

You may think that the use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs begins in the teen years. Unfortunately, drugs are a serious problem among younger children as well. Nearly one in four of students in grades four through six reports that someone has tried to sell or given them drugs. Experimentation with alcohol, tobacco or other drugs at this age is dangerous and can lead to serious social and physical problems later on.

Adult role models, including parents are largely responsible for whether children will fall victim to these risks. Strong, healthy bonds between adults and children are an extraordinary defense against drugs. The most common reason that young people give for not using alcohol and other drugs is not wanting to harm the relationship between themselves and the adults in their lives. In addition to building and maintain positive relationships, parents and adults who work with children need to know what else can be done to protect children. Communicating openly about the dangers of drugs and knowing the warning signs are key.

The U.S. Department of Education has formulated guidelines for talking to kids about drugs.

- Set aside time to address the subject of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs
- Talk with children in a calm, quiet, unhurried manner
- Send a clear, consistent message that children should not use drugs, and reinforce this message periodically
- Listen carefully and pay attention to children's facial expressions and body language to gauge their reaction to the subject and respond in a meaningful way
- Teach children that prescription drugs can be just as harmful as street drugs when used incorrectly
- Explain to children what an illicit drugs are, why they're illegal and what they look like
- Make children aware of the consequences, both health and legal, that are associated with drugs
- Teach children to say "no" to drugs and give children reasons to support their decisions (i.e. "I'm doing something else tonight." "The coach says drugs will hurt my game." "My parents will ground me.")  
Remind children to be firm when saying "no", they should not have to argue or debate.

Knowing the signs, symptoms and effects of drug use can help adults educate children and intervene if children are involved with drugs. Be concerned when children exhibit these behaviors:

- Withdrawal from previous interests, friends, or hobbies
- Decline in academic performance
- Reluctant to talk about new friends or having friends who avoid meeting parents
- Secretive phone conversations
- Lack of interest in appearance or change in style of dress
- Periods of unexplained absence from home, school or other places
- Increasing periods of erratic behavior, moodiness, inappropriate sensitivity, irritability, depression or hostility
- Increased use of drug-related slang and street terms
- Reduced energy, self-esteem and enthusiasm
- Reduced interaction with family members
- Defensive reactions to questions about substance abuse
- Possession of large amounts of unexplainable money or material goods
- Suspected involvement in the disappearance of money or other items of value from friends, home or school
- Frequent incidents of dishonesty
- Frequent nausea, decreased control of motor capabilities and ability to judge time and distance and distorted perceptions

It is never too early to start talking to your children about the dangers of drugs. Remember that healthy child/parent relationships are the number one deterrent in using drugs. Make sure you are talking to your children.