

A Parent's Guide

*Talking with your child about
alcohol and other drugs*

Helping our Communities to be Healthier



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1. Introduction

Most of our children do not end up abusing alcohol and drugs. Still, there are many reasons why they might consider experimenting. They live in a society where alcohol, tobacco and other types of substances are common, promoted and accepted by certain people. For this reason alone, there are opportunities abound for our children to be introduced to a variety of mood-altering substances.

Fortunately, we have a powerful line of defence against the mixed messages our children sometimes get from our drug-using culture – you!

You can help your children handle the pressures and influences to use drugs. You are – and will remain – the most important role model for your children, and you know your children better than anyone else. You can encourage them to think critically and to help them understand the importance of being careful about what they put into their bodies. Your children will see your example – positive or negative – as a pattern for the way they should lead their lives.

2. Everyone makes mistakes

Keep in mind that there is no such thing as an ideal family. Every family has its challenges, and everyone makes mistakes – children and parents.

What is important is how you as a parent act when you do not make the best choice. Honestly admitting when you are wrong and making amends can be a powerful way to model the behaviour you want your children to adopt.

As a parent, you must focus on your children's strengths and ways to keep them safe. Children experience differing degrees of vulnerability, based on their personality, genetics, family upbringing, peer groups, school, community and culture. The more risks they face, the more important it is for you to help them develop ways to cope.

3. How to help children cope

- Belonging to a family that discusses and models responsible drug use (for instance, not allowing smoking in the home; drinking responsibly; not using illegal drugs; and ensuring that all prescription medication is stored and used appropriately).
- Having you as a parent who strives to build close relationships with your children and sets clear expectations and consistent discipline.
- Having friends who:
 - do not use drugs or encourage drug use;
 - are engaged in school and other positive social activities such as sports, music and art; and
 - influence decision-making positively.

4. Drawing on community resources

It is important for you as a parent to be involved and informed. Reach out to your children to support them, encourage them and let them know how much they mean to you.

Connect with your local family resource centre or community centre as an opportunity for support with other parents with children of similar ages. Contact your children's school; know the teachers and administration so the lines of communication will remain open.

Keep yourself in the picture. Doing things together as a family (preparing a meal, discussing a television show, playing sports together) gives you a chance to spend time together and to become closer. Finding time for your children is not always easy, **but it is always worthwhile.**

5. Opening up the discussion

Tell your children that you are open to conversations with them and want to hear their thoughts. You can do this in a casual or a more planned way (for example, at a family meeting). To open up the discussion, it is helpful to:

- avoid lecturing. Focus on having an open-minded discussion;
- keep a relaxed attitude and encourage your children to ask questions and to give their views;
- try to understand your children's point of view;
- do not expect teens to agree with you about everything just because you are the parent. (But they can learn your values and know where you stand); and
- develop active listening skills.

Children need to know that you, as their parent, are going to listen, be consistent in your actions, and protect them. They are much less likely to open up and seek help and advice if they expect you to react with anger or panic.

Do not feel you must fix everything. Children learn independence when they are involved in solving their problems.

Use I-messages ("I feel, because...") instead of you-messages that blame or put down ("You are being silly").

6. Responding in a helpful way

Some keys to success include:

- focusing on being honest and open about your values and how they relate to your children's lives;
- learning as many facts about drugs as you can;
- being prepared to help your children make sense of conflicting messages that they may be getting;
- emphasizing that using alcohol and other drugs is a choice and an opportunity to practise making good decisions; and
- letting them know that it is natural to have problems and make mistakes, and that they can count on you if they need help.

Many people do not think of alcohol as a drug, but it is. Alcohol is the most abused drug in our country. Because alcohol is socially accepted, it is the largest drug issue in families and communities.

7. What should you say to your children and at what age?

Your children learn their attitudes about alcohol and drugs from those around them, especially you as their parent, and from other adults. Talk with your children about alcohol and drugs when they are young. A constant dialogue should continue throughout their adolescence.

Preschoolers (three to five years of age)

Preschoolers are very imaginative and curious. If they are not told the facts, or if they are given only part of the picture, they will use their imaginations to fill in the blanks. They want a great deal of information and accept what you tell them at face value. This is the time to raise the topic yourself in what are known as teachable moments. Take advantage of social gatherings or other times your child may be around alcohol.

What you say is important, but what you do is even more so. Your children watch what you do and hear what you say. Children start learning about alcohol and other drugs as soon as they are able to observe other people's use of and attitudes toward alcohol and other drugs.

School age (five to eight years of age)

Get to know your children's friends and their families. Continue to talk about alcohol and other drugs. Become educated about drugs from Addiction Services in your area [www.gnb.ca/health\(http://www.gnb.ca/0378/centers-e.asp\)](http://www.gnb.ca/0378/centers-e.asp). Give your children complete, accurate information and make sure they are aware of the risks. Continue to make healthy choices to show your children how to take care of themselves and their bodies. If you do not have the answer to a question, it is acceptable to say, "I don't know, but together let's find out!" Children are interested in details of how things work and how information connects together.

By the end of this developmental stage, your children should know: how foods, poisons, medications and illegal drugs differ; how medications prescribed by a doctor may help during an illness but can be harmful if misused; and why adults may drink alcohol but children may not, even in small amounts, as it is harmful to children's developing brains and bodies.

School age (nine to 14 years of age)

Children are developing and confirming their personal boundaries; they are learning about their comfort zones. Keep on talking; this is when they need accurate information the most! **Ten percent of New Brunswick's 7th graders have tried alcohol.** Explain the difference in drinking in moderation and abusing alcohol. Be firm and consistent in your rules about alcohol and children. You may want to sign an agreement that sets out the consequences of underage drinking. If you make an agreement, stick to it. Stay up-to-date with what is happening in your children's lives. Make an effort to know their friends and their parents. Make sure that your children know that they can come to you if they need to talk.

Instil in your children the confidence they need to withstand pressures from friends.

Applaud their ability to think for themselves and to make decisions. Teach your children to be aware of how drugs and alcohol are promoted. Discuss how advertising, songs, movies and television shows convey messages that using alcohol and other drugs is fun and glamorous.

Adolescence (15 and 16 years of age)

These teenagers assert themselves increasingly. They go out with groups of friends more often than before, and they encounter pressure to do what everyone else is doing. At parties, they may want to drink alcohol. Fifty percent of New Brunswick High School students report drinking alcohol at least once, with 26% consuming alcohol more than once a month. Always know where your teens are and whom they are with.

Define your expectations and establish clear, reasonable rules. Share with your children coping skills, such as calling if they need a ride and resisting the temptation of alcohol and drugs. They should understand what the consequences may be if they become intoxicated (becoming involved in a fight; an unplanned or unwanted sexual encounter (often leading to unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections); and motor vehicle accidents. Feel free to share your ideas and experiences.

Adolescence (17 and 18 years of age)

Advertising associating drinking with having a good time has a significant influence on older teenagers. Communication can become more difficult because of their need to separate from their parents and

forge their identities. It is important that parents praise and encourage young people for all the things they do well and for the positive choices they make. Knowing that the adults in their lives appreciate them is highly motivating and can support teens in their commitments to avoiding alcohol and other drug use.

Through trial and error, young people learn acceptable or appropriate limits of behaviour. They learn this partly through sharing their experiences with peers, and partly through interactions with adults, who provide feedback on adolescent behaviour and set boundaries about what is appropriate. Adult behaviour about alcohol and other drug use influences adolescent attitudes.

8. Tips for talking with children

- Focus on the facts; give your children factual, age-appropriate information about alcohol and other drugs.
- Keep your explanations short and simple. Use teachable moments.
- Children like to ask questions; be ready to listen to and address their questions.
- Children respond better to conversation than to lectures.
- Do not tell children too much. They will absorb what they can and tune out what they cannot. Repeat yourself often; reinforcement is necessary.
- Help your children practise making decisions.
- Discuss things they see on television, such as the glamorization of alcohol use. This gives them the facts so they can counteract television bias and glamour.

9. Facts about adolescence and substance use

- Teens who go through puberty earlier than the average have shown higher levels of substance use because they enter the middle adolescent stage sooner. This stage is associated with more risk-taking behaviours.
- Experimentation with alcohol and drugs may be a way to test out an adult behaviour.

Most young people who use substances will not progress to problem use or dependency; the earlier a young person begins using alcohol or other drug, however, the greater the chance that he or she will run into difficulty as a result.

- **Pre-use:** A person has yet to try any substances. It is important to have several conversations with your child about your rules and expectations about substance use.
- **Experimentation:** A person has made the decision to use a substance. Usually the person will begin by trying alcohol or cannabis. Typically, use is for recreational purposes and is infrequent. Substances are usually obtained from, and used with, friends.
- **Early abuse:** A person has a more established pattern of use and may be using more than one drug (alcohol is a drug). As well, a person has experienced some adverse consequences from his or her use. Simply using more does not, by itself, indicate dependency.
- **Abuse:** A person's substance use has become regular and frequent and has been going on for an extended period. For a youth at this stage, several adverse consequences have occurred, such as missing school, poor grades, and conflict with adults.
- **Dependence:** A person continues to use substances regularly despite the negative consequences he or she is facing. There are signs that the person has developed a tolerance to the substances and requires greater quantities to feel high. A youth at this stage is preoccupied with using, and there is an increase in risk-taking and dangerous drug-related behaviours.

10. Acknowledgements

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So what do I say to my children about alcohol and drugs? and *Adolescence...What parents need to know*, The Alcohol and Drug Education and Prevention Directorate of the Saskatchewan Ministry of Health.

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Kids and drugs: A parent's guide to prevention, Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

New Brunswick Student Drug Use Survey, Highlights Report, 2007. Department of Health, Government of New Brunswick.

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