

Ask BYFS

Parent Question: When should I talk to my children about drugs and alcohol?

It is always important to follow your child's lead and respond when they are curious. However, children are exposed to both alcohol and drugs in their daily lives and what they see and hear can be confusing to them. Children see public service announcements on television encouraging parents to talk to their kids about alcohol and drugs. Adults have alcohol in the home; parents, older siblings and other family members and friends may be drinking when children are around. There is frequently advertising during sporting major events such as the Super Bowl and Major League Baseball games. Drugs in the medicine cabinet should be distinguished from the kinds of drugs used for recreation, yet they are both referred to as "drugs." The conversations parents have with children about alcohol and drug use should be ongoing. As children mature, they are able to understand and relate to the issues they will face as they grow into adolescence. These are suggestions on how to begin.

- **Use advertising as an opportunity for a teachable moment.** Say something like, "do you understand what they are trying to sell in that commercial?" If your child wasn't paying attention, it may be too soon to talk. Follow their lead.
- **After asking a question, be prepared to listen.**
- **Establish your family position on alcohol and drug use.** If you abstain and hope your children will also abstain, be sure to share briefly why you have made the choice and why you hope your child will as well. If you take the position that consuming alcohol is ok when one is of legal age, explain that there are safe ways to do so. You will have to decide at what point you can share safe use by saying "when you are older, I will talk more about how to use alcohol safely. You may hear that you should not ever drink alcohol and while I don't believe that, I do believe you should wait until your body and brain are mature enough to handle it. Scientific research and the law say that twenty-one is the safe age." If you do drink, model appropriate consumption and behavior. If someone around your children has had too much to drink, use this as a time to talk about drinking too much.
- **Model by using your own choices as an example.** "I have just had a glass of wine, so I won't be driving again today." Even if this is exaggerated, they will get the point.
- **Be clear that all recreational drugs are illegal and therefore there will never be a time when it will be ok for them to use any kind of illegal drug.**
- **Raise the issue from time to time to keep the topic open.** Encourage your child to talk to you if they ever have a question or concern.

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