



HERREN PROJECT

How to Talk to Your High Schooler About Substances

It is more important than ever to talk about substance use with our children. Many teens use substances for the first time in social situations with substances that are easy to access, like vape products, marijuana, and alcohol. Peer pressure is most often the cause, which can start much earlier than we'd like to think.

Continued use is often a result of reduced self esteem, a desire to fit in, and an underdeveloped brain that isn't yet able to understand consequences or mitigate risk.

This is why it is so important that we start these discussions early - to help them understand the risks associated with use before they begin to believe they are indestructible and to continue these discussions throughout the teen years.



Tips on How to Start the Discussion

Prepare for the Conversation

You don't need to know a lot about each substance. You can ask them questions about what they know, and/or you can do some research together. Be prepared to answer difficult questions about your own substance use. It is okay to be honest and own your past or current use of substances. If that makes you uncomfortable, you can also explain that adults get to make their own choices and they will someday get to make those choices too. You decide where your comfort level lies. Your comfort in discussing these topics will set the tone for theirs.

Be Aware

Be aware that your teen probably won't want to discuss these topics and may become uncomfortable when you bring them up. It's okay to be uncomfortable, but that doesn't mean the conversation stops. Using real life examples is the best way to promote understanding.

Recognize any Substance Use Disorder

Recognize any substance use disorder in your family. It is important your child know that this disease has a tendency to run in families and if they may be genetically predisposed. This will help them be as informed as possible if and when they need to make a choice about their own use.

Set Clear Rules and Expectations

Set clear family rules and expectations when it comes to substance use. Give a clear consequence for breaking the rules. A few examples of rules used by many families are:

- No using drugs
- No alcohol use
- vaping or smoking
- No riding in cars driven by someone under the influence of substances

Discuss the WHY Behind Substance Use

Most people focus on the substance use as the problem without realizing it's actually a symptom of something else. When choices are made that are out of line with who they are or want to be, such as the use of substances when they said they would never use, one can become depressed and anxious as a result. Let your child know that peer pressure is real and it's difficult to navigate, even for adults sometimes. Ask them if they've experienced it and how they handled it in the past.

Teach Them Strategies to Say NO

Come up with ideas for what they can say if they are asked to use a substance and are having a difficult time saying no. For example, many families tell their kids that they may be subject to a drug test at any point while in their home. This is less to punish and more to give their child an out with their friends. If they're pressured, they can say, "No I can't, my parents drug test", making it easier to say no.

Be Real

Don't expect your kids to be perfect. This is really hard for your teen to navigate. Let them know it's normal to be curious, and that their peers may make it appear like substances are safe and fun. Talk about the long term dangers of use, and let them know that the longer they wait the less chance they have of becoming addicted. Their brain is not fully developed until they are around 25. The earlier they use the less developed the brain will be, which in turn increases their chances of substance use disorder.

Be Open

Listen to what your child has to say, even if you don't like what you hear. Let them know that no matter what they are loved, and you are there to help. That doesn't mean there won't be consequences, but their safety is always your top priority. Almost any mistake can be overcome with honesty.

Ask Open Ended Questions

Ask open ended questions that encourage your child to elaborate instead of just giving a yes or a no answer. Use active listening and try and reflect what your child has just said back to them. For example: "I feel like you're saying..." or "It seems like you're feeling...". This will help make your teen feel heard and understood and give them an opportunity to correct you if you're not understanding.

Celebrate Your Teen's Successes

Celebrate your teen's successes. It may be frightening the first time he or she reports declining an invitation to use. Try not to react to the fear and focus more on how proud you are of their choice. It may seem like they don't care much about your opinion - they care way more than they let on.



What Should I Do if My Child Breaks One of the Family Rules Around Substance Use?

No matter how good a parent we might be, it is still fairly likely that your child is going to break one of the family rules. Pushing against boundaries is part of growing up, and adolescence is generally when we struggle with this the most. Understand that although substance use is not normal, pushing against our boundaries is. Try not to overreact.

Try not to React in Anger

If you need to take some space before having a discussion, that's fine. Be honest and tell your child that you are very upset and need some time to think before you can talk. It's actually beneficial to let them sit in their anxiety for a bit.

Your first question should be: WHY?

When you are ready, sit beside them and ask them, "Why? Why do you need to change yourself to be around kids you have known your whole life?" Ask them how they feel about themselves right now, and if that feeling was worth the choice to break the rule. How would they feel if the rest of the community were to find out? Is this who they want to be?

Listen

Listen to their answer, even if it makes you uncomfortable. Make sure you also tell them you still love them and that will never change. Your child may not admit to using the substance or breaking the rule, and that's okay. Don't force it. You can still have the discussion by stating your evidence.

Try Not to Punish

Natural consequences are much more effective than punishment. Your child is struggling to navigate a difficult world. Try and come from a place of compassion and understanding. They most likely already feel awful about themselves - adding to that will only reduce their self esteem.

Set Natural Consequences

As discussed earlier, consequences work best if they are directly related to the the bad decision that was made. In other words, try to make the punishment fit the crime. This is what is meant by natural consequences. The loss of your trust and your disappointment are both natural consequences. Make it known to your child that they have lost your trust, which can be earned back, but it will take them making positive choices and following the family rules going forward.

Example: Taking away your child's cell phone for vaping doesn't make any sense. It's a punishment that is simply meant to punish. However, If your child received vaping products by texting their seller from that phone, then the loss of the cell phone would be more of a natural consequence.

Stick to "I" Statements

Example: "When you miss curfew, I get scared and can't sleep because I am worried that something has happened to you. I need you to call or text me." This will allow for further discussion and boundary setting without your teen feeling judged.



Warning Signs of Substance Use

Most teens and tweens will experience normal mood swings and may even start to pull away from you a bit. This can be scary for some parents, but for the most part it is normal behavior for adolescents. Chances are this is what you are experiencing with your tween. However, if you notice a more significant change in behavior as well, there may be more going on. Here are some of the warning signs for teen substance use:

Warning Signs:

- Sleeping more than usual
- Losing interest in experiences they once enjoyed
- Pulling away from old friends and creating a new friend group
- Becoming increasingly angry or aggressive
- Appearing significantly depressed or despondent
- Sudden weight loss
- Frequent nose bleeds
- Red and/or watery eyes
- Having the shakes or tremors



What Do I Do if I Think My Child Has a Problem With Substances?

If you find out that your child is using a dangerous substance or feel they may have a bigger problem than you originally thought, consult a professional immediately.

Herren Project offers consultations with a licensed clinician to help lead you in a positive direction. You may also want to find a therapist in your area that specializes in adolescent emotional health. You will benefit from having a professional to help guide your family in addition to your child having professional support. Having a trusted adult for your child to talk with that is not an immediate family member can be beneficial even outside of substance use.

Our children are often afraid to tell us the things they aren't proud of in fear of disappointing us. Therefore, many teenagers feel more comfortable discussing their issues with someone else. Providing them with another trusted adult is way more beneficial than them finding a peer that might not steer them in a positive direction.