



# Practical Strategies in Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Prevention for Young Children

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What can parents and other adults do with young children to prevent use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs? Parents and caregivers have a number of things they can do to help young children prepare to make good choices.

This publication offers suggestions for parents and other adults to consider as they guide young children in learning to make healthy choices regarding alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.

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## Reasons Young People Give for Drug Use

Adults need to understand the reasons why children may consider drug use or be open to drinking alcohol or smoking. Children and youth suggest a variety of reasons for using alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. However, some are more common than others. Select suggestions from the list below and try to identify the "Top 5" reasons that young people give for drug use.

### Top 5 Reasons Given by Youth for Drug Use

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

### List of Reasons

- To get a good "buzz"
- To answer an invitation from a friend to have a good time
- To feel grown up
- To find lasting happiness
- To increase control over my life and my activities
- To do something fun away from the influence of family members
- To get away from and forget about my problems
- To satisfy curiosity about what use of drugs or alcohol is like
- To relax from stress and feel good
- To try something that seems OK, according to what you see in movies and on television
- To fit in and belong
- To help me feel more masculine or more feminine
- To help me achieve my goals
- To get rid of personal doubts about myself
- To take risks and rebel
- To become more athletic or fit
- To do something that I've never done before

Discuss the selections you have made and explain your choices to another adult. Compare your responses if possible.

## What Parents and Other Adults Can Do

According to the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, young people give five primary reasons for using alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. The five reasons young people primarily give are:

- *To feel grown up*
- *To fit in and belong*
- *To relax and feel good*
- *To take risks and rebel*
- *To satisfy curiosity*

Parents and other adults need to think carefully about these reasons and how they respond appropriately and effectively to each of them. This publication offers a variety of ideas that parents may use in helping children understand and select healthy choices; however, these ideas are only suggestions, and parents also may need to do other things based on their judgment and circumstances.

## To Feel Grown Up

Children may feel that use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs will make them feel more “grown up.” Ideas for dealing with this issue include:

- **Encourage children to talk about what alcohol, tobacco and other drugs are and what part they play in your family.** Parents do not always need to begin the discussion of these topics, but they do need to be open to the questions or comments of young children. Also, they need to acknowledge questions from young children as an opportunity for communication about this important topic.
- **Carefully examine your own values regarding usage of alcohol and other drugs.** With young children around, considering your own values and what you wish to communicate about alcohol, tobacco and other drug usage is important. When, if ever, is drinking permissible in your family? Making decisions about whether alcohol and/or tobacco use is acceptable, as well as the frequency and amount of use that is allowed for adults (who can use these products legally), will help present a clear message to your children. The messages you send should be given clearly and often. Also, parents should highlight the legal guidelines that prohibit the usage of these products by minors.
- **Create an environment where young children feel comfortable asking questions and discussing feelings.** As young children raise questions, knowing they are free to ask questions of you or share

their feelings in a positive, supportive environment is helpful for them. Invite their opinions to find out their thoughts on the topic. Avoid getting angry or defensive; remain calm and explain your responses clearly and patiently to young children in terms they can understand.

- **Understand that if you use alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, you are sending strong messages to young children.** Young children learn through observation and imitation of those around them who are role models. Role models for young children typically include mothers, fathers, stepparents, brothers and sisters, grandparents, other relatives, caregivers, teachers and even media personalities (sports celebrities, entertainers, etc.). Think about eliminating your use of such products and being clear about responsible use (of alcohol, prescription drugs, etc.).
- **Do not involve children in or expose them to messages that promote alcohol, tobacco and other drug use as “grown up.”** Help children understand that ads selling alcohol, tobacco and other products often portray a false image. Be careful not to involve children in any use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. The intent of ads promoting such products is to sell a product to individuals and make money from them. Research indicates that exposure to or usage of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs at younger ages is highly linked with more rapid and higher levels of substance addiction.

## To Fit in and Belong

Children may seek to use alcohol and other drugs to fit in with peers or get social approval. Ideas for dealing with this issue include:

- **Turn frustrating times into opportunities for learning.** Young children need to learn positive ways to react to frustration. If a tower of blocks keeps collapsing during a play session, work with the child to find possible solutions. Help children learn coping skills that will be a resource for them later in life, and teach children to make independent decisions without focusing on peer approval. Guide them to focus on how each decision will affect them and solving problems, rather than blaming others.
- **Express confidence in your child when he or she is helpful.** Boosting a child's self-confidence is always a good idea. Let him or her know you appreciate his or her efforts to help. Also, give your children manageable tasks to accomplish so they can gain mastery and feel good about themselves. As children feel more self-confident, they also feel less need to act in negative ways that focus on peer responses or social approval. Give your child a place to fit and belong within your family or setting based on love and respect.
- **Set aside regular times to give a child full attention.** There is no substitute for the minutes and hours spent with a child in building a positive relationship. Strong connections between parents and children help young people to avoid alcohol, tobacco and other drug use. Let children know they are too wonderful

to do drugs. Strong bonds will help children turn away from offers to use alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.

- **Help your child deal with peer pressure.** Young children need help knowing how to respond to negative invitations from others. Role model with them and practice how to respond effectively if offered alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. For example, suggest and role play responses to an invitation, such as, "No thanks, I'm really not interested" or "I won't take that because it's not healthy."
- **Aid your child in building social skills.** Children who are comfortable with others and themselves are less prone to "follow the crowd" or give in to negative peer pressure. Help your child build friendships, talk with others and feel comfortable in social situations.

## To Relax and Feel Good

Children may get into using alcohol, tobacco and other drugs to escape stress or deal with negative feelings. Ideas for dealing with this issue include:

- **Discuss with your child the joys of healthy living.** Help young children understand that healthy living is joyful and rewarding. It allows you to run, jump, laugh, play or work for hours. How good you feel and being healthy often is related to the positive, healthy choices you make.
- **Help children find positive ways to relieve stress.** These might include expressing your

feelings, focusing on good nutrition and exercise, taking time to read or rest, and talking with others. Children who learn healthy stress relief activities can avoid negative coping strategies such as alcohol, tobacco and other drug use.

- **Aid children in taking responsibility for their own health and well-being.** Young children can learn concrete approaches to taking care of themselves. Brushing teeth, putting away toys, doing chores, getting physical exercise – all of these activities can help children learn to be responsible. Taking responsibility for their own health can assist them in making good decisions relative to alcohol, tobacco and other drug use.
- **Learn to "read" each of your children and understand their cues when they are troubled and unhappy (being irritable, frustrated, withdrawn, etc.).** Responding to a child's cues when he or she needs support is important. Learning to trust their parents is helpful for young children when problems occur so they will seek assistance as needed. Turning to a trusted adult source for support is better than seeking an outlet such as alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.
- **Keep your child's life in balance.** Too much of a certain activity, such as watching TV or even doing chores, can lead to stress or negative patterns for a young child. Keep a balance between varied activities, and don't "overprogram" young children with too many stressful activities too soon. Children need a balance in their activities. Establish

routines with consistency and use realistic expectations in raising children instead of programming their activities so they will be like miniature adults.

- **If consistent with the beliefs of your family, involve your child in religious activities.** Research indicates that religious involvement leads to fewer risky behaviors and higher levels of self-esteem for adolescents. Foundations for such involvement are best started in a child's early years.

## To Take Risks and Rebel

Children may become involved in the use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs to take risks and rebel against rules or expectations. Ideas for dealing with this issue include:

- **Encourage your child to develop decision-making skills.** Letting young children make small decisions helps them develop skills of their own. Whenever possible, let them choose what to wear or give them options from which to choose. This reinforces a child's decision-making ability and also aids him or her in understanding choice and consequences. For example, in providing a snack, ask, "Would you like an apple or an orange?" and allow the child to choose. Further, encourage children to pursue positive opportunities, such as joining the art club or getting involved in a sports team.

- **Provide guidelines such as rules that apply to all family members and enforce them with appropriate consequences.** Clear rules about behavior based on age-appropriate expectations with clear consequences let young children know what is expected of them. Those rules also provide guidance about appropriate versus inappropriate behavior. Parents have a responsibility to set clear boundaries in areas where mistakes have lifetime consequences.
- **Know where your child is and who his or her friends are.** As children grow, peers and friends play an important role in influencing their behavior, attitudes and choices. By getting to know their friends and the parents of those friends, guiding children toward more positive influences that will be more helpful and avoid unhealthy decisions, such as using alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, is possible.

## To Satisfy Curiosity

Children may begin to use alcohol and other drugs to satisfy their curiosity about what those substances tastes like, how those substances make them feel or what effects the substances will have. Ideas for dealing with this issue include:

- **Aid your child in avoiding dangerous substances that are common all around him or her.** With young children, make them aware of harmful substances

around them, such as bleach, kitchen cleaners or other products (prescription drugs, etc.). Read the warning labels to your children and explain the severe consequences of products' misuse. Then explain to children that not all harmful substances or drugs have warning labels on them. Let your children know they should trust only you as a parent or other specified people to give them food or medicine. Explain also that drugs from a doctor are meant only for the person they are prescribed to, and that they can be harmful to others.

- **Teach children the difference between reality and fantasy.** Young children especially may not always perceive the difference between fantasy and the real world. Seek to understand your child's point of view. Ask your child what he thinks about a TV show or a story. Explain what you like and dislike about it. Discuss how use of drugs, being violent or making unhealthy decisions can hurt people in real life.
- **Get children the facts about the negative consequences of alcohol, tobacco and other drug use.** Children may maintain curiosity about harmful substances. Help them understand the real nature of such products and their negative effects, and many of the possible negative consequences that can result from their use.

## Risk and Protective Factors for Children

Research on children and risk behaviors has demonstrated that a variety of important risk and protective factors affect children, even at younger ages. For example, certain risk factors or challenges in the life of a child may increase the chances that he or she will engage in some kind of unhealthy behavior. Also, benefits or protective factors increase the chances for young people to feel better about themselves and be less involved in making unhealthy choices.

One of the strong findings in research on risk and protective factors is power of a positive, connected relationship between parent and child. Children who feel their parents are there for them, who understand and respect them, and who care enough to follow through with some limits on their behavior are less likely to use alcohol, tobacco and other drugs and more likely to get better grades and feel better about themselves.

As a parent or caring adult, take steps to improve the protective factors in the lives of young children while also reducing the risk factors that may influence their lives and development. Important factors associated with a variety of outcomes for youth are listed below (note that these are not exhaustive):

### Factors related to good grades

- Low levels of depression
- No or limited substance use
- Higher levels of self-esteem
- Involvement in extracurricular activities (4-H clubs, organized sports, etc.)

- Greater religious involvement
- On-time or late puberty development
- Family support and involvement

### Factors related to delinquency

- Higher reported isolation (feeling distant or separated from others, especially parents)
- Drug and/or alcohol use
- Higher levels of depression
- Poor or troubled relationship with parents
- Age-inappropriate chores at home (such as cooking meals for the entire family or providing child care on a daily basis)
- Association with negative peers

### Factors related to alcohol, tobacco and other drug use

- Higher reported isolation (feeling distant or separated from others, especially parents)
- Higher levels of delinquency
- Higher levels of depression or anxiety
- Poor or troubled relationship with parents
- Spending more time with peers
- Age-inappropriate chores at home (such as cooking meals for the entire family or providing child care on a daily basis)
- Higher usage of TV or computer
- Early pubertal development

### Factors relating to loneliness and lower self-esteem

- Less identity development (less sure of who they are)
- Dissatisfaction with personal appearance
- Lower frequency of religious involvement
- Poor or troubled relationship with parents
- Economic hardship

### Factors relating to depression

- Higher sense of isolation (feeling distant or separated from others, especially parents)
- Poor or troubled relationship with parents
- Lower level of identity development
- Higher usage of TV or computer
- Dissatisfaction with personal appearance
- Economic hardship
- Higher involvement in alcohol, tobacco and other drug use and delinquency

## Conclusion

Alcohol, tobacco and other drug prevention begins when children are in their early years. For example, from birth, ensuring the safety of children and not leaving an infant or toddler with someone under the influence of alcohol and other drugs is important for parents. Preventing exposure to tobacco smoke is another example of how parents need to consider the health and well-being of the young children in their care.

The messages that parents and other adults send and reinforce about using any of these substances frame how a child will think, feel and act about alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. A variety of helpful tools are available to assist in teaching young children to be drug-free, safe and healthy. Children who grow up to make responsible and healthy choices for themselves and others will create a bright and positive future.

## 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. Also may 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 to 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 through 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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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.

*The messages that parents and other adults send and reinforce about using substances such as alcohol, tobacco and other drugs will shape the ideas and choices that young children make in being drug-free, healthy and safe.*



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