



# Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Prevention for Young Children

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As young children grow older, the challenges they face in life become more serious. Parents and other adults may become increasingly concerned about children's safety.

This publication addresses the topics of alcohol, tobacco and other drug prevention, and how to guide children in growing up healthy and drug-free.

## Young Children and Drug Prevention

Children and youth are often delightful, entertaining and just plain interesting to be around. "Dull moments" are rare with children, especially young children. Yet as children grow older, the challenges they may face in life become more serious. Parents and other caring adults may become increasingly concerned about the influence of these challenges. What are some of these difficult issues?

- Sexual maturation and behavior
- Underage drinking or drug use
- Fighting or aggression
- Damage of property or theft
- Depression and anxiety

These are issues that become serious only in adolescence, right? Wrong. The foundations for healthy development throughout childhood are laid in a child's early years. Among the most important topics for parents to address is the issue of alcohol, tobacco and other drug prevention. Helping children grow up healthy and drug-free is a worthy goal of healthy childhood.

Parents would be unwise to think they can wait until adolescence to begin talking with their children about usage of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. A child's values and beliefs are formed in the early years of childhood. Parents should discuss these issues with their children from an early age, and share ideas and values that will help them make healthy decisions as they grow older.

The prevention of alcohol, tobacco and other drug usage begins with the message that parents and adults share with children about these topics. Some schools offer drug prevention programs that begin in the earliest grades. However, schools alone cannot carry the burden of prevention efforts. Parents and other adults need to actively discourage drug use and be aware of signals that children may be involved with drugs. Begin thinking now about the message you wish to share with your children and how you will teach them to make healthy life decisions. Talking with children allows you to:

- Speak clearly about family values and beliefs
- Provide opportunities to discuss good decision making
- Focus on your child's abilities and strengths
- Promote a strong message about expectations and behavior
- Aid your child in finding a place of belonging in the family

## Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs

Methamphetamine. Heroin. Cocaine. These are the drugs that most parents hear about and fear their children may be offered on the street or playground. Yet most children do not begin using drugs by being exposed to or going directly to these "hard" drugs. Instead, most commonly children are exposed to and use more common but dangerous drugs: *alcohol* and *tobacco* (nicotine).

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## Media Messages and Young Children

Young children are targeted by advertisers at young ages. They often are exposed to media images that depict usage of tobacco, alcohol and other substances as “cool” or attractive or rebellious or fun.

Consider the influence of media messages sent to children through magazines, TV commercials, music, the Internet or other forms of mass communication. Ask yourself some of the following questions about a particular commercial or magazine ad that introduces the use of alcohol, tobacco or other substances:

- Is the advertisement trying to sell something to you? If so, what is it?

- Is that product healthy for you? Is it healthy for your children?
- How is the sponsor of the product trying to get you to purchase it? (feel unlovable, left out, unsuccessful, everybody does it, etc.)
- Does the ad promote or glamorize the use of alcohol, tobacco or other substances?
- How do you feel about being manipulated by the ad message?
- How do you think young children might be affected or manipulated by a particular ad message?

In modern society, taking drugs for ailments ranging from arthritis to headaches to cancer is common. Most of these drugs are legal. Yet they are not harmless. They often have side effects and some can be addictive with repeated use. Understanding that the use of drugs, even those that are common or legal, can have physical or mental effects that are potentially serious or hurtful is important for young children.

Two commonly used drugs, alcohol and tobacco (nicotine), are considered by many experts to act as “gateway” drugs. This means that their usage may act as a “gateway” for entering into the use of other types of drugs, including illegal drugs. If a person drinks a beer only occasionally or does not smoke, this may seem like a minor concern. However, research shows that young people commonly experiment with nicotine or alcohol prior to involvement with other types of drugs. Earlier experimentation and use is linked with stronger and earlier addiction to substances, so parents need to pay attention to children’s attitudes and behaviors regarding alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.

## Tobacco Use

Awareness about the hazards of tobacco smoking and chewing tobacco has not

diminished its usage significantly among teenagers. Reaching young children with public messages that discourage tobacco use is important. However, having parents and other adults decide what message they wish to give young children and then consistently sharing that perspective with their children is even more important.

Tobacco usage raises concerns because it is perhaps the most common drug that children have exposure to at young ages and it can have serious health effects. Further, it may, at times, lead toward usage of other drugs of a serious nature. The status of nicotine as a “gateway” drug has been commented on by Gleason and Driscoll (1998):

*“It is virtually impossible to find a young person who smokes but does not use alcohol. Many young people drink and do not smoke, but few smoke and do not drink. Most people, even youngsters, recognize that smoking is a very serious health risk. But if they are willing to smoke, the risk of using alcohol is an easy next step. And because smokers are risk-takers, they are probably the most likely to take the next step toward illegal drug use, starting with marijuana (p. 6).”*

Parents need to be aware of the messages their children receive that encourage tobacco use and do their

best to emphasize the risks of nicotine usage. Additionally, parents ought to discuss not only the health risks but other social impacts of using tobacco, such as discoloring your teeth, affecting how you smell (clothes, hair, breath, etc.) and influencing the health of others (secondhand smoke, etc.).

## Alcohol Use

Alcohol is another serious and potentially addicting “gateway” drug. Wide exposure to alcohol use means that this is perhaps the most likely drug of choice for young people. It is sold widely and linked to eating out, sports activities, celebrations or parties and many other types of activities. In addition, advertising about alcohol constantly suggests that those who drink beer or other beverages will be happier, more successful and more attractive. Children see these images and too often fail to learn the negative consequences associated with alcohol use.

Children who are exposed to messages about alcohol begin to form their impressions and opinions at a very early age. According to Laura DeHaan:

*“Children form opinions about drugs and alcohol at a very early age. Even four- and five-year-olds have definite opinions about alcohol. Preschoolers, because of the commercials they see on TV, often think that alcohol helps people have more fun and be better athletes! Images of alcohol are everywhere in our society — consumption of alcohol is depicted twice per hour in daytime shows, and three times in an average evening program.” (DeHaan, 1998, p. 1)*

Although alcohol is widely available and advertised constantly, many parents do not know how to discuss it with their children or feel uncomfortable in doing so. Or they think that drinking alcohol is something that their own children never would do. Parents and other adults should help young children by establishing clear standards and expectations about alcohol use.

Taking steps to help children form positive views of themselves and avoid the use of alcohol and tobacco will help

them grow up less likely to use other drugs. Parents should discuss their feelings and views together and decide what standards and values regarding usage of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs they wish to transmit to their children.

## Conclusion

Helping young children avoid the difficulties associated with alcohol, tobacco and other drugs is an important topic of discussion for parents and other adults. Additionally, having tools to assist in teaching young children to be drug-free, safe and healthy is vital. Raising young children to grow up drug-free and be able to make responsible choices is critical to our future and theirs.

## Responding to Children's Questions About Drugs

Young children are especially curious and may ask a variety of questions about alcohol, tobacco and drug use. Considering how you might respond to such questions is important.

Think about the following scenarios and the child's question in each circumstance. How would you respond to the question? What are a variety of effective responses you could give? Discuss your potential responses with another parent or adult.

### Scenario One

You are watching a television program with your 6-year-old son and a scene of a group of teenage boys drinking beer at a party comes on. You comment that drinking all that beer could make you sick. Your son asks:

*Why would people want to put it into their bodies if they might get sick?*

### Scenario Two

A national news magazine comes to your home and has a cover story on a new drug being used for cancer treatment. Your 7-year-old daughter has you explain the topic and then asks you:

*Why are some drugs good for you and some drugs wrong for you to take?*

### Scenario Three

You and your spouse are visiting with friends one night after your children have been put to bed. Each of you is sipping a glass of wine or other alcoholic beverage. Your 4-year-old son comes down the stairs for a glass of milk, then asks:

*Why can't I taste that "grown-up" drink?*

### Scenario Four

After a lesson on drug prevention at school and learning about different drugs, your 8-year-old asks you:

*Did you smoke marijuana when you were growing up?*

## Recommended Resources

### ■ Books and Publications

Califano, Jr., J.A. (2009). *How to Raise a Drug-Free Kid: The Straight Dope for Parents*. New York: Fireside Books, Simon and Schuster Inc.

*A valuable and instructive "how-to" guide on engaging children in relationships, talking to them in meaningful ways about drugs, and providing support and guidance in making life choices to avoid alcohol, tobacco and drug challenges.*

Kuhn, C., Swartzwelder, S., and Wilson, W. (2002). *Just Say Know: Talking with Kids About Drugs and Alcohol*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

*Practical and engaging book that instructs parents on how to talk with children about drugs, informs them about drugs and their properties, and shares insight on how to understand if children are experiencing difficulties with drugs.*

Mothers Against Drunk Driving. (2002). *Protecting You/Protecting Me: An Underage Alcohol Use Prevention Curriculum for Grades 1-5*. Irving, Texas: Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

*An extensive curriculum that provides an excellent resource on alcohol and drug prevention targeted at children in the first through sixth grades. Excellent for teachers, school counselors, etc. May be ordered through Mothers Against Drunk Driving at 511 E. John Carpenter Freeway, Suite #700, Irving, TX 75062, or by calling (214) 744-6233. May also be ordered online at [www.madd.org](http://www.madd.org) or at [www.pyppm.org](http://www.pyppm.org).*

Partnership for a Drug-Free America. (2005). *Growing Up Drug-Free: A Parent's Guide to Prevention*. New York: Partnership for a Drug-Free America.

*Outstanding resource for parents on helping children grow up drug-free. Developed by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America on behalf of the U.S. Department of Education. Copies may be ordered by calling the Department of Education's toll-free number: (877) 4EDPUBS. Full text also is available on the Internet at [www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SDFS](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SDFS), or more directly at [www.drugfree.org/Files/Parents\\_Guide](http://www.drugfree.org/Files/Parents_Guide).*

Pedro, J., Lecca, T., and Watts, D. (1993). *Preschoolers and Substance Abuse: Strategies for Prevention and Intervention*. New York: Haworth Press.

*Insightful and useful book on strategies for drug use prevention with young children.*

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2004). *Keeping Youth Drug Free*. DHHS Publication No. (SMA)-3772. Rockville, Md.: Center for

Substance Abuse Prevention, Substance and Mental Health Services Administration, Department of Health and Human Services.

*A valuable guide to discussing alcohol, tobacco and other drug prevention with children. Excellent for parents and other adult caregivers. Copies of this publication may be obtained, free of charge, from the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI), by calling (301) 468-2600, (800) 729-6686 or TDD (800) 487-4889. This publication also can be accessed electronically at [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov).*

Wilmes, David A. (1998). *Parenting for Prevention: How to Raise a Child to Say No to Alcohol and Drugs*. Center City, Minn.: Hazelden Information and Educational Services.

*A helpful and informative book for parents and other adults on teaching life skills to young children and avoiding difficulties with alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.*

## ■ Web Sites and Organizations

**Hazelden Foundation.** A highly respected foundation that distributes educational materials and self-help literature on quitting alcohol, tobacco and drugs. Located in Minnesota, interested individuals may call (800) 257-7810 for general information or (800) 328-9000 for literature and resources. Information also can be obtained by visiting the Web site at [www.hazelden.org](http://www.hazelden.org).

**Partnership for a Drug-Free America.** A national leader among organizations in working to reduce alcohol, tobacco and other drug use. Information can be obtained by visiting the Web site at [www.drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org).

## Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program.

The primary vehicle of the federal government for preventing drug use among youth. This agency gives funding for school-based education and prevention activities. Further information can be accessed at [www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osdfs/index.html](http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osdfs/index.html).

## Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)/ National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI).

A resource that provides a wide variety of federal government publications dealing with alcohol and other drug use. Call at (800) SAY-NOTO (729-6686) or access further information on the Web site at [www.health.org](http://www.health.org).

## Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)/ Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP).

A division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that provides a wide variety of resources and information on science-based prevention strategies and programs. Call at (301) 443-0365 or access further information at <http://prevention.samhsa.gov/>.

**The Anti-Drug.com.** The Anti-Drug.com is a project of the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign, administered by the Office of National Drug Control Policy of the federal government. The media campaign and Web site equip parents, teens and other adults with information and resources to prevent and reduce alcohol, tobacco and other drug use. Further information can be obtained at [www.theantidrug.com](http://www.theantidrug.com).

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