

Talking to 15-18 Year Olds About Healthy Choices



KEY FOCUS AT THIS AGE:

Honesty, real-world consequences, and keeping trust strong

Teens at this stage are developing more autonomy and often feel they know more than we give them credit for – and sometimes, they do! They're likely encountering substances in social settings, and some may begin to experiment. Now's the time for open, honest conversations that respect their growing independence while offering real talk about what's at stake.

Key messages to share

"Substances may seem common, but that doesn't mean they're safe – or harmless." Highlight the difference between social norms and smart choices.

"There are real consequences – health, legal, school, safety – that can come from using substances."

Be specific and practical, not fear-based. They may be better able to hear immediate consequences, such as losing a license or their place on a sports team, than the long-term consequences of use. Both are important, and should be presented in a balanced way.

"Being a teen is hard, and you don't have to have it all figured out. Let's keep talking." Normalize uncertainty and keep the door open for reflection and help.

"Addiction can happen to young people." Emphasize it can be very difficult to stop using substances. Even if

someone stops using substances,

there can be permanent damage to their brain or body from excessive use.

This is an important time to have conversations about increased risk due to a family history of addiction, if applicable.



I trust you to make smart decisions. And I'll always be here if you need help."

Reinforce that your support doesn't go away as they get older.



How to talk about substances in a natural way

Before a party, hangout, or school dance: “What’s your plan if someone’s drinking or using something?”

After a news story or local incident involving substances: “Did you hear what happened? What do you think led to that? How could it have gone differently?”

When discussing goals (college, sports, jobs): “How might using substances impact your plans in any way?”

When they mess up or come to you with something hard: “Thank you for telling me. Let’s figure out what you need next.”

Simple activities to reinforce the message

Build a “What If” Plan: Collaborate on a realistic exit strategy for risky situations – who can they text or call? What’s the backup plan if they’re with a friend who’s been drinking? Learn more about supporting your child in [navigating peer pressure](#).

Pros & Cons Journal Prompt: Ask them to write out their own list—what do they think people like about using substances? What are the risks? This encourages internal decision-making. Invite an open and honest conversation about their list. Be transparent about your expectations and experiences with substances.

Role-Reversal Q&A: Ask them how they’d handle a situation you describe. Let them be the “expert” and guide the convo.

Tips for parents & caregivers

- › **Don’t overreact.** Even if they make a mistake, focus on what they’ve learned and what they’ll do differently next time.
- › **Respect their intelligence** – ask their opinion on policies, peer trends, and public figures.
- › **Use assertive communication to be clear** about your expectations and explain your reasoning (not just “because I said so”).
- › **Avoid scare tactics** – they can tune those out fast. Stick to facts, research, and stories.
- › **You don’t have to have all the answers.** If you don’t know the answer to their question, say “I’m not sure, let’s look it up together.”
- › **Be honest about your own experiences with substances**, both in your youth and now into adulthood. Don’t condone the behavior but empathize with their curiosity.
- › **Let them know you’re a safe space** – especially in emergencies. Reinforce that you’d always rather they call you than take a risk.
- › **Practice your own healthy coping skills**, both to model for your teen and to help you be your best self when they need support. Consider [practicing co-regulation](#) when they come to you about a mistake.

