

Preparing your young children for a healthy, drug-free future



kids watch. kids listen. kids learn.

Massachusetts Department of Public Health
Bureau of Substance Abuse Services

You are your children’s strongest role model. What you do and say makes a constant impression on your children – and can help put your 3rd to 5th graders on a healthy, drug-free path for life.

Young people have messages about substances – especially alcohol – coming at them from all angles. Ads, movies, TV shows, and music commonly portray alcohol use, and almost never show its negative consequences. Parents, other adults, and the larger community are sending messages about alcohol and other substances as well. All these messages can influence children who are forming beliefs and attitudes about alcohol and other drugs in their late elementary years.

Soon, as children enter middle school, their peers may start to experiment with substances including alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. Over the next few years, your children will be more exposed to substance use, put more importance on what their friends think and do, and start to form opinions about whether using substances like alcohol is “cool.”

The good news is that the late elementary years are an ideal opportunity for you to protect your children from future substance use. Parents and other caregivers play the strongest role in preventing substance use – and you’re probably already doing many of the things that protect your children:

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Many parents and caregivers feel powerless to prevent their children from using drugs and alcohol, but you influence them more than anyone or anything else! Children whose parents talk with them about substance abuse are up to half as likely to use drugs, and teens say that parents are the number one influence on their decisions about whether they drink alcohol.

Alcohol and inhalants: The biggest risks

Alcohol and inhalants are the substances used at the youngest ages in Massachusetts, and many people think of them as common and legal – yet they can be very harmful to young people. This is why shaping your 3rd to 5th graders’ behaviors and beliefs about these substances is so important.

Your children are nearing an age when some kids begin trying substances. Alcohol is the most commonly used substance by 6th to 8th graders in Massachusetts – about 4 out of 10 middle school students report ever using

**Parents, grand-
parents, and other
caregivers can help
put children on the
path to a substance-
free future.**

alcohol. The substances children use at the youngest ages, however, are inhalants. Inhalant abuse is the intentional breathing of gas or vapors to get intoxicated, or alter one's mood. Inhalants are found in over 1000 common household products. In

Massachusetts, the average age of first using inhalants is 11.3 years, followed by alcohol at 12.1 years. **The late elementary years are an ideal time for prevention.**

MORE RESOURCES:

Information Sheets, Massachusetts Department of Public Health:

Information about specific drugs and their effects.

www.mass.gov/dph/bsas/publications/familyguide/infosheets/intro.htm

Alcohol: The facts

Alcohol is especially harmful to children. Alcohol can damage the brain and cause learning problems, and is linked to behavior problems, depression, violence, and death, including suicide. The younger people are when they start to drink, the higher their chances of developing an alcohol problem later in life.

Few elementary-aged children are using alcohol. In one study, 6% of 4th graders said they drank beer in the last year. However, children of this age are heading into a time of change. While only 17% of 4th to 6th graders say they have friends who drink beer, 44% of 6th to 8th graders have friends who drink beer. Children's beliefs about alcohol start changing at this time, too.

Now is your opportunity to build on healthy habits and beliefs children of this age often have. During these years, children believe alcohol is harmful, and they feel it's not alright for children their age to drink. More than three-quarters of all 4th graders believe they'll never use alcohol.

MORE RESOURCES:

Protecting You, Protecting Me (MADD): Information and activities for parents about the dangers of underage drinking.
www.pymp.org/parents/index.cfm

Initiative on Underage Drinking/National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism: Information and resources.
www.niaaa.nih.gov/about/underage.htm

Modeling healthy alcohol-related behavior

Alcohol is considered very common and accepted by many people. It's legal for adults over 21, and many families keep alcohol in their homes. Alcohol is frequently portrayed in the media, often in glamorous or humorous ways. For all these reasons, it's important to teach your children that alcohol should be used only in healthy and responsible ways.

What parents say – and especially what parents do – are the biggest factors influencing children’s substance use.

“Kids pick up the good and the bad.”

– Seaside community parent



Take Action

Here are effective ways you can model this behavior to your children:

- If you use alcohol, use it moderately. This generally means a maximum of 1 drink a day for women, and up to 2 drinks a day for men.
- Don’t communicate to your children that alcohol is a good way to relax or handle problems. Demonstrate other, healthier ways to relieve stress, such as exercising or talking things over with someone close to you.
- Don’t involve your children in your use of alcohol, such as asking a child to get a beer from the refrigerator.
- Keep alcohol out of reach or in a locked cabinet, starting when your children are young.
- Be aware of how you talk about drinking, such as telling stories that make drinking glamorous or funny.
- Never drink and drive, or ride in a car with a driver who’s been drinking.
- When entertaining adults, provide alcohol-free beverages and food. Do not serve anyone who’s had too much to drink, and make plans for them to get home safely.

- If your children see someone using alcohol in an unhealthy or irresponsible way, you may need to explain it. See “When a family member or friend abuses substances” (page 10) for guidance.
- Don’t support teen drinking. Your elementary-aged children are aware of your attitudes and behavior related to teen drinking, especially if there are teen siblings in the house. Do not provide alcohol to teens and their friends.

(Adapted from *Make a Difference: Talk to Your Child about Alcohol*, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism)

“If you as a parent witness something and you don’t say anything, your kids will think it’s OK. You have to acknowledge what is not right.”

– Urban parent

Cultural or religious customs – such as drinking wine at meals or religious occasions – may affect your family’s beliefs about alcohol. Take this into consideration as you set family rules and expectations about alcohol, and explain this to your children.

Protecting your children from inhalants

Like alcohol, a major challenge in inhalant prevention is the false belief that using inhalants is innocent and legal, because the substances are often found in common household products. Also, many parents don’t believe their children are at risk: 4% of parents believe their middle school children have tried inhalants, while over 22% of middle schoolers have actually tried them. It’s important that parents understand the risks and dangers of inhalant use.

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Some children start using inhalants as early as age 9 or 10. Children who use at a young age are more likely to become dependent on inhalants, and have a higher risk of serious drug use later. In Massachusetts, 4.8% of 6th graders, 5.3% of 7th graders, and 9.4% of 8th graders have used inhalants. Inhalants are found in over 1000 common household, school, or industrial products, including glues, cleaners, paint thinners, and anything in an aerosol can.

Inhalants can cause serious short-term and long-term harm to children, including:

- Sores on the nose and face
- Accidental injuries
- Weight loss
- Damage to the liver, kidneys, and central nervous system
- Problems with judgment, reasoning, and long-term memory
- Addiction
- Even death, which can occur after the first or many uses



Take Action

Right now is your opportunity to reinforce the dangers of inhalants with your children:

- Model the proper use of household products, and emphasize the harm caused by using them as inhalants.
- Don't talk with your children about the "high" inhalants may cause, and do not point out particular products that could be used as inhalants.
- Read product labels and follow directions, such as using products in an area with plenty of fresh air.
- Supervise the use of any products that could be used as inhalants, and use water-based alternative products when possible.
- Keep household products that could be used as inhalants in a locked storage space, and check them regularly to make sure that your children have not used them.

MORE RESOURCES:

National Institute of Drug Abuse: Information and resources.
www.inhalants.drugabuse.gov

Parents: Massachusetts Inhalant Task Force Packet: List of products that can be used as inhalants; substitute products; information and resources for youth and families. Order at 1-800-952-6637 (toll free) or www.maclearinghouse.com

Building strong communication with your children

Creating regular, open, and honest lines of communication about all topics is important to reducing your children's risk of substance use. Talking about substance use and its risks, and communicating your anti-drug beliefs and expectations, also protects your children.



Take Action

Here are some tips for developing strong communication with your children:

- Be a good listener. Repeat what your child has said to be sure you heard and understand what your child is saying.
- Ask open-ended questions that encourage conversation (not questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no).
- Take the chance to learn something new from your child. Listen without interruption, and ask your child to explain slang or concepts new to you.

"Deep down inside, they may have some answers you haven't even thought about."

– Urban parent

Many parents find the easiest way to discuss the topic of substance use is to take advantage of "teachable moments," like when there's been a related news story or when substance use is portrayed on TV or in music. Here are some suggestions for starting a conversation:

- If a character on TV is using substances, ask “Where do you think this person will end up in life?” or “What do you think her family thinks?”
- If a tragic story involving substance use has been on the news, explain how substance use was involved and ask for your child’s opinion.
- When you pass a billboard advertising alcohol or cigarettes, ask your children if they believe what the ad is saying. Discuss what the ad may be telling your children about alcohol or tobacco, and ask for their opinions.
- Use times of change to discuss substance use, such as starting a new school, joining a new club, or starting a new activity. Talk about your child’s hopes and fears, the possibility that your child may be exposed to substance use, and how to handle it (see “Preparing your children to deal with peer pressure,” page 17).
- Ask your children what they know about substances – particularly alcohol – and listen carefully. Take the opportunity to reinforce your rules about not using alcohol while underage and discuss how it can affect learning.

These discussions do not need to be long and overly serious. Reinforcing your expectations and asking your children’s opinions can take only a few moments, such as when you’re taking them to school or other activities, or even when you’re doing household chores together.

“Ask your child, ‘How was your day?’ and don’t let them just say ‘OK.’ Ask what they did and what happened.”

– Urban parent



When a family member or friend abuses substances

Many children have family members or family friends who abuse substances, and it's likely that your children will see this sooner or later. Your children may see substance abuse in your neighborhood or community, too. Many parents say they use this as an opportunity to talk with their children about substance use and abuse. Here are some suggestions for how you can handle it:

- Explain what is happening and why.
- Explain how this is harmful to the family member or friend you care about.
- Take the opportunity to express how much you care for your child and reinforce your family rules and expectations.

What if my child asks if I used substances?

Many parents are concerned about getting this question, and some say this fear makes it difficult to start conversations with their children. It's natural to worry about this question, but it's important to talk with your children and be ready for the question if it does come up. One way of handling the situation can be to keep the conversation focused on your child. You can say something like, "I want to talk about you and make sure you're safe. Let's talk about what may come up when you're in middle school – I'd like to hear what you think."

If your child insists on an answer, honesty is often the best solution, because it maintains your children’s trust in you. However, you may not be comfortable answering the question, and there may be a better time when they’re older. In that case, you should let your child know that you choose not to share your experiences. If you do admit to using substances when you were young, you don’t need to provide details, but can instead talk about the negative consequences. You can answer by saying something like:

- “When I was young I drank alcohol because some of my friends did. I thought I needed to in order to fit in. But I was wrong – most kids didn’t drink then, and most kids don’t drink now.”
- “I smoked cigarettes when I was young, but we didn’t know just how dangerous smoking was back then. If I had known, I never would have started, because it’s addictive and very hard to quit.”
- “Everybody makes mistakes. When I used drugs, I made a big one. But I love you and want to save you from making a bad decision like I made.”

(Adapted from *Keeping Your Kids Drug-Free*, Office of National Drug Control Policy)

If you’ve never used substances, share this with your children. Tell them how you resisted peer pressure when you were younger, and why you made the decisions you did. Let them know how those decisions have made you a happier and healthier person.

Building caring relationships with your children

Now is a great opportunity to build strong parent-child relationships that can help protect your children from substance use later. Teens who say they have an “excellent relationship” with either of their parents are 25% less likely to use substances. The risk is even smaller for teens who have excellent relationships with both parents. The following qualities are all related to a reduced risk of substance abuse:

- A caring and supportive family environment
- Parents having high expectations of their children
- Parents encouraging their children to take part in family routines
- Parents offering praise, affection, and acceptance



Take Action

Here are some ideas for getting closer to your children:

- Make time to have family dinners. While busy schedules can sometimes make sitting down to family dinners a challenge, spending this time together can help reduce your children’s risk of substance use later. Teens who have dinner with their families several nights a week are less likely to try alcohol than teens who have family dinners less often. And 30% of teens say they wish that they could openly discuss substance abuse with their parents at dinner.
- Spend at least 15 minutes each day doing something your child wants to do, like talking, cooking a meal together, playing a game, or doing a craft project your child chooses. The more time you can spend with your children, the better.



- Try to do something special together at least once a week. Suggest things like a family movie night at home, going to the park or museum, skating, or a day trip to another town.
- Take opportunities to note your children's strengths, such as in sports, crafts, or other activities. Point out moments when they do something special or make extra effort, like treating someone well or volunteering to help.
- Support your children's activities, such as sports, school activities, or other hobbies. Attend as many of their games or other events as you can.

"I teach my children by example."

– Urban parent

Setting clear rules and expectations about substance use

Setting clear, no-use rules about alcohol, inhalants, and other substances will protect your children. Don't make the mistake of believing that alcohol use is "just going to happen" and that it's a rite of passage. In fact, parents' expectations play a bigger role in teen substance use than peer pressure. Starting at a young age, sending and repeating the message that you disapprove of substance use can help to reduce your children's risk.

Some family rules and expectations to consider setting include:

- No one under 21 will drink alcohol (religious occasions may be an exception). Inhalants and drugs are not allowed.
- Older siblings will not encourage younger brothers or sisters to drink and will not give them alcohol.

- Kids will not stay at parties where there is alcohol or drugs, and they won't get in a car with a driver who's been drinking or using drugs.

(Adapted from *Make a Difference: Talk to Your Child about Alcohol*, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism)



Take Action

Here are some ways you and the rest of your family can communicate rules and expectations:

- "I've been thinking lately that I've never actually told you this: I don't want you using alcohol, inhalants, tobacco, or other illegal drugs."
- "The rule in our house is that nobody uses drugs."
- "I love you and want the best for you, so I don't want you using alcohol or any drug."
- "It's my job as a parent to keep you safe, so I'm going to ask you questions about who you're with and what you are doing."

(From *Keeping Your Kids Drug-Free*, Office of National Drug Control Policy)

It's also important to enforce family rules at all times, and with appropriate consequences – even rules not related to substance use. Consequences can be positive, like recognizing when your child has followed the rules. Consequences can also be negative, such as limiting TV or Internet use. When rules are broken, consequences related to the rule should be enforced. Be clear with your children about the consequences of broken rules or unmet expectations.



Setting such rules and expectations now can have an impact later: teens who say their parents would disapprove of them having alcoholic drinks use alcohol at lower rates than teens who believe their parents would approve. Teens whose parents believe their children are not likely to use drugs are, in fact, much less likely to use substances. And many teens report one of the greatest risks of using drugs is disappointing their parents. Remember that moderate rules are most effective: being overly controlling or strict can put children at risk for substance use, too.

Monitoring your children's activities

In addition to having clear rules and expectations, supervising and monitoring your children can reduce their risk of using substances. This includes knowing your children's friends, knowing where they are and when, and what kinds of activities they are involved in. Being aware can help you prevent risky situations and take action if necessary.



Take Action

Here are some tips:

- Have your children check in with you regularly. Provide them with change, phone cards, or cell phones, with clear rules for using them. Make sure your children know how and when to reach you.
- Make a list of the coming day's activities to post in the house or keep with you.
- Know your children's friends. This can help you see and prevent potential problems, especially because children are more likely to try substances if their friends are using them.

- Get to know the parents of your children’s friends – look for them at meetings or activities, or call to arrange a meeting. Ask them about their rules, and let them know about yours.
- Work with other parents to create a list of phone numbers, addresses, and email addresses – including other places where your children like to hang out.
- Pick up your child a little early from an activity so you can observe how she or he behaves.

"I must meet the family before my child can go to a friend’s house."
- Seaside community parent

Getting involved

Keeping your children involved in positive, structured activities can help protect them from substance use. After-school programs, sports leagues, and programs offered by community agencies may be good options for your children to be active and form relationships with peers and other adults.

You can help protect your children and others from substance use by getting involved in community efforts. Schools, youth programs, and community groups may be active in preventing substance use in your community. You can get involved in a local parent-teacher organization, neighborhood association, or anti-drug group.

MORE RESOURCES:

MA Regional Centers for Healthy Communities: Resources and information about local substance use prevention activities. 1-800-327-5050 (toll free) to learn the location nearest you or www.mass.gov/dph/ohc/reghealthcenters.htm

Too Smart to Start: Resources including a community action kit. 1-800-729-6686 (toll free) or www.toosmarttostart.samhsa.gov/commresources.html

United Way First Call for Help: Information and referrals for youth, cultural, and family services. 1-800-231-4377 (toll free; 24 hours)

Preparing your children to deal with peer pressure

Peer pressure related to substance use is subtle – it’s more than “just saying no.” The peer pressure young people feel is more related to their wanting to be accepted, to belong, and to be noticed.

Late-elementary-aged children are heading into a major time of change – moving from elementary school to middle school – and these changes can be risky and stressful times for children. In elementary school, very few children are using substances. But as children enter middle school, they become more exposed to substance use, and most importantly, some of their peers start experimenting. Because kids want to be accepted and

liked, it may leave them with the decision to join in using substances, or to leave the group and seek new friends. Kids can even turn peer pressure around and use it positively to encourage their friends to stop using.

"I've told my children, 'Come ask me – I'll explain. I want you to know I'm here and we can talk about it.'"

– Urban parent



Take Action

You can help build your children's skills to resist this pressure – and maybe even turn it around.

- Prepare your children for these changes. Talk about the possibility that they will become more exposed to substance use, including among their friends.
- Reinforce the fact that most young people are not drinking or using drugs.
- Help your children feel comfortable in social situations. Remember, peer pressure is often about acceptance. Help your children "break the ice" with others and teach them how to ask questions of other people and listen. Talk about awkward moments you've had – and that it's OK to feel uncomfortable sometimes. Help your children work through misunderstandings.
- Help your children practice "turn down" comments if offered alcohol or other substances. They can decide what their set of "no" comments will be, but you can help them practice their comments and how to leave the situation if necessary. These responses can include "No thanks" or "I have to go." Some

children may want to express their position and say “I don’t drink alcohol/do drugs” or “It’s not for me.” Others may say it would get them in trouble with their parents, coach, etc. Some children may need extra attention in practicing their responses if it’s hard for them to turn down older kids or adults.

- Teach your children to think about media messages (see page 9). Many media messages about substances glamorize their use and play upon people’s desire to be popular and attractive – exactly the issues children this age are starting to face. Help your children understand the intent of the message, who created it, and why using alcohol or tobacco is not as glamorous or funny as the ad says. This is called “media literacy.”

MORE RESOURCES:

The Cool Spot: Interactive website for young teens, including information on the risks of underage drinking and resisting peer pressure.
www.thecoolspot.gov

“Reversing” peer pressure

Encourage your children not only to resist pressure to use substances, but to take a stand against substance use among their friends. This is an ideal opportunity to “turn the tables” on peer pressure and reverse friends’ substance use before it becomes a serious pattern.

- Help your children understand when it is best to turn to you, or another trusted adult, for help.

- Help your children practice what to say and how to handle such situations.
- Your child can say, “You’re my friend and I care for you. I’m worried about you using substances and how it’s caused a problem or affected others. I’d like to help you, and this is how. It’s important to me that my friends not use substances.”
- Let your children know you can be trusted and would like to hear about their efforts.

Other adults can help

Other family members, family friends, neighbors, youth program leaders, coaches, and religious leaders can help protect your children from substance use. They may be able to deliver anti-substance messages, and help to reinforce your rules and expectations. Such adults can be especially helpful if a parent is dealing with their own substance abuse. Here are a couple of ideas for talking with adults who work with your children:

- “My child looks up to you as his/her (program leader, teacher, coach, mentor, etc.). Here are our family rules and expectations about substances.”
- “Do you ever do programs or talk with the children about substance use? If not, would you be willing to talk with them and help to support what I’m trying to teach my children at home?”

(Adapted from *Having the Conversation...with an Adult Influencer*, National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign)

Facing substance abuse issues in your home

Half of all children live in a home where a parent or other adult drinks heavily, or uses tobacco or illegal drugs. Current parental substance abuse puts children at higher risk of abusing substances than past substance abuse – so getting help is not only healthy for the caregiver, but healthy for your children too. New kinds of treatment are available, and some treatment does not require health insurance.

Parents with substance abuse in their past may also worry about the effect this has on their children. The most important thing for parents to know is that confronting and dealing with their problem was the healthiest thing they could do for their children. (See “What if my child asks if I used substances?” page 10).

GETTING HELP:

MA Substance Abuse Information and Education Helpline:

Information and treatment referrals. 1-800-327-5050 (toll free; 24 hours; multi-lingual) or www.helpline-online.com

Quitworks: Advice and resources for trying to stop smoking. 1-800-879-8678 (toll free; multi-lingual) or www.trytostop.org

Al-Anon: Groups to help friends and families of alcoholics. 1-888-425-2666 (toll free) or www.al-anon.org

Adolescent Substance Abuse Program, Children’s Hospital, Boston:

Information, diagnosis, referrals. 1-617-355-2727 or www.ceasar-boston.org

How well do you know your child?

These questions can help you learn more about your children. Talk with your children about your answers to find out how well you know them.

What is your child's favorite color?

Who is your child's best friend?

What are the names of your child's teachers? Who is your child's favorite teacher? Do you know why?

Who are some of your child's role models? What does he or she admire about those individuals?

What is your child's favorite food?

What is your child's favorite movie or TV show?

What three words would your child use to describe him/herself?

What are your child's hobbies?

What are your child's future goals?

(Adapted from *Keeping Youth Drug Free*, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)

If you found you didn't know the answers to all these questions, don't worry – this is a great time to ask your child questions and get closer.

If you found you know your child well, congratulations and keep it up! Parents who are close to their children help to keep them on a substance-free path.



TO LEARN MORE ABOUT PREVENTION:

Massachusetts

Massachusetts Health Promotion Clearinghouse: Free publications on many health topics. 1-800-952-6637 (toll free) or www.maclearinghouse.com. Substance abuse prevention materials include:

- *Be the First to Talk with Your Pre-Teen about Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drugs: A Family Guide* booklet for parents of pre-teens
- *7 Ways to Protect Your Teen from Alcohol and Other Drugs* booklet for parents of teens
- *Don't Give Kids Alcohol* brochure for parents
- *Inhalants Poison Your Body* brochure for middle-school aged youth
- *Choose to Keep Your Freedom* brochure for 10 to 18-year olds

Massachusetts and Rhode Island Poison Control Center: Information and hotline about inhalants and other poisons. 1-800-222-1222 (toll free; 24 hours) or www.maripoisoncenter.com

Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Bureau of Substance Abuse Services: Information, statistics, publications. www.mass.gov/dph/bsas/bsas.htm

National

Join Together: Information, publications, advocacy. www.jointogether.org

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information:

Information, publications, referrals. 1-800-729-6686 (toll free; English and Spanish) or www.health.org

SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services

Administration): Information, referrals, helpline. 1-800-662-4357 (toll free; English)/1-877-767-8432 (toll free; Spanish) or www.samhsa.gov

Family Matters: Publications, step-by-step on-line guide.

www.sph.unc.edu/familymatters

Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids: Information, advocacy.

1-202-296-5469 or www.tobaccofreekids.org

Selected information sources for this booklet include:

Join Together Online, www.jointogether.org

Massachusetts Department of Public Health and Massachusetts Department of Education, "Massachusetts Youth Health Survey," 2004

National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, Columbia University, www.casacolumbia.org

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, www.niaaa.nih.gov

National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign, Office of National Drug Control Policy, www.theantidrug.com

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, www.samhsa.gov

