



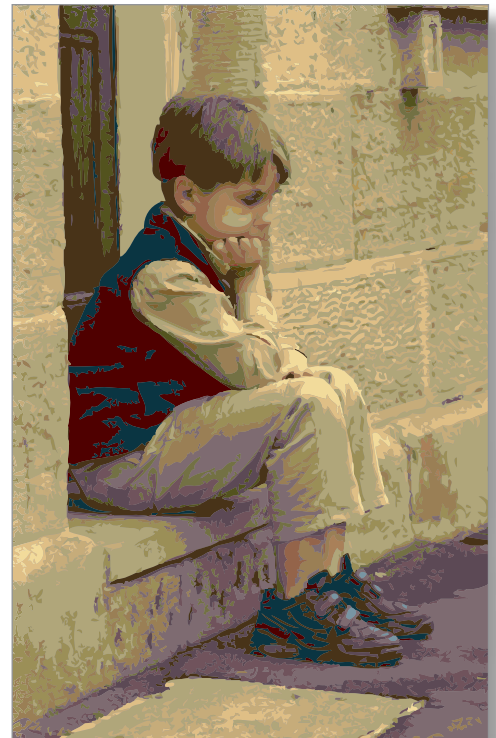
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# Talking to your child about substance use

**With your child in elementary school, you already know your role as a parent involves more than just getting your child clothed, fed, and off to the bus in the mornings. There's also homework to help with, and physical and emotional changes in your child to watch for. And, sometimes, there are tough questions to answer about issues involving friendship, sexuality, and morality.**

Substance use is another matter that's certain to come up during the elementary school years. Whether the topic arises from something your child sees on TV, a school project, or a visit to a friend's house, your child is going to start having questions about tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs.

For some parents, the idea of talking about substance use is daunting. Deciding what to say and when to say it is one issue. Then there's the question of how much information is "too much" for a young child. To help you communicate effectively with your child about substance use, here are some guidelines to consider.



## What to say (and not say) about substance use

### **Answer your child's questions simply and honestly.**

When your child asks you a question, give them a straight answer. If they want to know what alcohol is for, say, "Drinking helps people relax and have fun. But some people need alcohol to cope with daily life." If they want to know why people smoke, explain that tobacco contains addictive properties that make it hard for people to quit, even when they don't want to smoke any more.

**Stick to the question at hand.** Avoid long explanations and stick to the question your child asks. There's no need to add anything to the conversation unless your child asks for more information. In other words, you don't have to tell your child things you don't want them to know or don't believe they're old enough to understand, such as your own history of substance use. Keep in mind, however, if you avoid talking about issues they're curious about, they may create questionable explanations that cause more problems than the truth.

**Use appropriate language and images.** If you're explaining something new, use words your child understands. And avoid using harsh images that can unnecessarily frighten or confuse a child. For example, if your child is very young, it's better to say, "Smoking makes you smell bad" than "Smoking causes cancer and can kill you." And while it's acceptable to explain that some people who drink alcohol do dangerous things, such as get into fights or drive drunk, it's best not to exaggerate and give the impression that all people who drink become alcoholics who live on the streets. As your child gets older, you can provide more thorough or detailed explanations of substance-related harms.

### **Even preschoolers have questions about substances.**

For example, they may want to know why people are standing outside buildings to smoke cigarettes, or why two people are arguing loudly on the street. If your preschooler asks you questions, offer simple, honest explanations, and use language they understand.

## When to talk (and not talk) about substance abuse

**Take advantage of spontaneous opportunities.** Use every chance you get to talk to your child about substance-related issues. If you're drinking beer and your child wants to know what's in your hand, tell them it's alcohol, a drink that adults sometimes enjoy. If your child asks about an anti-smoking commercial on TV, explain that the pictures are meant to show how bad smoking is for a person's body.

**Communicate when you can give your child your full attention.** If your child asks you a tough question at a bad time of the day, such as when you're weaving through rush hour traffic, say, "That's a really good question. Let's talk about that when we get home." Showing a willingness to listen and respond lets your child know you're interested in their concerns. And putting the topic off until you're able to concentrate on the conversation shows they can trust you to make time for them when there's something important to discuss.

**Create opportunities to talk about things you think are important.** If you need to prepare your child for an event that involves substance use, such as a gathering that includes relatives who smoke cigarettes, try bringing up the subject through a game or activity. For example, you and your child could visit a health-related Web site made for kids, such as [www.aboutkidshealth.ca](http://www.aboutkidshealth.ca). After playing a game or two, you could talk about things that aren't good for your health, such as smoking. You could also explain that while everybody knows smoking is dangerous, some people have a hard time quitting because their bodies tell them they need to smoke.

# How to make sure your messages are getting through

**Practise good listening skills.** When your child needs to talk to you about something they've seen or heard, give your child your undivided attention. Listening attentively to your child's concerns and ideas will allow you to gauge their understanding of substance-related matters. Knowing what and how your child thinks will also help you prepare for future questions.

**Repeat, repeat, repeat!** While even the most patient parent can get frustrated hearing the same questions over and over again, your child will benefit from your continuous reinforcement of ideas and information about substances. Keep in mind that children cannot always absorb everything they learn the first time they hear it. The more often they hear important messages, the better.

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