

# Raising Drug-Free Kids: What to Do, When to Do It

By Tari Marshall

According to the 2006 Illinois Youth Survey, the mean age when students first smoke cigarettes is 13. They try alcohol and marijuana by the time they are 14. That's also about the time when pre-teens are becoming more independent and parents begin wondering if they have any influence left with their kids at all.

The fact is research shows that parents have an influence over their children's decisions about drug use well into their college years.<sup>1</sup> While a 2000 National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) study reported that parents are "the most important influence in preventing substance abuse among their children," 35 percent of parents said they think they have little influence.

Additionally, the 2006 *Partnership Attitude Tracking Study* conducted by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America found that kids who report learning a lot about the risks of drugs from their parents are up to 50 percent less likely to use, but only 49 percent of parents reported having "frequent" (four or more) discussions with their kids about drugs. Of more concern is that a mere 36 percent of parents reported having in-depth conversations about abuse of prescription medications and only 33 percent said they thoroughly discussed abuse of over-the-counter cough and cold medicines with their teens at a time when abuse of these legal substances is on the rise.

"Talking with their children about drinking and drugs is intimidating for many parents," noted Steve Pasierb, president of the Partnership for a Drug-Free America. "Many parents mistakenly think their child is too young, and when they get older, parents fear not knowing what to say and when to say it. It's actually part of an ongoing conversation about your child's health that starts at a young age."

Among the online resources available to parents is a Parent Toolkit on the Partnership's Web site at [drugfree.org](http://drugfree.org). It offers age-appropriate advice from parenting and health experts, parents and other caring adults. Here are excerpts from The Parent Toolkit, suggesting what parents can do at each stage of their children's development.

## Pre-School Years

Since the foundation for all healthy habits – from nutritious eating to face washing – is laid down during the preschool years, they are a great time to set the stage for a drug-free life.

- **Talk to your child about the joys of healthy living.** Discuss how good you feel when you take care of yourself – how you can run, jump, play and work for many hours.
- **Celebrate your child's decision-making skills.** Whenever possible, let your child choose what to wear. Even if the clothes don't quite

match, you are reinforcing your child's ability to make decisions.

- **Stress the need for your child to take personal responsibility for his own health, well-being and personal environment.** Turn chores like brushing teeth, putting away toys, wiping up spills and caring for pets into fun experiences that your child will enjoy.

## Grades K-3

Five-to-eight-year olds are still tied to family and are eager to please, but they're also beginning to explore their individuality. It's very important that you continue talking to your child about a healthy drug-free lifestyle and stress that of all the voices your child hears, yours should be the guiding force.

- Keep your discussions about tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs factual and focused on the present. Let your child know that people who drink too much alcohol get sick and throw up, or that smoking makes clothes stink and causes bad breath.
- Talk to your kids about the drug-related messages they receive through advertisements, the news media, and entertainment sources. Some TV shows or movies may even glamorize drug use. Remember to ask your kids how they feel about the things they've heard – you'll learn a great deal about what they're thinking.
- Set clear rules and behave the way you want your kids to behave. Tell them the reasons for your rules. If you use tobacco or alcohol, be mindful of the message you are sending to your children.
- Work on problem solving by focusing on the types of problems kids come across. Help them find long-lasting solutions to homework trouble, a fight with a friend, or in dealing with a bully.



## Grades 4-6

Preteens are on a quest to figure out their place in the world. When it comes to the way they view that world, they tend to give their friends' opinions a great deal of power while, at the same time, they're starting to question their parents' views and messages. Your advice may be challenged – but it will be heard and will stay with your child much more than he or she will ever admit.

- Make sure your child knows your rules – and that you'll enforce the consequences if rules are broken. This applies to no-use rules about tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs – as well as bedtimes and homework.
- Give your children the power to make decisions that go against their peers. You can reinforce this message through small things such as encouraging your child to pick out the sneakers he likes rather than the pair his friends have.



- Preteens aren't concerned with future problems that might result from experimentation with tobacco, alcohol or other drugs, but they are concerned about their appearance – sometimes to the point of obsession. Tell them about the smelly hair and ashtray breath caused by cigarettes. Make sure they know that it would be hard to perform in the school play while high on marijuana.

## The First Year of Middle School

Be warned, this is a critical time and calls for extra vigilance on your part. Your son or daughter may still seem young, but their new surroundings can put them in some mature and tempting situations.

- The likelihood that kids will try drugs increases dramatically during this year. Your child is going

to meet lots of new kids, seek acceptance and start to make more – and bigger – choices.

- To many middle-school kids, peer approval means everything and your child may make you feel unwelcome. He is going through a time where he feels as though he should be able to make his own decisions and may start to challenge your values. While your child may physically and emotionally pull away from you to establish his own identity, he actually needs you to be involved in his life more than ever before.
- Be aware that your child is going through some major physical and hormonal changes. Her moods may vary as she tries to come to terms with her ever-changing body and the onset of puberty. Keep yourself educated on what to expect – if you reassure her that nothing is out of the ordinary, your child can relax knowing that what she's going through is normal.

## Grades 7-9

If your child is 13, says Dr. Amelia Arria, senior scientist with Treatment Research Institute, you should assume that he or she has been offered drugs or alcohol.

- Make sure your teen knows your rules and the consequences for breaking those rules – and, most importantly, that you really will enforce those consequences if the rules are broken. Research shows that kids are less likely to use tobacco, alcohol and other drugs if their parents have established a pattern of setting clear rules and consequences for breaking those rules.
- Let your teen in on all the things you find wonderful about him. He needs to hear a lot of positive comments about his life and who he is as an individual – and not just when he makes the basketball team. Positive reinforcement can go a long way in preventing drug use among teens.
- Show interest – and discuss – your child's daily ups and downs. You'll earn your child's trust, learn how to talk to each other, and won't take your child by surprise when you voice a strong point of view about drugs.
- Don't just leave your child's anti-drug education up to her school. Ask your teen what she's learned about drugs in school and then continue with that topic or introduce new topics.

## Grades 10-12

When it comes to drugs, teens are a savvy bunch. Drugs and messages about living drug-free have been part of their lives for years. They've witnessed many of their peers using drugs – some without obvious or immediate consequences, others whose drug use gets out of control.

- Don't speak generally about drug- and alcohol-use – your older teen needs to hear detailed and reality-driven messages. Topics worth talking about with your teen: using a drug just once can have serious permanent consequences; can put you in risky and dangerous situations; anybody can become a chronic user or addict; combining drugs can have deadly consequences.
- Emphasize what drug use can do to your teen's future. Discuss how drug use can ruin your teen's chance of getting into the college she's been dreaming about or landing the perfect job.
- Use news reports as discussion openers. If you see a news story about an alcohol-related car accident, talk to your teen about all the victims that an accident leaves in its wake. If the story is about drugs in your community, talk about the ways your community has changed as drug use has grown.
- Compliment your teen for all the things he does well and for the positive choices he makes. Teens still care what their parents think. Let him know how deeply disappointed you would be if he started using drugs.

*Marshall is Director of External Affairs and Manager of Illinois' Partnership for a Drug-Free America Initiative at Prevention First.*

*Sources:*

*<sup>1</sup>ScienceDaily, February 11, 2008*