

Talking to 19-24 Year Olds About Healthy Choices



KEY FOCUS AT THIS AGE:

Empowered decision-making, managing risk and long-term thinking

Young adults are stepping into independence – college, careers, relationships, and life beyond high school. They're facing adult-level choices, often without the structure or support they've had before. Conversations now should respect their autonomy, help them think through their values, and remind them they're not alone, no matter how "grown up" they may seem.

Key messages to share

"You have the freedom to make your own choices – and that comes with responsibility."

Lead with respect, not control.

"Substances can affect your health, relationships, and future – especially when used to cope or escape." Bring in mental health, long-term wellness, and career impacts.

"It's okay to set boundaries. You don't have to drink or use substances to belong." Normalize opting out and empower self-advocacy. Give examples of [healthy communication](#).

"Make sure you have a exit strategy for risky situations." Let them know you trust them to make smart decisions, and you're always there if they need help.

"You can always come to me – no shame, no judgment, just support."

Reinforce that support doesn't end when they move out or turn 21.



How to talk about substances in a natural way

When they're planning a night out or traveling: "What's your plan for getting home safe?" or "How do you handle it when others go too far?" "Encourage them to develop a safety plan with trusted friends. This might include choosing a designated driver, establishing a buddy system, and other ways to look out for one another in potentially risky situations."

After a tough week or emotional moment: "How do you usually cope with stress or feeling overwhelmed? What helps you reset?"

During casual check-ins or when they're venting: "Sounds like there's a lot going on. How are you managing all that stress?"

If they mention others' choices: "What do you think about how they handled that? What would you have done?"

If you're reconsidering or changing your own substance use: "There's still a lot we don't understand about the impacts of substances on our bodies and our individual bodies are changing all the time. I'm thinking about [behavior change – e.g., *cutting down on my drinking*] because of [insert reason]."

Simple activities to reinforce the message

Goal Reflection Prompt: Ask them to list their top 3 priorities for the next year – career, health, relationships. How do their habits align with those goals?

Scenario Planning: "What would you do if a friend drank too much or used something dangerous at a party? What would you hope someone would do for you?"

Social Circle Check-In: Encourage them to consider who in their life supports healthy habits and who may push boundaries. Discuss how to navigate that with confidence.

Tips for parents & caregivers

- › **Avoid lectures.** Instead, ask thoughtful questions and stay genuinely curious about their perspective.
- › **Be a sounding board, not a fixer** – they want to be heard, not told what to do.
- › **Share your own stories or regrets** (as appropriate) to humanize the conversation.
- › **Validate their stress** – don't minimize the pressures of early adulthood.
- › **Reassure them that support and safety are always available**, even when they make mistakes.

