

How To Talk To Your Kids About Drugs and Alcohol

A Guide to Alcohol & Drug Prevention for Parents and Guardians



It's important to talk with your kids about alcohol and drugs early and often—not just once.

Research shows that kids who learn about the risks of drugs and alcohol from their parents are up to **50% less likely to use.**

These conversations don't have to be perfect. They just have to happen.

And the good news? You're already having teachable moments—this just gives them a little more purpose.

You are absolutely capable of having these conversations. Let's make them count.

What is your child going through?

Between ages 9 and 16, kids are navigating major physical, emotional, and social changes:

- **Brain development:** The decision-making and impulse control parts of the brain are still forming.
- **Body changes:** Puberty begins—bringing mood swings, new social pressures, and identity exploration.
- **Desire to belong:** Friends become central to self-esteem. Peer pressure can feel overwhelming.
- **Craving independence:** They want more freedom—but still need guidance and support.

These transitions can make them more curious about substances—or more vulnerable to experimenting.

How to show up in the conversation:

You don't have to be perfect—just present. Here's how to set the tone:

- **Be calm:** If you're anxious, your child will shut down.
- **Be honest:** Share your values, your experiences (if relevant), and the truth about risks.
- **Be nonjudgmental:** Listen more than you talk. Curiosity builds connection.
- **Be curious:** "What have you heard?" is more powerful than "Don't ever do this."
- **Be clear on your boundaries:** "In our family, we don't use alcohol or drugs at your age. Here's why..."

Boundaries = love and safety. Be consistent and compassionate.



Before you have the conversation:

Do a quick self-assessment: What is the intention in talking to your student? Am I here to scare them? What is my view of substance use? Am I looking for safe use or looking for abstinence? Is there an age limit? Am I ready to truly be open to hear them without snap judgement and reaction?



How to start the Conversation:

Teachable moments happen more often than you think. Look for everyday opportunities:



At a stoplight: You see someone under the influence—ask, “What do you think is happening?”



News or sports story: A famous athlete is arrested for driving under the influence —“Have you ever heard about what happens when someone drinks and drives?”



Billboards or ads: “What do you think they’re trying to make look cool?”



Overheard conversation: “Did you hear what they said? What are your thoughts on that?”

Make it age appropriate:

Elementary (around 5–8):

Relate to other unsafe items they know.

“We don’t touch things like wine or beer, just like we don’t touch cleaning supplies under the sink—they’re not safe for kids.”

Middle School (9–13):

Tie the risks to what they care about.

“Substances can mess with your body during puberty. If you get caught vaping, you could be kicked off your team—worth it?”

Tween/Teen (11–16):

Ask about their exposure.

“Have you seen kids at school vaping? It’s super common now. What have you heard about it?”

Any age, any time:

“Hey, if you ever feel curious or pressured about drugs or alcohol, you can always talk to me—no judgment.”

What If You Think Your Child Is Already Experimenting?

If you suspect use, stay calm and curious.

Typical Behaviors versus Warning Signs

- | | |
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| ▪Withdrawing from family to spend more time with friends | ▪Withdrawing from friends, family, and social activity |
| ▪Wanting more privacy | ▪Becoming secretive; need for privacy, seems to be hiding something |
| ▪Moving from childhood likes to teen pursuits | ▪Loss of interest in favorite activities and not replacing with others |

How to respond:

- “I’ve noticed some changes. I’m not mad—I’m just worried. Can we talk about it?”
- “What does it do for you? What does it help with?”
- Reaffirm your boundaries: “It’s still not okay with me—but I want to understand what’s going on.”



Your child may be testing limits, numbing pain, or trying to fit in. Help them feel seen—and get support if needed.

Need more info?

If you have questions about how to talk to your kids, or if you or a loved one needs support with substance use:



816-361-5900



www.firstcallkc.org

Together, let’s end the addiction crisis—one conversation at a time.

first call
Let's end the addiction crisis, together.