



HERREN PROJECT

# How to Talk to Your Elementary Age Student About Substances

Parents and caretakers have the biggest influence and impact on emotional development for children. Children watch, listen and repeat what they observe. They develop their view of the world and how it works from watching and experiencing the adults around them. We have especially important responsibilities to our children.

Elementary-age children are for the first time navigating social situations in school without their parents. They learn to trust other adults such as teachers and counselors as well as face decision-making opportunities daily. These are the opportunities for children to practice independence and autonomy. Although choosing an outfit, what to eat for lunch, or how to complete schoolwork may not seem like big decisions for elementary school-age children, those decisions may be the first opportunities they have to practice using their voices and opinions.

Developing confidence in decision-making and vocalizing needs is an essential skill for everyone regardless of age. For children, this confidence is developed through the help of the adults who surround them.



## Tips on How to Start the Discussion

Discussions with elementary-age students are vastly different than those with older students. With young children, the discussions do not need to be about substances or substance use disorder unless they have a relative or loved one who is living with SUD.

Conversations should be focused in 4 main areas:

- Identifying Emotions
- Developing Coping Skills
- Self-awareness / Self-esteem
- Emotional Regulation

These topics can be woven into most conversations with children. As adults, we need to be comfortable having uncomfortable talks with our children/students. Sometimes children will share feelings with us that may be difficult. It is in those moments that we need to be able to help them the most.



## Identifying Emotions

Before children can develop coping skills, they need to identify what they are feeling. It is important for young children that they have an effective way to express what they are feeling. But that starts with giving them words to identify those emotions. Kids usually can say happy or sad, but do they know what frustrated feels like or hurt, angry or embarrassed. Without clearly giving kids words for the different feelings, we tend to see anger. Being able to identify feelings then gives the adults in their lives the opportunity to help them develop coping skills for those emotions.

Using phrases such as “It looks like you may be frustrated” or “Your face looks like you are feeling sad” are ways that give new words to our children that they may not have otherwise. We can then validate their experiences.

Opportunities exist in everyday life to begin to teach emotions to children. There are multiple resources that are immensely helpful to start to approach this topic. Here are a few examples:

### **Books**

- “Visiting Feelings” by Lauren Rubenstein
- “Sylvester and the Magic Pebble” by William Steig
- “The Giving Tree” by Shel Silverstein
- “My Many Colored Days” by Dr. Suess
- “When Sophie Gets Angry—Really Really Angry” by Molly Bang

### **Movies / Television**

- “Inside Out” - Disney / Pixar
- “The Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown”
- “Daniels Neighborhood”- PBS
- “Sesame Street” - PBS

### **Applications (Apps)**

- Avokiddo Emotions
- Settle Your Glitter



## Develop Coping Skills

Once our children can express or verbalize their feelings, we can then give them skills to regulate and tolerate them. For example, if our child is feeling sad, we can help them identify ways to self-soothe or ask for comfort. These are skills that are important to have throughout life. Working through feelings with another person is a gift we can give our children.

Our children will feel things that they do not like, such as frustration or disappointment. We need to model coping skills for those feelings until they pass instead of fixing those feelings with something else. For example, if your child is feeling worried, we can redirect them to notice what is happening in the moment and stay present. It is hard work but pays off when our children can identify, express, and work through uncomfortable emotions.

Researchers have found a correlation between children who have developed coping skills and a lower risk of substance use in their future. Some healthy coping skills for children include:

### **Movement / Exercise**

Exercise is a healthy way for children to release excess energy when they feel overwhelmed, frustrated, or even over-joyed. Movement can be an excellent way to help kids regulate their emotions. If we model this coping skill and encourage our children to turn to physical activities when they are struggling with difficult emotions or situations, eventually, that will become a natural way for them to cope with the challenges they face.

### **Music**

Children respond to music. Whether they are making their own or listening, music can affect their brain and their body. Music has been incorporated into relationship techniques, exercise, and some therapies. Providing children another outlet to notice the calming effect it can have offers incredible benefits. Encouraging children to express themselves through music can develop into a lifelong interest as well.

## **Writing / Drawing**

Creating artwork is an excellent way of expressing feelings through color or words. Children can use different mediums such as paint, crayons, or clay to create objects representing how they may be feeling. Having the ability to move thoughts and feelings out of your head and onto paper creatively can be an incredible way to cope with stress.

## **Deep Breathing / Relaxation**

Deep belly breaths or balloon breaths can help kids settle their minds and body. There are many benefits to slowing our breathing and noticing how that changes how our bodies feel. Even when children are not feeling uncomfortable, it can be an excellent opportunity to ask them to take a breath and notice how the rest of their body feels. When they are more stressed, they will be more comfortable and confident that breathing will affect them positively.

## **Practice Mindfulness / Gratitude**

Our children are NOT little adults. Their brains are working extremely hard to take in information and understand it much differently than ours do. Being mindful of children means staying connected to the here and now. What does their body feel like, and what do they notice in the world around them? Children look for the good in situations. Encouraging and nurturing that skill helps them develop gratitude.

It is nearly impossible to feel gratitude and misery at the same moment.



## They Are Watching You

Our children repeat what we model. Be mindful as parents, teachers, and caregivers that those little minds are taking what they see and are repeating it. You are not perfect, and neither are your children. It is ok to 'fail' and use it as a learning opportunity. Watching our children struggle is hard. But if we do not, then we are not giving them the chance to develop the skills they will need in their lives. It is ok not to be ok. It is through those experiences that we build resilience and strength. Use as many opportunities as you can to point out your feelings, how you cope with those feelings, and how you feel after.



## How Does This All Connect With Substance Use Disorder?

People with SUD commonly seek something outside of themselves to make them feel better. That something can be substances, gambling, relationships, or food as examples. Developing skills such as emotional regulation and gratitude help validate feelings and cope with them on the inside. If we can create methods to self-soothe that are healthy, we are less likely to turn to making unhealthy choices like the use of substances.