

TALKING TRAUMA

What is Trauma?

Trauma is any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person's life. It can affect anyone and may stem from a single incident or an ongoing experience, like parental incarceration or parental substance use.

Research shows that there are positive outcomes associated with talking about trauma with children who have experienced trauma. Still, it's important that these conversations are developmentally appropriate and happen when a child is ready.

To the right are the dos and don'ts of talking trauma from those who have lived it.

PREVENTION FIRST 



When talking to your children about parental substance use or incarceration...

DO

✓ Be honest.

Have developmentally appropriate conversations: Not all information is suitable for all ages, find ways to share information in ways your child will understand.

✓ Educate children on trauma, intergenerational trauma, and empathy.

✓ Use art as a tool to express feelings around what's happened.

✓ Make connections with other families in the same situation.

DON'T

✗ Speak negatively about the parent who is incarcerated or using substances.

✗ Force a child to talk if they're not ready.

✗ Hide what's happening or lie.

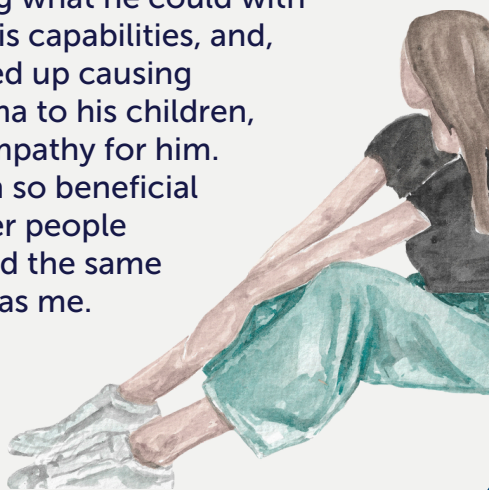
✗ Take your child's words personally. There are a lot of feelings that they might be working through. Have patience and understanding.

“ Courtney’s Story ”

My dad used substances throughout my childhood and was incarcerated going into my freshman year of high school—I was fourteen. More than anything, my experience always felt so shameful. I was always so scared that people would find out...I would talk to my dad on the phone, but even that was a lot. When you talk to someone in prison, there’s a really intense message that plays before you’re really even able to talk to them. The whole thing was a lot for a 14-year-old.

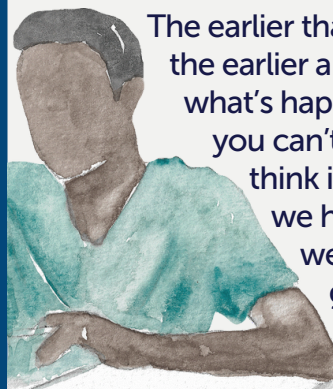
[When my parents told me about my father’s substance use,] I don’t think it was done in the best way. It was clear they didn’t have a discussion about ‘how are we going to tell the kids.’ He was honestly probably still intoxicated when he told me. I wish they would’ve prepared more, maybe they could’ve gone to therapy themselves. There weren’t discussions about how it impacted us, or how we could get support.

Understanding trauma [was critical to my healing]. All the decisions that my dad made stemmed from something. He was doing what he could with the best of his capabilities, and, sadly, it ended up causing further trauma to his children, but I have empathy for him. It’s also been so beneficial to meet other people who have had the same experiences as me.



“ Ahmad’s Story ”

[My mom used substances so] my grandparents raised me, and we were blessed to have them step in. There was definitely a period of time when we lived in the middle of both lifestyles. [We would be with my mom] and see what it was like to live with someone who wanted better in life but was addicted to substances, and then we also had the chance to live in a household with a mother and father who took care of things. Our household was pretty transparent. There was nothing to hide; everything was on the table. It was never “maybe we should keep this from them.”



The earlier that you can be transparent, the earlier a child can get used to what’s happening. There’s a lot that you can’t change [in life], and I think it was a good thing that we had adults who made sure we understood what was going on. It was better than us having to find out on our own. Kids are very smart. I understand trying to make sure that the image of the father or the mother (whoever is struggling) is protected by not speaking negatively about them, but the fact is that they’re not there. That is what is going on in the household. They were absent, and the reason why they were absent matters.

Art [was important to my healing], it’s the perfect way to express yourself. Sometimes you don’t have words, but you feel a way about things. Those things get expressed through anger, or we lash out, but the issue is that I can’t quite tell you what I’m feeling. So being able to express yourself through art is so important. It’s the ultimate release, a way to speak without talking.



For more information, including resources on how to have developmentally appropriate conversations with youth about trauma visit prevention.org/youth-and-caregiver-resource-center

1. <https://www.apa.org/topics/trauma>

2. Sloover, M., Stoltz, S. E. M. J., & van Ee, E. (2024). Parent-Child Communication About Potentially Traumatic Events: A Systematic Review. *Trauma, violence & abuse*, 25(3), 2115–2127.