

## Manitoba Addictions Awareness Week

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### Parenting for Prevention: Children & Adolescents and Alcohol/Drug Use

In today's world, it is not uncommon for children to be faced with opportunities to use alcohol or other drugs at a fairly young age. Although it's natural for many adolescents to experiment with substances, most do not come to any harm as a result of this experimentation, generally motivated by curiosity or wanting to fit in with a peer group. Many parents wonder what they can do to minimize the chance that their child will use alcohol or other drugs, or to minimize the chance that they will suffer any negative consequences.

The opportunity and to "parent for prevention" begins when children are still in their pre-teen years. This is the age where children are old enough to begin to understand complicated topics but young enough to willingly accept guidance from their parents.

The following steps can act as a guide in informing your child about alcohol/other drugs, and includes strategies that families can use to minimize the chance that a child will encounter difficulties with substance use when they are older.

- 1. Talk with your child about alcohol/other drugs:** The best time to do this is during natural, "teachable" moments when the topic presents itself, such as when you are watching a movie together where alcohol is being served; or when your family is hosting a party where alcohol will be one of the beverages served. Give children factual, age-appropriate information about alcohol and other drugs, and be ready to hear and address their questions. And remember, it's okay not to have the answers, and to tell your child that you will help them find the answer to their questions.
- 2. Really Listen to your child:** It's important to really listen, and to show children that you are listening by using attentive body language. Although the issue they are presenting may seem trivial, or you are tempted to close the subject as quickly as possible, stay focused on what they are saying and how they are saying it, and be open to the going with the discussion without judgment. Children are far more likely to talk with us if we are approachable and open to what they have to say.
- 3. Help your child feel good about him/herself:** There are a number of things parents can do to try and achieve this goal:
  - Look for things that your child is good at, even small things, and give praise.
  - Praise effort, not just accomplishment.
  - Help your child to set realistic goals for him/herself.
  - Don't compare your child's efforts with others—this is unfair, and sets your child up to feel that they're not "good enough".
  - When correcting your child, criticize the action, not them.
  - Give your child age-appropriate responsibilities, so that they learn they can do important things around the house to contribute to the family

- Give them opportunities to try new healthy, creative challenges so that they can find their strengths. This does not mean they have to excel at everything. Simply enjoying the activities will teach them that there are lots of positive activities that they can spend time on.
  - Last, but not least, show your child you love them through affection, and saying so often
4. **Be a good model or example for your children:** Parents are models for their children, even when they are not trying to be. You can be a model in your own drinking habits and in your attitudes about others' drinking. Use real life situations in your household, like hosting a party, to model what you believe about responsible alcohol use. Talk to your child about responsible drinking. Model responsible hosting by having plenty of non-alcoholic beverages on hand for people who may choose not to drink alcohol.
  5. **Help your teen deal with peer pressure:** Parents can prepare children to deal with peer pressure by talking to them before they are in a situation where they are faced with a decision about alcohol/other drug use. Help them anticipate situations/scenarios that they might encounter, and brainstorm with them how they can say "no" to use and still "save face". Then help them role-play what they will do and how to say "no" in a given situation.
  6. **Make family policies that help your child say "no":** Explain to children what you expect from them when it comes to decisions about alcohol/other drug use. Explain what the consequences will be if they don't follow the family expectations, and be sure that these consequences are logical and realistic. Be prepared to follow through if your child breaks one of the family rules, because consequences help to teach children you mean what you say, and that their actions are connected to what happens to them.
  7. **Team up with other parents:** Talk to other parents about what their expectations are of their children with regards to alcohol/other drug use. Know where your child is and what kind of supervision he/she is receiving when they are with a friend's parents.
  8. **Know what to do if you suspect your child is having a problem with alcohol/other drugs:** Learn to recognize the early signs that may indicate an alcohol/drug problem. Express concern to your child. Let them know that you are willing to help them. Know where you and your child can go for professional help and follow through.

As a parent, remember that you have a huge influence on your child's attitudes and the choices he/she makes. Giving them age-appropriate information about alcohol and other drugs, doing things with your child to build their self-esteem, and showing unconditional love will go a long way in building secure adolescents who are engaged in many positive activities. **What you do and say when your children are young, does count.**

*Adapted by AFM youth staff with permission from the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol Information (NCALI)*