

Engaging Families in Effective Substance Abuse Prevention

Parents and Prevention - What We Know

Parents and families make all the difference when it comes to keeping kids healthy. Research shows that many young people do not drink alcohol or use other drugs because they do not want to disappoint their parents.

Additionally, research conducted by the Partnership for Drug-Free Kids contends that when children are taught the risks of substance use by their parents, these young people are up to fifty percent less likely to experience problems with addiction later in life.

Within the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, research into the lives of young people is also ongoing. The organization's prevention arm, FCD Prevention Works, administers *the FCD Student Attitudes and Behavior Survey* in dozens of domestic and international school communities among students each academic year. From this survey, the organization can now draw upon the report of over 86,000 students in grades 6-12, surveyed over 142 schools and 28 countries in the 2009-2016 academic years.

FCD students taking the survey are asked about the role of parental monitoring, supervision and support in their daily lives. Survey results show that parents have much more influence on their children's decision to use or not use than they may think. When students are asked, "Whose opinion matters the most to you when you make decisions about alcohol and other drug use?" the majority of FCD students declare their parents' opinions more important than those of teachers, coaches, older students or peers. In some school communities, kids tell us through the FCD survey that what their parents share regarding expectations around alcohol and other drug use matters even more to them than their own opinions, especially during the middle school years and transition to high school.

What we know about parents' and families' influence on keeping kids healthy is clear – young people need their parents and other immediate caregivers as their prevention partners. So what might be getting in the way of engaging in substance abuse prevention efforts with your kids, and how can that change?

A Parent's Worry: Does Everyone *Really* Do It?

Most young people in the United States and across the world do not drink alcohol at high volumes. Many have never used alcohol at all, and most don't use other drugs during this stage in their lives. Does that seem hard to believe? If so, you're not alone, and you can also be reassured by the data. The social norms approach to prevention is a data-driven approach to prevention based on the fact that young people and even the adults in their lives tend to consistently and dramatically overestimate alcohol and other drug use by teens. At the same time, we are all prone to underestimate healthy behaviors, such as the non-use of substances. The trouble is, when you and your kids believe there is a high level of use within teenage peer groups, this alone may encourage healthy kids to begin to drink alcohol or use other drugs. By contrast, use is less prevalent in communities where parents and other adults in teens' lives uphold non-use as the norm, and young people are recognized and respected for their healthy choices.

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In order to begin to change substance use norms in a culture where teens may think "everyone is doing it," it is important to question where unhealthy beliefs come from in the first place. Many times your kids may hear stories about a small group of their peers who have made unhealthy choices with regard to substance use. When kids repeatedly hear such stories, teenage use begins to seem like a normal occurrence in their community, and the related consequences of use might start to become normalized. As more people talk, stories grow and become exaggerated. When this happens, pretty soon the majority of teens in a community, who make consistently healthy choices about alcohol and other drugs, start to feel abnormal for abstaining from use, and inside of them, an internal pressure to fit into what they think is the norm begins to mount.

Families, and especially parents, can intervene to correct false, unhealthy perceptions of use and to point out the healthy behaviors of so many youth where they live. Families that understand the social norms approach will be able to question and challenge - in a supportive manner - their child's generalizations and overestimations of their peers' higher-risk behavior. A first step in engaging families in social norms-based prevention is to ensure that parents are not fueling false and unhealthy normative beliefs! How many times have we heard an adult say, "All kids are going to experiment with alcohol"?

The truth is that most students don't use regularly and don't think it's cool to get drunk. In fact, over 30% of students surveyed internationally and nearly 40% of students in the United States hold the personal opinion that drinking is *never* a good thing for teenagers to do. Quite often, our young people who make healthy decisions become an unsupported majority, choosing healthy behaviors even as the adults in their lives expect less of them. The family role in preventing student use starts when parents, older siblings and the extended family all help young people feel confident, proud and celebrated for making healthy choices.

Families and Free Time: It's Just a Movie

Teens' perceptions about what is normal and acceptable behavior are derived from a few primary sources: parents, peers and media. Increasingly, families are challenged to win the attention of young people from formidable adversaries like smart phones, tablets and social media platforms.

Technology provides students fingertip access to music, movies, television and other media. Technology is beneficial when it connects kids to relatives living in another state, as a hub for research and learning, and often as a place for healthy recreation, too. However, in the midst of all the apps, a variety of media content can normalize teen alcohol and other drug use, minimize the associated risks, and glorify attitudes about using substances.

The Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine found that, even before the advent of tablet technology, for every hour of music teenagers listened to, they were exposed to 35 references to alcohol and other drug use. In general, exposure to potentially "pro" substance abuse messages from our society far outweighs the amount of discussion families are having about prevention. This is why it's so important for families to have lively conversations about media with their children. Technology isn't going anywhere, but we can help families deconstruct the media influences in their children's lives. Children should understand that movies, music and television are not a true depiction of an often much healthier reality.

Young people should be challenged to think critically about the messages they receive. This can begin at home, when downloading a new song, playing a video game or watching a popular TV show as a family. FCD Prevention Works recommends identifying teachable moments within media use. Parents can let their teens turn up the radio, or sit down with them to watch the latest comedy, if only to check in with their kids about the feelings, perspectives and attitudes they have about the media's portrayal of alcohol and other drugs. If a child's response is something like, "That's just normal teenage stuff; everyone gets high," then a bonding moment can turn into a teachable moment where family members remind one another that most kids actually don't use alcohol or other drugs.

What Else Can Parents and Families Do?

What are some of the most effective strategies parents can use to help lower the risk of substance abuse for their children? How can schools support these strategies?

We at the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation believe there are many additional actions that parents can take to make a significant difference in lowering the risks of unhealthy teen use, addiction, and relapse after treatment and the beginnings of recovery.

Here are a few key suggestions:

- Encourage children and adolescents to become and stay involved in pro-social activities. These include sports, clubs and organized groups, mentor-mentee programs, arts organizations, as well as other supervised hobbies and activities.
- Communicate with others in the community who seek your child's best interests, such as schools, places of worship, and especially other parents and caregivers, and,
- Most importantly, communicate with one's children and teens, listening as much as talking.

Studies have consistently shown that children who are involved in co- and extra-curricular activities are less likely to use substances. Students can be engaged in school, community, charity, scouting or religious groups and activities, depending on their interests, skills and passions. Not only do these activities take up otherwise idle or unsupervised time in an adolescent's schedule, but participation can also encourage a strengthened sense of identity, community, and direction within a young person - all reasons not to use substances. Fitting regular activities into children's schedules also makes it that much easier for parents to monitor their children's time.

Basic parent and family prevention education is also key. One of the most common risk factors for adolescent substance use is a lack of parental knowledge about alcohol and other drug risks, coupled with parental denial about what may be going on in the lives of their children. It can be very difficult to know that a child is using substances if one is not aware of the signs and symptoms of use. Schools can play a significant role in providing parents and families with accurate, relevant information about the prevention of alcohol and other drug abuse in students. Parent networks can be built through community or school-based newsletters, online forums and parent workshops on this important topic.

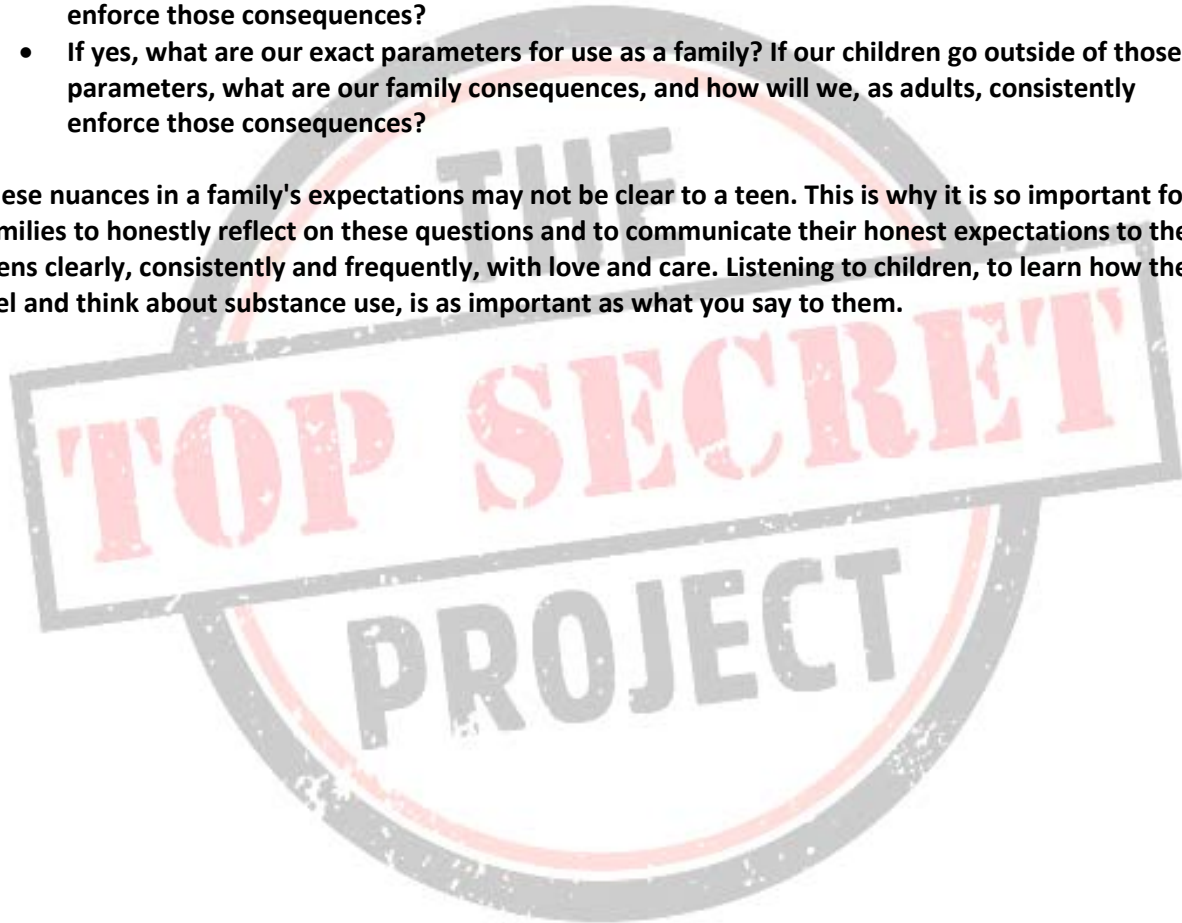
Parent-to-parent communication outside of the school is also an effective way to monitor the behavior of teens in a community. Parents can share phone numbers with one another, to get to know the adults raising their kids' best friends and to always check in with a parent hosting a student party before their child's attendance at the event. These are basic but vital steps that can keep healthy kids healthy.

Establishing and maintaining active and ongoing communication with children about substance abuse prevention is the most critical piece of a family's prevention efforts. Many parents assume their children know how they feel about substance use, but during the teenage years, clear and consistent communication about family rules and expectations is crucial. The children need to hear of your expectations early, often, and with absolute consistency, including the expectation that whenever they need you, you will be there to support them, hear them out, and provide further guidance.

Parents should ask themselves questions like:

- Is it acceptable in our family for our teenage children ever to use alcohol? To become intoxicated?
- If no, what are our family consequences for use, and how will we, as adults, consistently enforce those consequences?
- If yes, what are our exact parameters for use as a family? If our children go outside of those parameters, what are our family consequences, and how will we, as adults, consistently enforce those consequences?

These nuances in a family's expectations may not be clear to a teen. This is why it is so important for families to honestly reflect on these questions and to communicate their honest expectations to their teens clearly, consistently and frequently, with love and care. Listening to children, to learn how they feel and think about substance use, is as important as what you say to them.



FCD Prevention Works™ is the leading international nonprofit provider of school-based substance abuse prevention services. For forty years, FCD has worked worldwide to provide students and the adults who care for them with the knowledge, understanding and skills they need to make intelligent, healthy choices about alcohol, tobacco and other drug use. FCD is part of the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation.

FCD is committed to the effective practice of prevention. The qualitative prevention assessment and quantitative *FCD Student Attitudes and Behavior Survey*, as side-by-side resources or stand-alone services, allow schools and communities to engage in prevention that is dynamic and data-driven.