

Five Things You Can Do to Help Your Child Stay Substance-Free During Adolescence

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Parents often think that they exhibit less and less influence over the lives of their children as the children become teens. You too may think that you now take a back seat to your child's peer influences and friends. Rather, parents are still a vital part of a teenager's life .

Research strongly supports the fact that parents play a meaningful and continuing role in shaping an adolescent's behavior, including his or her decision to use or not use drugs. Studies have identified five keys for parents who seek to raise a substance-free teen. There is, of course, no guarantee that a child will not use drugs. But these five strategies can increase the likelihood of raising a healthy teenager.

Healthy Parenting Skills

Below are five strategies have been shown to help prevent initiation of substance use or to help an adolescent in recovery not return to substance use. If you suspect your child may be at-risk for using drugs or has used drugs in the past, we encourage you to adopt these five strategies in your everyday life. If you already do these things as part of your parenting, then this information should strengthen your commitment to your teenager.

Strategy 1: Monitoring

One of the most consistent and robust findings in adolescent drug prevention literature is the strong association between parental monitoring and a lower risk for drug use among children. It's simple: The more effective monitoring and supervision of children, the lower the risk of their drug use. Let's look at what "monitoring" actually means.

Parental monitoring is defined as knowing the general whereabouts of your child at all times, *especially* when school is out for the day. As you might guess, a high-risk period for teen drug use takes place after school. Proper parental monitoring includes being aware of the activities in which your child is engaged and also being present during recreational events such as school sport activities. For many parents and guardians, attending school and sport events may be difficult, if not impossible. If you can't attend your child's school or recreational events, express your desire to your child that you wish you could attend the events, and continue knowing your child's whereabouts at all times.

Research shows that it is also very important to monitor your child's health and well-being in critical areas of functioning, such as academic performance and school connectedness. Parents should make every effort to strengthen a youngster's attachment to school and to promote academic success. Several studies have shown that school engagement (such as participation in extracurricular activities) and academic achievement are *strong protective factors* for prevention of drug involvement. "Protective factors" are things that protect and shelter your child from risks of drug use. Early academic problems and school failure are among the strongest predictors of early drug use. The earlier a child uses drugs, the higher likelihood of that teen developing a serious substance use problem later in life.

Strategy 2: *Appropriate Role Modeling*

We don't need research to tell us that children imitate their parents. But we may need to be reminded that children imitate not only healthy behaviors but also unhealthy behaviors. This includes drug and alcohol consumption. One way to model healthy adult drinking behavior for your teen is by consuming small amounts of alcohol with a meal or under celebratory circumstances, such as your birthday. By modeling this type of behavior, your child will see you drink in a moderate way, without extremes, and not as a negative coping strategy when you're angry, extremely tired, or sad.

Speaking in an open way about alcohol is another healthy modeling behavior. Modeling openness can strongly influence your child's attitude. Talk openly with your child about your own use of alcohol and let your child talk freely about the use of drugs or alcohol he or she has seen and any opportunities to use he or she may have experienced at or after school.

Another area where it is important to model healthy behaviors is while regulating emotions and reacting to stress. These behaviors are indirectly linked to drug use. How you, as a parent and adult, cope with stressful situations or manage your emotions is visible to a child. Your child will learn to express stress and emotions by witnessing your behaviors.

Strategy 3: *Building a Warm and Supportive Relationship*

Children who have warm and supportive relationships with their parents are less likely to engage in drug use. As a result, it's especially important to establish a close relationship with your child early on in his or her development. Some studies have shown that weak parent-child bonds or early parental rejection begins a negative cycle of parent and child interactions.

For older adolescents, maintaining closeness remains important. One research study shows that a close relationship will make it easier and produce less conflict when the time comes for you to monitor your child's behavior and selection of peers more closely as the child ages. If your relationship with your child has been stormy for a long time, it's never too late to start a closer, more intimate and supportive relationship. Your child may have some ideas of his or her own on how to build such a relationship. Talk to your child and engage him or her in building and living a relationship that everyone in the family can be happier with.

The following characteristics are common in close relationships:

- discussing shared interests (such as sports or music)
- engaging in academic or extra-curricular activities together
- low levels of conflict when communicating
- working through challenges together
- honest and direct communication
- encouragement for achievements small and large)
- allowance for an appropriate degree of autonomy and independence
- teaching basic life skills (such as handling finances and dealing with unwanted peer pressures)

On the other hand, several studies show that family conflict and harsh discipline increase the risk for drug use.

Strategy 4: *Establishing Appropriate Parent-Child Communication*

Talking to your children about drugs and alcohol is important. Research studies show that two things happen when parents respectfully express disapproval of alcohol and other drug use: (1) there is a *decreased* risk of using and (2) there is a *reduced* likelihood that the teen will transition from experimentation to more regular or heavy drug use.

It is also important for parents to provide information to their children about the health and safety risks of drug use. As a parent or guardian, you need to keep yourself informed about new drug trends, such as the nonmedical use of prescription drugs and the use of medical marijuana. An effective tactic is to ask a child whether he or she has had the *opportunity* to try different types of drugs, rather than directly ask or challenge the child to see if he or she has used specific drugs. One study has shown that this strategy of gently inquiring about opportunities may elicit a more fruitful discussion.

Strategy 5: *Maintaining Awareness of Who Your Teen Affiliates*

The final component to discuss is the importance of peer influences on child risk behaviors. There is a wealth of research that supports the belief that a child's peer choices are often influenced by the very nature of the parent or parents' relationship to the child. Research has found that a teenager is more likely to affiliate with deviant and drug-using peers when the parent-child relationship is highly characterized by conflict.

Here are some practical strategies that may help you maintain awareness of your child's peer relationships:

- engage in light conversations about your child's peers (such as what activities they like, what their personalities are like, etc.)
- share information about your own friends and peers
- have direct conversations with your child's friends (an opportune time to have these conversations

is in a car, so if possible, offer to transport their friends)

- discuss the importance of peer choices and the role these choices play in social acceptance
- encourage your child to recognize and intervene when a friend might be having ^[1]_{SEP} difficulties
- establish communication with the parents of your child's closest peers in order to understand whether their household rules are similar or different, particularly regarding their attitudes and rules on providing alcohol to minors within the household