling him why people who use drugs are making poor decisions.

2 BE POSITIVE:
Stay upbeat and avoid blaming. Teens need to hear the "good stuff" just like the rest of us. When you reward good behavior kids are likely to repeat it. (Example: "You did a great job leaving that situation early, it shows you are an independent person and I'm proud of you.")

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Here are tips for talking with your child (continued):

- Keep up-to-date on the latest research and drug trends — including the increased misuse and abuse of prescription drugs among teens.

If you feel uncomfortable striking up these conversations with your teen, one way to begin is to ask your child, "Have you ever been offered drugs or alcohol?"

In this way, your child might be more likely to open up than if asked about his or her own personal use. This can then lead to a discussion about:

- Why people might drink or use drugs (Example: social pressure)
- Your child's own feelings about the risks and benefits of use
- The reasons to avoid use, even though some people might not be outwardly experiencing consequences
- Refusal skills and alternatives to drinking and using

And asking this question may also help you get a better picture of your child's risk for personal use. This can set the stage for ongoing conversations about substance abuse throughout their adolescence.

- Have conversations with your child on all topics — such as his or her activities, friends, school, job, hobbies, etc. In other words, be interested in your child's life. This has been shown to protect against risk for teen tobacco use[14] and the transition to drug and alcohol use.[15] For tips on talking with your teen, visit www.timetotalk.org.

Remember: If you're having trouble communicating with your teen, seek out help from a professional.

6 Skills to Practice When Talking to Your Teen (continued): [16]

3 REFER TO SPECIFIC BEHAVIORS:

State what you want — not what you don't want — and identify exactly what you want your child to do in terms of specific actions (Example: "I want you to be home by eleven o'clock." versus "Don't stay out late.") Don't ask your child to change his or her thoughts, feelings, or attitudes (Example: "You need to think more responsibly about when you come home.")

4 LABEL YOUR FEELINGS:

State how you feel (not what you think) calmly in a non-judgmental manner (Example: "I care about you and I worry when you aren't home on time.") If your teen dismisses you and says, "Don't worry," acknowledge her feelings, but remind her that it is your job to protect her.

5 OFFER AN UNDERSTANDING STATEMENT:

Convey some understanding of your child's perspective (Example: "I know you really want to fit in with your friends...")

6 ACCEPT PARTIAL RESPONSIBILITY:

This is hard for some parents to do, but it can be very helpful in connecting with your child (Example: "I may not have told you what I expected as clearly as I could have...")

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SOURCES

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Disclaimer: Unfortunately, even with the "best" parenting practices, there is no guarantee that a teenager will refrain from starting to use drugs or alcohol, developing a drug problem, or even worse, experiencing serious drug-related consequences. Conversely, the worst of circumstances does not undeniably predispose a child to a life of addiction. While poor home environments and inadequate parenting certainly raise the risk of poor outcomes, children are remarkably resilient. Many children growing up with these kinds of disadvantages thrive and lead happy and sometimes extraordinary lives.

For more information, please visit drugfree.org

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