

Talking Matters: You Can Influence Your Children's Views On Alcohol and Drugs





Talking to your children about the harms associated with drinking alcohol and drug use can be an effective way to help prevent underage drinking and improper and illegal drug use. Children who have conversations with their parents or guardians about the dangers associated with alcohol and drugs are 50% less likely to use alcohol and drugs compared to those who don't.

**Note: "Parent" also refers to "guardian" within this document.*

When is it best to talk?

There will be many opportunities over the course of your children's lives for you to talk about important life issues such as alcohol and drugs.

It's not about having one "big talk". It's about having honest conversations about alcohol and drugs and about giving positive and reliable information.

As a parent, you can weave **age appropriate information** into everyday conversations with your children, making yourself your child's first source for information.

Talk *with* your children. Listen to what they have to say and let them know that you value their opinions.

Look for "teachable moments"

Any situation where people drink alcohol/use drugs can be a starting point. Start a conversation with your kids when:

- beer commercials are aired during sporting events;
- people are drinking wine at dinner;
- hosting or attending an event where alcohol is served;
- watching TV or a movie and the characters are drinking or using drugs; or
- you hear about a celebrity or athlete who is being charged with an alcohol/drug-related offence or who is attending alcohol/drug treatment services.

Tips for talking with your children:

- **Ask open-ended questions** to get them talking and to allow you to find out what they already know. For instance ask them “what do you know about...”, “where did you hear about...” or “can you give me an example of...?” Avoid questions where you will just get a “yes/no” answer.
- **Listen carefully. Don’t interrupt.** It’s important to listen before you talk. Respect your children’s views and use their points to start talking about alcohol and drugs. As a parent you want to share your knowledge and try to have the “right” answers, but it’s best not to rush these types of conversations. They need to know you are listening. Children feel more comfortable talking to you about difficult things they are experiencing if they feel they can share their feelings and concerns without being judged or criticized.
- **Do your research.** Don’t use scare tactics. Talk about the facts, your family history, your child’s health and decision making.
- **Create a clear family position and be consistent with your message.** Research shows that when this happens, teens listen. When adolescents are aware that their drinking would upset their parents, they drink less.
- **Your actions should match your beliefs.** Research has shown that teens drink less heavily when parents have specific rules against underage alcohol use, and when they themselves drink responsibly. Check out Canada’s *Low-Risk Drinking Guidelines* (for adults) for tips on how to model responsible drinking. Visit the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse at www.ccsa.ca.



- **Don't jump to conclusions.** If you find out that your teenager is using alcohol and/or drugs, it doesn't always mean that they are addicted. Instead, they may be using it due to curiosity and are experimenting. While this can be concerning to a parent, it can also be an opportunity to start conversations about alcohol and drugs. Teenagers need to know that alcohol/drugs don't have to be a part of growing up. Consider some of the suggestions in this booklet to help you start these discussions.

Expect the tough questions from your children:

"Mom, Dad, did you drink alcohol when you were a kid?"

Be prepared because children are curious and may eventually ask you this question. Parents often dread this question especially if they drank while underage.



Here are two possible ways to answer this question:

1. Tell your child that you choose not to share your alcohol use history. Mention that the main concern is what's happening here and now (in your child's life); or
2. You can admit that you drank alcohol when you were underage, but you can say that years ago you were not as aware of the risks of alcohol/drug use as you are now. If you feel comfortable doing so and believe that it would add to your discussion, you could give an example of an embarrassing moment you had related to drinking.

“Can I drink alcohol at home?”

Some parents wonder if this might help their children learn to drink in a responsible way. However, some studies have found that teens who use alcohol under supervision within their homes are more likely to binge drink outside the home.

“Can I have a party at home where alcohol is available, as long as you are there?”

Some parents feel that supervising this type of party can ensure safety of the people who are there. However, underage drinking is illegal and you could be held liable for injuries that occur during the event and afterward, not to mention the heartache that can happen if someone does get hurt. It’s safest to not allow alcohol use at all.

Parents can have an important influence over their children.

Guidelines on what to say to children at each developmental stage

It’s never too early to start talking about alcohol/drugs. Children begin to form expectations about whether or not they will drink alcohol when they get older, sometimes by grade three or four. Children’s views become more embedded as they get older. For instance, by age 15, many teens will have already developed a set of expectations and attitudes about alcohol use. As a parent, you can play a part in influencing this.

Remember... kids listen and watch you more than you may think.

Preschool (4 & under)

- Preschool age children are too young to understand details about alcohol/drugs. However, they are still observing and learning from the world around them.



What can you talk about?

- The best things you can do at this age are to spend quality time with your child and be a good role model.
- Keep all alcohol and medications safely out of reach.

School age (4-7)

- School age children start to learn about alcohol and drugs from other kids in their class. It is important to give facts about the things they are seeing/hearing on TV, at movies, and in real life.
- At this age children are still learning how to be confident and to make wise decisions. School age children need parents to set limits. Set and give consequences when needed and offer praise when they try hard and when they show good behaviour.

- Be a positive role model and encourage them to lead a lifestyle that is healthy, safe and based on “doing the right thing.” This can include such things as: reading, being involved in sports and hobbies, following rules that are intended to keep them safe, eating healthy foods, having good relationships with others and talking about their feelings.
- Teach children how to manage anger and solve problems without violence.
- School age children have the ability to think about things in a logical way and to see things from other peoples’ points of view. Help your children understand what some of these views might be in different situations.

What can you talk about?

- Don’t wait for your children to learn about alcohol and drugs from others. Talk to your children so that they understand the dangers.
- Focus on facts about health in general. Children at this age like to learn about how the body works. Take time to talk about:
 - things they can do to keep their body healthy such as eating good food, staying active, playing with their friends, and getting enough sleep;
 - how alcohol moves through the body (i.e., from the stomach to the bloodstream, then to other body organs such as the liver, kidneys, brain and muscles);
 - how alcohol can make a person have trouble walking, talking or making safe decisions; and
 - that someone can get sick (feel shaky, throw up, have headaches and feel tired) from drinking alcohol.

Pre-teens (8-11)

- At this stage of development children become more and more independent as their social world expands. Pre-teens are eager to make decisions and be involved in household activities. Give your child ways that he/she can do this, for instance by:
 - giving chores to do;
 - letting him/her help decide what foods to buy;
 - allowing him/her to help make suppers; and
 - allowing your child to be a part of deciding what movies to go to or where to go on family vacations.
- Pre-teens begin to learn about “cause and effect”. They begin to develop their own morals as they learn that certain actions have negative consequences.
- The opinions of your child’s peers become more important to them. They will try to make new friends and begin to learn which friends are best suited to them.

What can you talk about?

- Since pre-teens are beginning to understand actions and consequences, this may be a good time to talk about:
 - any family history of alcohol/drug and addiction problems;
 - laws related to alcohol/drugs and reasons for these laws;
 - making safe decisions; and
 - how alcohol/drugs affects one’s body.
- Talk to your kids about what makes a good friend. This could help them make good decisions about who they choose to be part of their lives, and to understand why they are making that decision.



Talking regularly with your children may help them resist peer pressure to use alcohol and/or drugs.

Early teen years (11-14)

- This age group is often focused on themselves and want to be accepted by their friends. They are going through lots of body changes due to puberty which can cause them concern and worry. Teens are self-conscious about their flaws and fear being judged by others. They are emotional and confused at times and often give parents mixed messages. For instance, teenagers may want to be independent, and in the next moment want the security and comfort offered by their parents.
- At this stage teens often still view extreme risk-taking behavior (such as underage alcohol/drug use) as ridiculous and not worth the risk. They also struggle to foresee and understand future consequences of present actions.



- They are idealistic and highly critical of their surroundings at this age. Parents should try to set a good example by leading a healthy lifestyle, modelling responsible drinking or by not drinking at all, by avoiding illegal drugs and using medications properly. Teens in this age group will often let you know when what you say doesn't match what you do.

What can you talk about?

- Focus on ways to resist peer pressure. Talk through ways your teen can stay away from the pressure to use alcohol/drugs and things they can say to peers who pressure them. Let your teen know it's okay to feel uncomfortable saying "no." Reassure your teen that he/she can always call you for help. If you are comfortable with this, allow your teen to justify their unwillingness to drink/use illegal drugs (or to use legal drugs improperly) by blaming you, their parent for not allowing this.

Middle teen years (15-18)

- Although some people in this age group have finished puberty, they may continue to be self-conscious about the way they look and have difficulties with their peers. At the same time they want to be independent from their parents. Therefore rebelling against parents is common, so know that this can be a normal stage of development. Hang in there!
- Teens often determine when conversations will occur and are more willing to talk when they are in a good mood. Combining an activity with a conversation may help your teen open up and share his/her thoughts and feelings. Activities could include such things as: when shopping, doing chores, or during a car ride.
- Your teen may share less information with you, but this doesn't mean you need to worry. This is often a normal part of him/her developing a sense of independence. Step back but be available for conversations. Pay attention to signs that he/she is ready for these talks and stay alert to signs that there are problems. Develop a mutual respect for one another. Avoid lecturing and giving the view that you always know best, as it will push your teen away.

What can you talk about?

- Offer the facts, but in more detail. Talk about the effects of alcohol and drugs on the body's organs, including the brain.
- Talk about the damages alcohol and drug misuse can have on their lives and the lives of their friends.
- Your teen may be interested in sharing their opinions and thoughts (and hearing yours) about laws regarding alcohol/drugs.



It's never too early to build a strong bond with your children.

Spend time and talk with your children. Sharing views, thoughts and feelings can allow them to feel that what they have to say, matters. Talking can help be a buffer against alcohol and drug use/misuse. A strong parent-child relationship can help kids make good decisions about their health and well-being. Remember, talking matters...

For more ideas on “conversation starters” regarding alcohol/drugs, see *Talk to Your Children* at saskatchewan.ca/addictions.

To access parenting booklet sources
please contact the Saskatchewan
Ministry of Health at (306) 787-7239.

saskatchewan.ca/addictions

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