

How to Raise a Drug-Free Child

Birth through Elementary School

Early Steps. A parent's actions even before birth are critical to helping a child stay off drugs in later years. Drugs, including nicotine and alcohol, can damage a fetus as early as three weeks after conception. And some research suggests babies born to addicted mothers may be at higher risk to addiction later in their lives.



First Lessons. Long before your children are ready for school, begin teaching them rules for behavior: honesty, fairness, respect for others and for the law. And be an example: live by those values yourself.

Good Choices. It's important to keep your children involved in family activities. They should regularly join the family for dinner and be part of family vacations and other activities. Teach your children to make the right decisions on their own, and impart "don't be a follower" lessons. Teach your children to say no.

Keep Communication Open. Don't worry how you start the discussion about drugs with your kids. Just talk. It may seem as though your children are not listening, but don't give up. Better they hear about drugs from you, than from others - including those who use and sell drugs.

Escape Routes. Give your children reasons for saying no to drugs. Practice responses with your children, such as, "No way. My mom would kill me if I did that.". Teach kids to avoid places where they may be pressured to use illegal drugs. And if they do encounter drugs, teach your children to leave the area.

Middle School

Facts. Parents should know the types of drugs their children might be exposed to and the dangers associated with each; be able to identify paraphernalia used with each drug; know street names of drugs and what drugs look like; and be alert for changes in their child's behavior or appearance.

Setting Limits. Many young people use drugs simply because their friends do. Get to know your child's friends and their parents. Make sure your child attends only drug-free, chaperoned events. Closely monitor your child's whereabouts. If there is a last minute change of plans, always have your child check with you first.

Keep Your Children Busy. Research has shown that when teens are unsupervised and have little to do, they are more likely to experiment with drugs. Keep your children involved with hobbies and/or extra-curricular activities.

Stay Involved. Although it may take personal sacrifice, a parent must continue to have direct involvement with their children. Attend open house at school, scout meetings, dance recitals, soccer games, etc. A parent has to be a part of their children's lives to be aware of any changes in their behavior.

High School

Enforcing Rules. Setting rules for a child is only half the job. A parent must be prepared to enforce the penalties when rules are broken. Make sure your child knows what the rules are, the reasons for them and what the consequences will be if they're broken. Allow no second chances. For example, should your child decide to disobey and drink alcohol, he/she should not be trusted to drive a vehicle.

Consistency. Make it clear the "no drugs or alcohol" rule applies not only at home but everywhere child is.



Keep Listening. It's important that parents don't do all the talking. If you listen to your children, you can learn a lot about what they think about drugs and help them avoid pitfalls. Listening isn't as easy as it sounds because kids at this age are not always in the talk mode. A parent must be ready to drop whatever they are doing and listen when their kids are ready to open up.

*Information excerpted from a family guide developed by Reader's Digest in association with the U.S. Department of Education, ABC Television Network and the Partnership for a Drug-Free America.