

Preparing your young children for a healthy, drug-free future



Kids watch. Kids listen. Kids learn.

Massachusetts Department of Public Health
Bureau of Substance Abuse Services



You are your children's strongest role model. What you do and say makes a big impression on your children — and can help put them on a healthy drug-free path for life.

Children have ideas about substances — especially alcohol — coming at them from all directions. Ads, movies, TV shows, and music commonly show alcohol use, but almost never show the bad things that can happen. In addition, parents, other adults, and the larger community are sending messages about alcohol and other substances. All of these messages can influence children who are forming beliefs about alcohol and other drugs.

The good news is that your children are at an ideal age for you to protect them from future substance misuse.

The tips in this booklet have been gathered from studies that look at what helps children to do well. You may already be doing many of the things that protect your children, but it is always helpful to learn as much as you can about keeping your children away from alcohol and other drugs.



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Children whose parents talk with them about substance misuse are much less likely to use drugs.

Alcohol and inhalants

Alcohol and inhalants are sometimes tried at young ages. Many people do not realize how damaging they can be. This is why setting rules about alcohol and inhalants before middle school is so important.

Misusing inhalants means breathing gas or vapors on purpose to get high. It is illegal to use inhalants in this way. Inhalants are found in over 1,000 common household, school, and industrial products. Inhalants can include glues, fuels, cleaners, paint thinners, Freon, and anything in an aerosol can. The elementary years are an ideal time to make it clear to your children that they should never put anything into their bodies unless it is given to them by a trusted adult. You can watch, and support them when you see them using these products carefully.

Few elementary-aged children are using alcohol. However, children of this age are heading into a time of change and may think about trying alcohol. By sending a clear message that it is harmful to young people parents, grandparents, and other caregivers can help put children on the path to a substance-free future.

Alcohol: The facts

Alcohol is especially harmful to children. Alcohol can damage the developing brain and cause learning problems. It is linked to behavior problems, depression, violence, and death, including suicide. The younger people are when they drink alcohol, the higher their chances of developing substance-related problems later in life.

Now is your opportunity to help your children learn healthy skills they can build on for the rest of their lives.



*"Kids pick up the good and
the bad."*

– MASSACHUSETTS PARENT

Modeling healthy alcohol-related behavior

Alcohol is legal for adults over 21 years old. The media may show people who drink alcohol in unrealistic ways. The damage that alcohol can cause is usually left out. Do your children see adults who use alcohol moderately or who choose not to drink? Alcohol affects youth's development and ability to make good decisions. For all these reasons, it's important to teach your children that alcohol should only be used by adults who choose to drink it.

What parents say — and especially what parents do — are some of the biggest factors influencing children's decisions now and in the future.

"If you as a parent witness something and you don't say anything, your kids will think it's OK. You have to acknowledge what is not right."

– MASSACHUSETTS PARENT

Cultural or religious customs may affect your family's beliefs about alcohol. Think about this as you set family rules and expectations about alcohol, and then you can explain this to your children.



Take Action

Here are some tips parents have found useful for showing their children how to make healthy choices:

- If you or other adults in your life use alcohol, use it moderately.
- Don't communicate to your children that alcohol is a way to relax or handle problems. Demonstrate other, healthier ways to relieve stress, such as exercising or talking things over with someone close to you.
- Like medications, alcohol should ideally be kept in a locked cabinet or box, starting when your children are very young.
- Be aware of how you talk about drinking alcohol. Don't tell stories that make drinking sound cool or funny.
- Never drink and drive, or ride in a car with a driver who has been drinking.
- When entertaining adults, provide alcohol-free beverages and food. Not serving anyone who's had too much to drink, and making plans for them to get home safely, send a strong message.
- If your children see someone using alcohol in an unhealthy way, you may need to explain it. See "When a family member or friend misuses substances" on page 30 for ideas.
- Your elementary school-aged children are aware of your attitudes related to teen drinking. Explain why you are against alcohol use by youth.

Protecting your children from inhalants

Like alcohol, inhalants are legal products and they are found in common household and office products, such as aerosol sprays. Other examples include some glues, fuels, gases, auto, cleaning, and beauty products. This can make inhalant prevention a challenge. Your children may hear about inhalants before you do.

Inhalants can cause serious short-term and long-term harm to children, including:

- Sores on the nose and face
- Accidental injuries
- Weight loss
- Damage to the liver, kidneys, and central nervous system
- Problems with judgment, reasoning, and long-term memory
- Addiction
- Even death, which can occur after the first or many uses

Some children start using inhalants as early as age 9 or 10.



Take Action

Right now is your best opportunity to reinforce the dangers of inhalants with your children:

- Model the proper use of household products.
- Read product labels and follow directions, such as using products in an area with plenty of fresh air.
- Don't talk with your children about the "high" inhalants may cause, and do not point out particular products that could be used as inhalants.
- Make sure they know the dangers caused by exposure to too much of a product.
- Supervise the use of any products that could be used as inhalants, and use water-based alternative products when possible.
- Keep household products that could be used as inhalants in a locked storage space, and check them regularly to make sure that your children have not used them.

MORE RESOURCES:

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health's "Parent's Guide to Preventing Inhalant Use" offers a list of safer products and ways to help protect your children. Download or order online at no charge at www.mass.gov/maclearinghouse or call toll-free: 1-800-952-6637 | TTY: Use MassRelay at 711 or 1-800-720-3480

New England Inhalant Abuse Prevention Coalition: Online resource to help parents prevent inhalant use.
www.inhalantabusetraining.org



Dealing with Questions about Marijuana

Children often become more curious about substances around the fourth and fifth grade. It is helpful to find out what they are hearing and make it clear that it is against the law to use marijuana for nonmedical reasons when you are under 21 years of age.

Marijuana use is related to the following issues:

- Youth who have used it heavily are less likely to achieve higher goals or dreams.
- Some studies have shown marijuana to be addictive, especially among those who start using it early or use it regularly.
- Youth who use marijuana regularly are more likely to report symptoms of chronic bronchitis than are nonsmokers.
- Marijuana affects the ability to drive safely, so children shouldn't ride with someone who has been using marijuana.

Ask your child:
"Do you know how marijuana
can hurt children's health?"

Involving children in fun activities can show them that they can enjoy themselves without using substances. You can help to set a tone that can extend into teen years and beyond.

Doctors and the American Heart Association have published articles saying that children, as well as pregnant women, should be protected from secondhand marijuana smoke. More research was recommended to find out more about how the smoke affects babies and children.

- Marijuana should be kept in a locked box or cabinet.
- Talk to your children about how you are concerned about them because you love them. Ask what they have heard about marijuana.
- It will be most powerful if they hear about the dangers from you.
- Explain to them that their bodies are still developing, so that's why you want to protect them from marijuana and marijuana smoke.
- Make sure they know that your rules about not using alcohol or inhalants also include marijuana.



Take Action

MORE RESOURCES:

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health's

www.mass.gov/parentpower website offers tips for talking to youth of different ages. Updates will be posted when new information is available.

Building strong communication with your children

Creating regular and open lines of communication on many topics is important for reducing your children's risk of substance misuse. Talk often about substances. Ask them about what they are hearing and tell them your expectations.

Here are some tips parents have found helpful for developing strong communication with children:

- Be a good listener. You can repeat what your children have said to be sure you understand.
- Ask open-ended questions that encourage conversation (rather than questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no).
- Take the chance to learn something new from your children. Listen without interrupting them, and ask them to explain slang or concepts that are new to you.

“Deep down inside, they may have some answers you haven’t even thought about.”

– MASSACHUSETTS PARENT

Many parents find one way to discuss the topic of substance use is to take advantage of “teachable moments,” like when it is shown in a news story, on TV, or in music. Here are some ideas for starting to talk:

- If a character on TV is using substances, ask, “Where do you think this person would really end up?” or “What do you think her family thinks?”
- If a tragic story involving substance use has been on the news, explain how substance misuse was involved and ask for your children’s thoughts.
- Use times of change to discuss substance misuse, such as starting in a new school, joining a new club, or starting a new activity. Make sure they know that most children don’t use alcohol or drugs. Talk about your children’s hopes and fears, the possibility that your children may be exposed to substance misuse, and how to handle it if they are. (See “Preparing your children to deal with peer pressure,” page 27.)
- Ask your children what they know about substances — particularly alcohol — and listen carefully. Take the opportunity to talk about your rules for not using alcohol while underage, and how it can affect doing the things they like to do.

These discussions do not need to be long. Being clear about your expectations and asking your children’s thoughts may take only a few moments. This can be when you’re taking them to school or other activities, or even when you’re doing household chores together.

“Ask your child, ‘How was your day?’ and don’t let them just say ‘OK.’ Ask what they did and what happened.”

– MASSACHUSETTS PARENT



MORE RESOURCES:

For more information on prevention for youth ages seven to seventeen, see the “Strengthening Families Program” DVD. This interactive DVD teaches youth skills and gives parents actions they can take with their children. Doing the fun activities with your children has been shown to help prevent substance misuse. Order online at no charge at

<http://massclearinghouse.ehs.state.ma.us/product/SA3516.html> or call toll-free: 1-800-952-6637 |

TTY: Use MassRelay at 711 or 1-800-720-3480

What if my children ask if I used substances?

It's natural to worry about this question, and it helps to consider what you want to say if it does come up. One way of handling the situation can be to keep the conversation focused on your children.

You can say something like:

- "Let's talk about what may come up — I'd like to hear what you think."

If your children insist on knowing about your substance use, you may not be comfortable answering the question until they're older. In that case, you can choose not to share your experiences. If your children know that you misused substances, you don't need to provide details. Instead, talk about the negative consequences.

You can answer by saying something like:

- "I smoked cigarettes when I was young, but we didn't know just how dangerous smoking was back then. If I had known, I never would have started, because it's addictive and very hard to quit. I'm glad I've quit now."

If you've never used substances, share this with your children. Tell them how you resisted peer pressure when you were younger, and why you made the decisions you did. Let them know how those decisions have made you a happier and healthier person.



"I teach my children by example."

– MASSACHUSETTS PARENT

Building caring relationships with your children

Now is a great time to build strong parent-child relationships that can help protect your children from substance misuse later. Teens who say they have an “excellent relationship” with either of their parents are less likely to use substances. Even if substance misuse runs in your family, strong parenting can help reduce the risk. This includes:

- Providing a caring and supportive family environment
- Having high expectations of your children
- Encouraging their goals for the future
- Reassuring them that scholarships for youth who work hard are often available (see page 32)
- Setting clear family rules and expectations about not using substances
- Giving praise, affection, and acceptance to your children, especially when they make good choices
- Offering help and support for emotional and day-to-day needs



Take Action

Here are some ideas for getting closer to your children:

- Spend at least 15 minutes each day doing something your children want to do, like talking, cooking a meal together, playing a game, or doing a craft project that your children choose.
- Get children involved with their unique cultural heritage. Studies have shown Latino children who felt a connection with their culture were happier and made healthier choices, for example.
- If possible, try to do something special together at least once a week. Suggest things like a family movie night at home, going to the park or museum, skating, or a day trip to a nature area or another town.
- Take opportunities to note your children's strengths, such as in schoolwork, sports, crafts, or other activities. Point out moments when they do something special or make extra effort, like treating someone well or volunteering to help.
- If they need extra help in school, talk to their teacher, counselor or other school staff to help them to get it.
- Support your children in sports, school activities, or hobbies. Attend as many of their games or other events as you can.
- Show them how you can have fun in healthy ways.

Setting clear rules about substance use

The best parenting style to prevent underage drinking combines high levels of encouragement and affection with consistent discipline and rules. Setting clear “no-use” rules about alcohol, inhalants, and other substances will help protect your children. Using this parenting style, as well as repeating the message that you disapprove of substance use, can help to reduce your children’s risk.

Some family rules to consider setting include:

- No one under 21 will drink alcohol (religious services may be an exception).
- Inhalants, marijuana and other drugs are not allowed.
- Kids will not stay at parties where kids are using alcohol or drugs, and they won’t get in a car with a driver who’s been drinking or using drugs.
- Older siblings will not encourage younger brothers or sisters to drink and will not give them alcohol.

Here are some ways you and the rest of your family can communicate rules and expectations:

- “I’ve been thinking lately that I’ve never actually told you this: I don’t want you using alcohol, inhalants, tobacco, or other drugs.”
- “The rule in our house is that nobody uses drugs.”
- “I want the best for you, so I don’t want you using alcohol or any drug.”
- “It’s my job as a parent to keep you safe, so I’m going to ask you questions about who you’re with and what you are doing.”

Be sure to be consistent, firm, and clear in your rules and decisions. When necessary, remind your children what will happen. These actions can be positive, like recognizing when your child has followed the rules. They can also be negative, such as limiting TV or Internet use for a period of time when rules are broken. Setting such rules and expectations now can have an impact in the present, and the future. Many teens report one of the greatest risks of using drugs is disappointing their parents. Remember that moderate rules are most effective. Being overly controlling or too lax can put children at risk for substance use, too.

What to say to 4th & 5th graders: “What do you know about marijuana? Marijuana use is against the law for anyone under 21 years old.... We want you to do well in school, so we have a family rule against using drugs, including marijuana.”

Walker, LR, Haggerty, K, “A Parent’s Guide to Preventing Underage Marijuana Use,” 2014



Monitoring your children's activities

In addition to having clear rules about alcohol and other drugs, supervising and monitoring your children can reduce their risk of using substances. This includes knowing where your children are, what kinds of activities they are involved in, and knowing their friends.



Take Action

Here are some tips for keeping track of your kids:

- Have your children check in with you regularly. Make sure your children always know how to reach you.
- Help your children spend time with friends who have similar family rules and goals, and get to know them. This can help prevent problems. Children are more likely to try substances if their friends are using them.
- Get to know the parents of your children's friends — look for them at meetings or activities or give them a call. Ask them about their rules, and let them know about yours.
- Work with other parents to create a list of phone numbers, addresses, and email addresses for your children's friends and their families — and the places where your children like to spend time.
- Pick up your children a little early from an activity so you can observe how they behave.

"I must meet the family before my child can go to a friend's house."

– MASSACHUSETTS PARENT

Getting involved

Volunteering and getting involved in the community can promote positive feelings and help children avoid risky behavior. After-school programs, sports leagues, and programs offered by community agencies may be good options for your children to be active and form relationships with peers and other adults.

You can help protect your children and others from substance use by getting involved in community groups and events, such as a local parent-teacher organization, neighborhood association, or anti-drug coalition.



MORE RESOURCES:

Mass 2-1-1: Information and referrals for youth (including recreational programs) and family services. Toll-free 211 or 1-877-211-6277 (multilingual) | TTY: 1-508-370-4890 | <http://mass211.org>



Preparing your children to deal with peer pressure

Dealing with peer pressure related to substance use is subtle — it's more than just saying "No." The peer pressure young people feel is more related to their wanting to be accepted, to belong, or to be noticed.

Moving from elementary school to middle school can be a growing but stressful time for children. In elementary school, very few children are using substances. But as children get older, they become more exposed to substance use, and most importantly, a few of their peers may start trying them. Because children want to be accepted and liked, they may decide to join in using substances, or seek out new friends. The elementary years are an ideal time to help children gain the confidence to resist peer pressure. Kids can even try to turn peer pressure around and use it in a positive way to encourage their friends to stay away from alcohol.

"I've told my children, 'Come ask me — I'll explain. I want you to know I'm here and we can talk about it.'"

— MASSACHUSETTS PARENT

MORE RESOURCES:

The Cool Spot: Interactive website for young teens, including information on the risks of underage drinking, and resisting peer pressure. **www.thecoolspot.gov**



Take Action

You can help build your children's skills to resist this pressure — and maybe even turn it around.

- Prepare your children for both the exciting and the challenging changes they may experience. Remind them that most youth don't use alcohol or other drugs.
- Help your children feel comfortable in social situations. Remember, peer pressure is often about acceptance. Help your children "break the ice" with others and teach them how to ask questions of other people and to listen.
- Talk about awkward moments you've had — and that it's OK to feel uncomfortable sometimes.
- Help your children work through misunderstandings as well.
- Help your children practice "turn down" comments if offered alcohol or other substances. These responses can include "No thanks" or "I have to go." Some children may want to express how they feel about substances and say, "I don't drink alcohol/do drugs," or "It's not for me." Others may say that it would get them in trouble with their parents, coach, etc. Practicing these skills at different ages can help them feel confident.
- Teach your children to think critically about media messages. Many media messages about substances play upon people's desire to be popular and attractive — exactly the issues children this age are starting to face. Help them see the harms that substances can create. Try to protect them from watching too many TV shows or movies that portray substance use.

“Reversing” peer pressure

You can encourage your children not only to resist pressure to use substances, but to help their friends do so as well. This is an ideal opportunity to show them how to “turn the tables” on peer pressure and discourage their friends’ interest in substance use.

- Help your children understand when it is best to turn to you, or another trusted adult, for help.
- Help your children practice what to say and how to handle situations with substances.
- Your child can say, “You’re my friend. I’m worried about you trying substances and how it’s caused a problem. I’d like to help you. It’s important to me that my friends don’t use substances.”
- Let your children know you can be trusted and would like to hear about what they are going through.
- If needed, you can turn to a guidance counselor, the child’s doctor, or the resources on page 34 for advice.

Other adults can help

Other family members, family friends, neighbors, youth program leaders, coaches, and religious leaders can help protect your children from substance use. They can help remind them of rules and offer positive support. Here are a couple of ideas for talking with adults who interact with your children:

- “My children look up to you as their (program leader, teacher, coach, mentor, etc.). We don’t allow our children to use alcohol, marijuana or other drugs. If you teach the same thing it will help reinforce what they are learning at home.”
- “Do you ever do programs or talk with the children about substance use? If not, would you be willing to talk with them and help to support what I’m trying to teach my children at home? I’d like to see all of our kids stay away from alcohol and other drugs.”

When a family member or friend misuses substances

Some children have family members or family friends who misuse alcohol, tobacco, or other substances, and it’s likely that your children will see this sooner or later. Many parents say they use this as an opportunity to talk with their children about substance misuse. Here are some suggestions for how you can handle it:

- Explain what is happening and why.
- Explain how this is harmful to the family member or friend you care about.
- Explain how help is available to cope with this disease.

Children whose parents currently have a substance misuse disorder can be at higher risk, but there is hope. Getting help is not only healthy for the caregiver, but healthy for your children too. New kinds of treatment are available, and some treatment goes beyond that offered by health insurance. The most important thing for parents to know is that finding out if they need help is one of the healthiest choices they can make for themselves and for their children.

GETTING HELP:

Massachusetts Substance Abuse Information and Education Helpline:

Information on prevention and treatment referrals for people of all ages.

Toll-free: 1-800-327-5050 | TTY: Use MassRelay at 711 or 1-800-720-3480
(seven days a week, multi-lingual) | **www.helpline-online.com**

Al-Anon: Groups to help friends and families of alcoholics.

Toll-free: 1-888-425-2666 | **www.al-anon.org**

Massachusetts Smokers' Helpline: Advice and resources for trying to stop smoking. Toll-free: 1-800-QUIT-NOW or 1-800-784-8669 (English) | Toll-free: 1-800-8-Déjalo or 1-800-833-5256 (Spanish) | Toll-free: 1-800-784-8669 (other languages) | TTY: 1-800-833-1477 | **www.makesmokinghistory.org**

MassHealth and many other insurance plans cover medicines to help with quitting.

Positive Schooling

Positive experiences and connections with school are linked to a lower risk of substance use. Encouraging children throughout their schooling will help them have a good experience and keep them motivated.

- Come up with a regular time and place for your children to do their homework.
- Give support and praise to your children for good work habits.
- Praise them for what they've done correctly and for putting in the effort.
- If your children are having trouble in school or with homework it may be useful to use a homework chart. With this system your children can track their efforts.
- You can consider letting them earn points and rewards for good behavior.
- Attend open houses or meetings to stay connected to teachers and principals.
- You can help children to set goals for the future. If college seems out of reach for financial reasons, you can learn about the many scholarship monies available at www.fastweb.com. Talking about financial aid for college can help children to set goals for getting good grades.
- Talk with your children's teachers. With positive support, school can be a rewarding experience for you and your children.

In Summary

Giving rules and encouragement to your children can help protect them from substance use. Your work as a parent can be rewarded by seeing your children do well now and in the years to come.

MORE RESOURCES:

Triple P Positive Parenting Program: You can ask your pediatrician, or visit the website to find out more about purchasing a private self-guided program for parents that addresses challenging situations and helps support good relationships between parents and children.

www.triplep-staypositive.net

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT PREVENTION FOR ALL AGE LEVELS

Massachusetts

Massachusetts Health Promotion

Clearinghouse: Free publications and DVDs on many health topics. Toll-free: 1-800-952-6637 | TTY: Use MassRelay at 711 or 1-800-720-3480 | www.mass.gov/maclearinghouse

Materials based on the science of preventing alcohol and other drug use found there include:

- *“Strengthening Families Program Home Use DVD Version”* — series for families of 7- to 17-year-olds highlighting actions that parents and youth can take (Spanish audio track included)
- *“Talking to Your Middle School-Aged Child About Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drugs: A 10-Step Guide for Parents”* — booklet for parents of 11- to 13-year-olds (English and Spanish)
- *“7 Ways to Protect Your Teen from Alcohol and Other Drugs”* — booklet for parents of teens (English and Spanish)

- *“Preventing Underage Drinking... Priceless”* — fact sheet for parents of older children (English and Spanish)
- *“Preventing Substance Use Starts at Home: Safeguarding Your Children”* — brochure for parents of elementary- through high school-aged children (English and Spanish)
- *“Choose to Keep Your Freedom”* — brochure for 10- to 18-year-olds (English and Spanish)
- Additional copies of this booklet

Regional Center for Poison Control and

Prevention: Information and hotline about overdoses, inhalants, and other poisons. Toll-free: 1-800-222-1222 (24 hours) | TTY: 1-888-244-5313 | www.maripoisoncenter.com. In immediate danger, call 911 or your local emergency number.

Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Bureau of Substance Abuse Services:

Information, statistics, and publications.
www.mass.gov/dph/bsas
(See Prevention Information)



National

SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)

Publications Ordering: Information and publications for the public and professionals. Toll-free: 1-800-729-6686 (English and Spanish) | TTY: 1-800-487-4889 | <http://store.samhsa.gov>

SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) Home Page:

Information, referrals, and helpline. Toll-free: 1-800-662-HELP or 1-800-662-4357 (seven days a week, English and Spanish) | www.samhsa.gov

Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids:

Information and advocacy. 1-202-296-5469 | www.tobaccofreekids.org

Selected information sources for this booklet include:

Join Together, www.drugfree.org/join-together

National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, Columbia University, www.casacolumbia.org

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, www.niaaa.nih.gov

Partnership for Drug-Free Kids, www.drugfree.org/resources/

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, www.samhsa.gov

