



Family Strengths for Keeping Children Drug-free

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A close family that stresses adaptability and open lines of communication will help children stay drug-free. Community support for healthy lifestyles helps, but in any community, families can find ways to chart their own course through clear values, dialogue, and mutual support. In the long run, there are many factors that may affect a child's ability to make good decisions. Therefore, some families who do all the right things still may have a family member experiment with or become addicted to drugs.

Families who resist drugs use the following tools to keep life in balance:

- Closeness, which blends the freedom to be oneself with belonging in a family

- Adaptability, including consistency and flexibility
- Communication that fosters openness, honesty, and a willingness to confront or support others
- Values of responsibility and flexibility taught and applied according to each family members' age, personality, and circumstances

Talking with kids about drugs and alcohol

1. Listen first

When parents are available and open to concerns and feelings, children feel comfortable and accepted. Studies show they are also more likely to stay drug-free.

2. Let the child choose

Give a child every opportunity to make choices: what to wear, how to celebrate a birthday, whether to learn karate or clarinet. Take time to discuss concerns or issues and to explore options before acting. Skill and confidence in small things, such as when to feed the dog or rearrange a bedroom, will help make a child secure in decisions about drugs and alcohol.

3. Encourage individuality

When a child is allowed to think or act differently from the group, she gains confidence in decision making and resisting peer pressure. If an eight-year-old doesn't want to go to a



peer sleepover, don't push her to attend. Instead, let her know it's okay to act independently from her group.

4. **Set rules and follow through consistently**

Setting standards about chores, homework, or getting along day-by-day sets



the stage for obeying rules on drug use. Children thrive on healthy and helpful boundaries. Telling a five-year-old that it's not safe to run across busy streets conveys a message of love and safety. Promising an eleven-

year-old that he can watch TV when his homework is done encourages him to concentrate and work toward a reward. If rules are consistently enforced with love on a daily basis, a child or teen is more likely to listen to firm rules on drugs and alcohol.

5. **Provide information at the right level**

Provide age-appropriate information for each child. Encouraging good health habits through a daily routine—a regular and balanced diet, exercise, washing, and brushing teeth—sets the standard for a healthy lifestyle. These routines or talks can naturally lead to messages about drugs: “We don't take medicines when we're not sick because they hurt our bodies.”

An eight-year-old can already understand simple facts about specific drugs like marijuana or alcohol. When the topic is mentioned over dinner or on TV, take the opportunity to talk. A simple matter-of-fact statement repeated often, combined with openness to questions or comments, will get the message across: “Do you know what marijuana is? It's a bad drug that can hurt your body.” With older kids, describe what drugs look like, street names, and how they affect the body. Knowledge about drugs, in addition to having an open and caring relationship with a child, make a parent believable when he says, “Cocaine and crack are very dangerous and illegal drugs that could kill you even if you take them just once.” By contrast, parents who are always worried, full of advice, or try to control a child's every movement do not inspire confidence.

6. **Spell out expectations regarding drugs**

Many parents don't want to play the “heavy” on drugs and alcohol, leaving kids confused. A simple statement will work: “We don't allow drug





use, and children in this family are not allowed to drink alcohol. The only time you can take any drugs is when the doctor or Mom and Dad give you medicine because you are sick. We love you and want drugs to help, not hurt you. Do you have any questions?"

7. Help children practice saying "No"

Kids need to imagine and role-play how to refuse to go along with the group with-



out becoming an outcast. In a casual setting with your 10-to-12 year-old, play "What if?" For example, "What if friends were home alone after school and asked you to join them drinking beer? Our family rule is that children are not allowed to drink alcohol. What could you say if someone offered you a beer?" Praise any answer that would steer the child clear of trouble. If a child is unsure, offer suggestions such as "No thanks. Let's play video games," or "No thanks, I don't drink beer. I need to keep in shape."

8. Walk the talk

Adult role models provide the most convincing messages about drugs and alcohol. Drinking to excess, popping pills, or abusing over-the-counter remedies undermines messages about health care and moderation. On arriving home from work, look for a child to hug rather than a beer to unwind; the messages of love and self-restraint reinforce expectations of kids. When friends come over, offer non-alcoholic beverages, as well as wine or spirits. Children will understand and live what they see. An example of restraint and responsibility is important for their character and health.

Remember that children get a variety of messages about drugs and alcohol—glamorous messages on TV, music, and advertising and warning messages from family or educational programs. They may wonder why, if drugs are so dangerous, the medicine cabinet is full of remedies. If alcohol is so bad, why do Mom and Dad drink beer with dinner?

Think carefully about how children and teens might interpret these messages:

"People who use drugs don't care about themselves or others." This statement may sound like a warning to stay away from drugs, but it could be interpreted as a statement that parents will withdraw their love if the child makes a mistake.

"If I ever catch you guys with beer, I'll call the cops." This



threat may be intended as a warning, but independent teens may read it as a dare to test their parents' patience or authority, especially in a community where teen drinking is ignored or not prosecuted.

Final Thoughts

No family is immune from risk; however, families that cultivate closeness, adaptabil-

ity, and good communication are better equipped to help children avert drug abuse and other risks. Thoughtful understanding of both children's needs and patterns of drug abuse can help parents respond in a caring and reasonable way. Children who know they can trust and open up with their parents are less likely to get caught—or better able to get out—of the web of drug abuse.

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