

Before Leaving Home: A Parent Guide to Substance Use Conversations



This practical guide can help you, **a parent or caregiver**, have an impactful conversation about substance use safety before your child leaves for college or moves away from home.

This guide offers **topic areas** for conversation.

Keeping your child safe,
not controlling them

Building trust and
communication

Preparing them for
real-world situations

Moving away from home or going off to college brings more freedom—and more exposure to **alcohol, cannabis, and other substances**. Talking about safety and harm reduction increases healthy choices.


STEP 1 SET THE TONE

Start with words that show care and an exchange of ideas and decisions:

"I know you're going to have more independence, and I trust you."

"You've grown up making good choices –I want you to think through some future situations to be safe and informed."



 **AVOID:** lectures, fear tactics, and "don't do this" only messaging

STEP 2

SHARE KEY SAFETY FACTS - KEEP IT REAL AND RELEVANT



KEY MESSAGE: *Seek non-alcoholic friends and activities; if you use-pace, hydrate, know your limits.*



ALCOHOL

Alcohol can commonly be used for social connections and celebrations. It can also be abused.

Abuse can lead to alcohol poisoning, assault or unsafe situations, poor decision-making.

Young adults can often jump to binge drinking or mixing substances.



CANNABIS



KEY MESSAGE: *choose not to use; if you do use start low, go slow. Avoid mixing substances.*

Legal does not mean safe. Today's vape products can have high potency (THC), impacting you fast with just 1 or 2 hits. Again, it's easy to overuse.

Edibles (gummies or THC beverages) can take longer to feel the effect. This can lead to consuming too much. One THC beverage can contain 2 servings or 10 mg THC. The legal serving in MN is 5 mg.

The risk of fentanyl laced pills on the street is real, it can easily result in an overdose or death.

Follow directions for your prescribed medication. Never take pills from someone else.



PILLS & OTHER DRUGS



KEY MESSAGE: *One pill can be life-threatening.*



STEP 3

TALK ABOUT
HIGH-RISK
SITUATIONS
WALK
THROUGH
COMMON
SCENARIOS



- ✗ Being homesick or feeling the stress of school and wanting to turn to substance use to cope.
- ✗ Going to parties seems to be what everyone else is doing on the weekends.
- ✗ Pressure to “keep up” with others, drinking games.
- ✗ Parties where something might be slipped into a drink leading to a sexual assault.

★ **ASK:** “How might you handle these situations?”

STEP 4

TEACH
PRACTICAL
SAFETY
STRATEGIES

KNOW THE SIGNS OF TROUBLE

Risking choices
(driving or fighting),
confusion, vomiting.

Slow or irregular breathing,
unconsciousness.

If something feels off:
seek the help of trusted
others or call 911
immediately.

PROTECTIVE HABITS

Use the buddy system;
have cell numbers.

Don't leave your
drink unattended.

Use Rideshare / campus
safety options.

If you ever feel unsafe,
call or text me anytime.

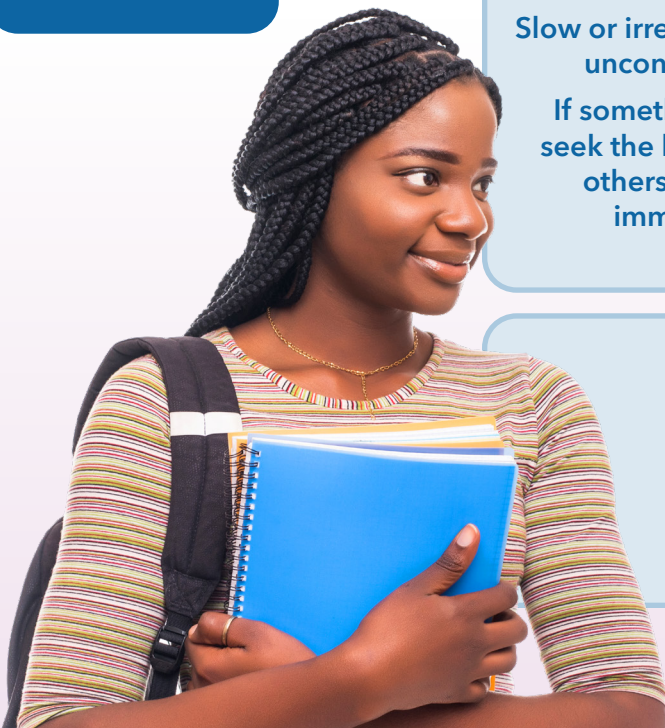
SAFER CHOICES

Seek alternatives to the party/bar scene.

Eat and drink water while drinking.

Avoid mixing substances.

Stay with trusted friends.





STEP 5

TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Many teens use substances to cope with stress, anxiety, or loneliness. Research shows substance use may help short-term, but it can worsen mental health symptoms and lead to addiction.

ASK:

"What are healthy practices to turn to for stress or mental health challenges?"

"What do you think will be most stressful being away from home?"



TALK ABOUT HEALTHY STRESS MANAGEMENT: Exercise, talking to a friend, counseling services, calling home.

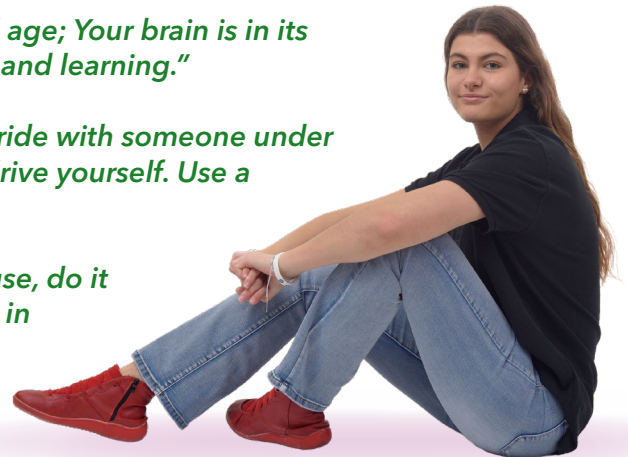
STEP 6

AGREE ON EXPECTATIONS - TALK CLEARLY ABOUT YOUR VALUES

"No use until legal age; Your brain is in its prime for growing and learning."

"Promise to never ride with someone under the influence. Or drive yourself. Use a rideshare service."

"If you choose to use, do it in moderation and in the safest way possible."



STEP 7

KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

SAY:

"We don't have to talk about everything today. Let's keep this conversation going."

"Let's check in after your first few weeks away."



Ongoing connection matters more than one talk.



Key Messages to Leave Your Child With:

"Your safety matters more than fitting in."

"Trust your instincts— if something feels off, leave."

"You can always call me—no matter what."

When to Be Concerned (*Later On*).

Risky behaviors, hangovers, frequent talk about parties



Academic decline; not attending classes



Mood changes or isolation



If concerned, approach with curiosity—**not accusation**

Key Messages for Positive Parenting

These challenging conversations are about raising a young adult who can:

THINK CRITICALLY

MAKE INFORMED CHOICES

ASK FOR HELP WHEN NEEDED

TRUST AND CONFIDE IN YOU



You are still a powerful influence, even as they leave home.

