



Tips for Parents on Keeping Children Drug Free



U.S. Department of Education

Rod Paige
Secretary

Office of Intergovernmental and Interagency Affairs

Laurie M. Rich
Assistant Secretary

John McGrath
Senior Director, Community Services and Partnerships

Menahem Herman
Director, Educational Partnerships and Family Involvement Unit

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U.S. Department of Education
Educational Partnerships and Family Involvement Unit
400 Maryland Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20202-8173
Email: partner@ed.gov
Telephone: 1-800-USA-LEARN (1-800-872-5327)
FRS: 1-800-877-8339, 8 a.m.-8 p.m., ET, M-F

The information in this booklet was taken from the U.S. Department of Education's publication, *Growing Up Drug-Free: A Parent's Guide to Prevention* (1998) and the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy's *Juveniles and Drugs—Overview* (2002).

This booklet was published by the U.S. Department of Education to make evidence-based drug prevention information easily available to parents, caregivers and others working to ensure that children are growing up drug free.



“It is essential that our parents understand that they’re the child’s most important teacher, and that the message of our parents must be unequivocal: don’t use drugs.”

—President George W. Bush

INTRODUCTION

Research shows that recent trends in youth drug use have stabilized; however, the rates of use remain at high levels. It has been shown that the earlier drug use is initiated, the more likely a person is to develop drug problems later in life. Youth substance abuse may lead to many other problems that affect not only the child, but also the child’s family and community.

Parents are the most important role models in their children’s lives. What you say and do about drugs matters a lot when it comes to the choices your children make. You can:

- ✦ set a positive example and get involved in your children’s lives;
- ✦ get involved in their activities, know their friends and know where they’re going and what they’re doing;
- ✦ create clear, consistent expectations and enforce them;
- ✦ talk early and often about drugs;
- ✦ discuss the consequences of drug use; and
- ✦ show you care enormously about what choices your children make about drugs.

Children learn by example. They adopt the values you demonstrate through your actions. The tips contained within this booklet will help you to lead by example and provide you with tips for keeping your child drug free. This booklet covers such important topics as:

- ✦ How to help your preschool children make good decisions as they form attitudes about drug use;
- ✦ What your children should know about drugs by the time they reach the third grade;
- ✦ Ways to help your child stay drug free in the middle and junior high school years; and
- ✦ How to ensure your child’s school is keeping students drug free.





TIPS FOR YOUR PRESCHOOL CHILD

It may seem premature to talk about drugs with preschoolers, but the attitudes and habits that they form at this age have an important bearing on the decisions they will make when they are older. At this early age, they are eager to know and memorize rules, and they want your opinion on what's "bad" and what's "good." Although they are old enough to understand that smoking is bad for them, generally they are not ready to take in complex facts about alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. Nevertheless, this is a good time to practice the decision-making and problem-solving skills that they will need later on.

Here are some ways to help your preschool children make good decisions about what should and should not go into their bodies:

- ★ Discuss why children need healthy food. Have your child name several favorite good foods and explain how these foods contribute to health and strength.
- ★ Set aside regular times when you can give your son or daughter your full attention. Get on the floor and play with your child; learn about his or her likes and dislikes; let your child know that you love him; say that he or she is too wonderful and unique to take drugs. You'll build strong bonds of trust and affection that will make turning away from drugs easier in the years to come.
- ★ Provide guidelines like playing fair, sharing toys and telling the truth so children know what kind of behavior you expect from them.
- ★ Encourage your child to follow instructions and to ask questions if he does not understand the instructions.
- ★ When your child becomes frustrated at play, use the opportunity to strengthen problem-solving skills. For example, if a tower of blocks keeps collapsing, work together to find possible solutions. Turning a bad situation into a success reinforces a child's self-confidence.
- ★ Whenever possible, let your child choose what to wear. Even if the clothes don't quite match, you are reinforcing your child's ability to make decisions.
- ★ Point out poisonous and harmful substances commonly found in homes, such as bleach, kitchen cleanser and furniture polish, and read the products' warning labels out loud. Explain to your children that not all "bad" drugs have warnings on them, so they should only eat or smell food or a prescribed medicine that you, a grandparent or a caregiver provides them.
- ★ Explain that prescription medications are drugs that can help the person for whom they are meant but that can harm anyone else, especially children, who must stay away from them unless they are prescribed properly for them.



TIPS FOR YOUR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILD

A child this age usually shows increasing interest in the world outside the family and home. Discuss how anything you put in your body that is not food, water or juice can be extremely harmful, and how drugs interfere with the way our bodies work and can make a person very sick or even cause them to die. (Most children of this age have had real-life experiences with the death of a relative or a friend's relative.) Explain the idea of addiction—that drug use can become a very bad habit that is hard to stop. Praise your children for taking good care of their bodies and avoiding things that might harm them.

By the time your children are in third grade, they should understand that:

- ★ foods, poisons, medicines and illegal drugs differ;
- ★ medicines prescribed by a doctor and administered by a responsible adult may help during illness but can be harmful if misused, and therefore children need to stay away from any unknown substance or container; and
- ★ adults may drink in moderation but children may not, even in small amounts because it's harmful to children's developing brains and bodies.

Before leaving elementary school, your children should know:

- ★ the *immediate* effects of alcohol, tobacco and drug use on different parts of the body, including coma and death;
- ★ the *long-term* consequences of drug use, including addiction and loss of control of one's life;
- ★ the reasons why drugs are especially dangerous for growing bodies; and
- ★ the problems that alcohol and other illegal drugs cause not only to the user, but to the user's family and the world.

Questions elementary school children frequently ask about drugs:

- ★ Why would people want to put bad things in their bodies?
 - ☆ One answer might be that they might not realize how dangerous the bad things are; another is that they are not taking care of themselves. Sometimes people start using a drug just to see what it feels like, but it can turn into an addiction (like cigarettes) and it's very hard to stop using it.
- ★ Why can't I taste that "grown-up" drink?
 - ☆ A small amount of alcohol has a much greater negative effect on a child's body than on an adult's; even a small amount can sicken a child.





TIPS FOR YOUR MIDDLE SCHOOL OR JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL CHILD

The year your child enters middle school or junior high school is both an exciting and a challenging time. They are little fish in a big pond and often want desperately to fit in. Because your children may now see older students using alcohol, tobacco and other drugs and may think they are cool and self-assured, your children may be tempted to try drugs too. Drug use goes up dramatically in the first year of middle school or junior high.

To help your children make good choices during this critical phase, you should:

- ★ Make sure they are well-versed in the reasons to avoid alcohol, tobacco and drugs;
- ★ Get to know their friends by taking them to and from after-school activities, games, the library and movies (while being sensitive to their need to feel independent);
- ★ Volunteer for activities where you can observe your child at school; and
- ★ Get acquainted with the parents of your children's friends and learn about their children's interests and habits. If it seems that your child is attracted to those with bad habits, reiterate why drug use is unacceptable.

To make sure that your child's life is structured in such a way that drugs have no place in it, you should:

- ★ If possible, arrange to have your children looked after and engaged in the after-school hours if you cannot be with them. Encourage them to get involved with reputable youth groups, arts, music, sports, community service and academic clubs.
- ★ Make sure children who are unattended for periods during the day feel your presence. Give them a schedule and set limits on their behavior. Give them household chores to accomplish. Enforce a strict phone-in-to-you policy. Leave notes for them around the house. Provide easy-to-find snacks.
- ★ Get to know the parents of your child's friends. Exchange phone numbers and addresses. Agree to forbid each others' children from consuming alcohol, tobacco and other drugs in their homes, and pledge that you will inform each other if one of you becomes aware of a child who violates this pact.
- ★ Call parents whose home is to be used for a party. Make sure they can assure you that no alcoholic beverages or illegal substances will be dispensed. Don't be afraid to check out the party yourself to see that adult supervision is in place.
- ★ Make it easy for your child to leave a place where substances are being used. Discuss with your child in advance how to contact you or another designated adult in order to get a ride home. If another adult provides the transportation, be available to talk to your child about the situation when he or she arrives home.
- ★ Set curfews and enforce them. Weekend curfews might range from 9 p.m. for a fifth-grader to 12:30 a.m. for a senior in high school.
- ★ Encourage open dialogue with your children about their experiences. Tell your child, "I love you and trust you, but I don't trust the world around you, and I need to know what's going on in your life so I can be a good parent to you."



TIPS ON HOW TO ENSURE YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL IS KEEPING STUDENTS DRUG FREE

Children have the best prospects for leading healthy, drug-free lives when schools support parents in their anti-drug message. There should be nothing confusing or contradictory in what children learn about drugs from the adults in their lives, and school policies need to reflect the same attitude toward alcohol and drugs that you express at home: Drug use is not acceptable. Drugs diminish a child's ability to concentrate and follow through on academic responsibilities, they cause absenteeism and loss of motivation, and students who use them can be disruptive and drain teachers' time and energy.

The best way to ensure that the anti-drug policies at your child's school are strong is to be involved. You can:

- ★ **Learn about the current policies regarding alcohol and other drugs at your child's school.** If there is no anti-drug policy in place, attend parent volunteer or curriculum review meetings, or schedule an interview with the principal to help develop a policy. The policy should specify what constitutes an alcohol, tobacco or other drug offense, spell out the consequences for failing to follow the rules, and describe procedures for handling violations.
- ★ **Familiarize yourself with drug education in your child's school.** Faculty members should be trained to teach about alcohol, tobacco and other drug use. Drug education should be taught in an age-appropriate way at each grade level throughout the year rather than only once during a special week. Drug education may be taught during health class, but all teachers should incorporate anti-drug information into their classes. There should be a parent education component. The school's program should be based on current research. Depending on the drug education conditions at your child's school, you may want to become more involved and inform the school administrators that there is a need for improvements in these areas.
- ★ **Immerse yourself in the school's drug education program at home.** Ask your child to show you any materials distributed during or outside class and take the opportunity to review them together.
- ★ **Find out if your child's school conducts assessments of its drug problem and whether these results are used in the program.**
- ★ **Ask what happens to those who are caught abusing drugs.** Does the school offer a list of referrals for students who need treatment?
- ★ **Request and examine any existing materials.** Do they contain a clear message that alcohol, tobacco and other drug use is wrong and harmful? Is the information accurate and up to date?
- ★ **Investigate whether your school's drug program is being evaluated for success.** Research indicates that some of the most effective programs emphasize the value of life skills such as coping with anxiety, being assertive and feeling comfortable socially. When these lessons are combined with drug education, students confronted with drugs are better equipped to resist them.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Federal Resources:

- ★ The Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools is one of the federal government's primary vehicles for preventing drug use and violence among youth. For the latest publications on keeping kids safe and drug free, call toll-free 1-877-433-7827. For online resources, visit www.ed.gov/offices/OSDFS.
- ★ The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy provides brochures and other free resources for parents. Visit www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov or call toll-free 1-800-666-3332.
- ★ The National Institute on Drug Abuse offers information on the effects of drug abuse. Visit www.drugabuse.gov/NIDAHome.html or call 301-443-1124.
- ★ The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration provides resources on the prevention and treatment of substance abuse and mental illnesses. Visit www.samhsa.gov for more information.
- ★ No Child Left Behind (see next page). For the latest information on how schools will be held accountable for keeping kids safe and drug free, visit www.NoChildLeftBehind.gov or call toll-free 1-888-814-NCLB.

Below are examples of nonprofit organizations that may have useful information. Other local and national nonprofit organizations may also have useful resources.

- ★ National Crime Prevention Council works to prevent crime and drug use by providing parents and children with audio-visual materials, reproducible brochures and other publications. They can be found by visiting www.npcpc.org or by calling 202-466-6272.
- ★ National Center for Missing and Exploited Children posts the latest information on keeping children safe at www.missingkids.com/. This information can also be accessed by calling toll-free, 1-800-THE-LOST.
- ★ Partnership for a Drug-Free America offers resources to help kids fight substance abuse at www.drugfreeamerica.org. Call 212-922-1560 for more information.



NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

On January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. This new law represents his education reform plan and contains the most sweeping changes to the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* since it was enacted in 1965. It changes the federal role in education by asking America's schools to describe their success in terms of what each student accomplishes. The act contains the president's four basic education reform principles:

- ✦ Stronger accountability for results;
- ✦ Local control and flexibility;
- ✦ Expanded options for parents; and
- ✦ An emphasis on effective and proven teaching methods.

In sum, this law—in partnership with parents, communities, school leadership and classroom teachers—seeks to ensure that every child in America receives a great education and that no child is left behind.

For more information about *No Child Left Behind*, or to sign up for *The Achiever* newsletter full of announcements, events and news, visit www.NoChildLeftBehind.gov. For questions about the U.S. Department of Education and its programs, call 1-800-USA-LEARN.



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Philip Rosenfelt

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John McGrath, *Senior Director, Community Services and Educational Partnerships*, Menahem Herman, *Director, Educational Partnerships and Family Involvement Unit*,

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Jacquelyn Zimmermann

