



Stronger Connections, Safer Choices:

A Guide to Meaningful Communication with Youth



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Introduction



This guide brings together a variety of resources and tools to help adults build strong, meaningful communication with the youth in their lives. The first section includes content from “Piece by Piece: Connecting with Your Kids,” developed by Challenge of Tarrant County and STARR Lab at the UTA School of Social Work. It combines evidence-based prevention messaging, practical communication strategies, and real-life conversation examples to support families and caregivers in promoting healthy, drug-free lifestyles. Additional sections provide guidance on topics like medication safety, responding to opioid or fentanyl overdoses, and more. The guide concludes with an activity workbook adults can use alongside youth to strengthen communication and encourage safer choices.

Remember, your role is to help your child develop skills for a healthy lifestyle. Research shows teens are 50% less likely to use drugs when their parents talk with them about it. Even more compelling, two-thirds of teens say that maintaining their parents’ respect is a key reason they avoid drinking or using drugs— an influence stronger than social media or peer pressure. Now more than ever, your steady presence and guidance matter.

YOU are their #1 influencer!!!

“Conscious parenting is not about being perfect, it’s about being aware. Aware of what your kids need from you to reach more of their full potential.”
– Alex Urbina

“Parenting teenagers is an exercise in letting go, while holding on with all of your heart.”
– Michelle Cruz-Rosado



Understanding Your Teen



-Why It Matters: Early, honest discussions prevent risky behaviors and substance misuse.

-Parental Role: Open, consistent involvement helps youth make informed, healthy choices.

-Your Teen: It is important to see your teen as an independent individual with unique opinions and experiences. By respecting their lived experiences and emotions, you can build a stronger relationship built on love and mutual respect. Accept that your teen's interests and worldview might be different than yours.

What your teen is experiencing as they grow through adolescence:

- Biological changes
- Social pressures
- Academic requirements
- Extracurricular activities
- Family responsibilities

Any one of these factors is difficult enough to navigate on their own. Your teen is attempting to balance any and all of them at the same time. This is why it is vitally important that they have the love and support of trusted parents, caregivers, and adults.



“At the end of the day, the most overwhelming key to a child’s success is the positive involvement of parents.” – Jane D. Hull

Conversations with teens are like relationships — they take time, effort, and a genuine desire to connect. They aren't one-time events, but ongoing interactions that grow and deepen over time. In fact, research shows that 60 one-minute conversations are often more effective and better received than a single long, serious talk. Regular, low-pressure check-ins help build trust and make it easier for teens to open up when something important comes along.

Before starting a conversation, consider two key things: timing and setting. Just like adults, teens may need time to unwind after a full day. Being tired, hungry, or stressed can make them less receptive. Choosing a relaxed time like during a car ride, while cooking, or on a walk can help conversations flow more naturally.

Talking with teens about tough topics like drugs, alcohol, and peer presence can feel overwhelming. Many parents worry about saying the wrong thing or believe their words won't make a difference. But research shows that's not true—what you say and how you say it matters more than you think.



Below are some common myths about parent–teen conversations, paired with the facts that can help guide you. Use these insights to feel more confident, start more open conversations, and keep communication going with your teen.

Parental Reluctance to Talk with Teens	
Myth	Fact
"My teen will not listen to me."	Teens and young adults report that parents are the number one source they turn to for important information.
"At this point, my teen should know better."	Providing your teen with additional information as they continue to navigate new situations each day will help them to make informed decisions.
"My teen is not interested in drinking."	Over 90% of teens try alcohol before graduating from high school.
"My teen has learned about the negative effects of substance use."	To be certain your teen has learned the information you want them to have, talk with them. Not all issues are covered in health classes in school.
"My teen knows not to believe everything they see on social media."	Research shows that 75% of teens report that seeing pictures and videos on social media that depict their friends and classmates drinking has motivated them to try alcohol.
Open communication builds trust and helps teens make informed decisions	

“The point of parenting is not to have all of the answers before we start out, but instead to figure it out on the go as our children grow. Because as they do, so will we.”
– Bridgett Miller

What Parents & Caregivers Should Consider



Communication is easier when the foundation of relationships has been established. When building relationships, research shows that continued conversations are most effective.

Factors to Consider When Preparing to Speak to Your Teen:

-Be Approachable: Be interested in your teen's life and what is important to them. Teens seek honesty and openness from you. Create a safe place for open and honest discussion without judgement.

-Pay Attention: Know your teen so you can spot changes any changes in mood or behavior.

-Recognize Warning Signs: Be present is more than merely being in the same room. Parents and caregivers should pay attention to things like sudden changes in mood and behavior, withdrawing from family or regular activities, declining performance in school, and/or secretive behavior. These may not be the result of substance misuse, but they could still be important indicators that your teen needs extra support and connection.

-Use Active Listening: Validate their feelings before offering advice. Show them that you pay attention when they speak with non-judgemental and inviting body language.

"No parent is always conscious, gentle, positive, peaceful, and authentic. We have to choose to be and practice moment by moment, day after day. The more we practice, the stronger we grow." – Lelia Schott



-Common Ground: Consider everyday topics, shared interests, or observations you’ve noted in your teen or around the house. Teens are more likely to open up when they have natural and easy entry points to a conversation. Some helpful topics could include shared interests, things happening in the family, etc.



-Model a Sense of Calm: Teens mirror your tone and approach. Try to avoid judgmental language or emotional overreactions when they confide difficult things to you. Your goal is to provide a safe space for your teen.

-Encourage Responsibility: Empower youth to make smart, independent choices. Focus on the teens’ strength and ability to be the catalyst of their own change.

-Ask Open-ended Questions: Encourage full responses with questions that attempt to move beyond simple ‘yes’ and ‘no’ responses. Be patient as you wait for them to respond.

Using Open-ended and Non-Judgmental Language with Teens:

Open-ended questions are questions that can’t be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." Instead, they invite the person to share more about their thoughts, feelings, or experiences in their own words. These questions often start with words like "how," "what," "tell me about," or "in what ways." When talking with teens, open-ended questions are especially valuable because they:

- Encourage deeper conversation and self-reflection
- Give teens more control over the discussion, which can help them feel respected
- Reduce pressure and make it easier for them to open up
- Provide richer, meaningful responses that help adults understand their teen’s perspective

In contrast, closed-ended questions often shut down conversation or lead to brief, limited responses.

Open-ended and Non-judgmental Language	
Close-ended or judgmental	Open-ended and non-judgmental
"Did you have a good day?"	"Tell me about your day."
"Do your friends approve of drinking?"	"What do your friends think about drinking alcohol?"
"Do you have questions about substance use?"	"What questions do you have about substance use?"
"Do you see alcohol on social media?"	"Tell me about how you see alcohol when you are on social media."
"You don't approve of drugs, do you?"	"What are your thoughts on drug use in high school?"

Open-ended questions encourage deeper conversation and understanding



“Teenagers are not problems to be solved but individuals to be understood.”
– Louise Ames

Addressing Teen Concerns About Communication		
Teen Concern	Teen Objection	Parental Response
Fear of hearing a lecture	"I know what you will do if we talk. You'll lecture me like you always do, and if I try to argue you will get mad."	"You're right. This time I won't lecture. I will listen to what you think. I trust you, and I want things to change now that you are getting older."
Anger about not being trusted	"You don't trust me!"	"I trust you. But this is a very important issue I want us to talk about so we can figure out ways to handle everything effectively—and to do that, we need to talk with each other."
Fear of punishment	"Sure, if I tell you what's going on, you'll ground me."	"I promise I won't respond that way. I want you to feel safe being open and honest with me."
The teen thinks they know it all	"I've heard it all before. We don't need to talk."	"You probably already know quite a bit. But it would mean a lot to me if we talked it through. Besides, it would help me understand how things are different from when I was your age."
Fear of being embarrassed	"This is so embarrassing. Why do we even have to talk about this?"	"I get that it feels uncomfortable. Honestly, it feels a little awkward for me too. But it's important—and I'd rather we both feel awkward for a few minutes than risk something harmful happening to you."
Belief that 'everyone else is doing it'	"Everyone at school drinks or tries stuff. It's normal."	"I know it may feel that way, but actually most teens are choosing not to. Even if some are, that doesn't mean it's safe—or right—for you. I care more about your health and
Fear of disappointing parents	"If I tell you the truth, you'll be so disappointed in me."	"I might feel worried, but I'll never stop loving you. I'd rather you be honest with me so we can figure it out together than have you go through it alone."
Changing the subject	"Can we not talk about this right now? Let's just watch TV."	"I understand you don't feel like talking right now. But this is important, and I don't want to put it off. Let's pick a time that works for both of us."
Patience and understanding create space for meaningful conversations		

"Every day, in a hundred small ways, our children ask, 'Do you see me? Do you hear me? Do I matter?' This behavior often reflects our response."

– L. R. Knost

Starting the Conversation



Open, ongoing communication between parents and teens is one of the strongest protective factors against substance misuse. But knowing how to begin the conversation can sometimes feel tricky or intimidating. The goal is to make these talks natural, safe, and judgment-free.

Creating the Right Atmosphere

Where and when you talk can matter as much as what you say. The right environment helps your teen feel comfortable and respected.

-Privacy: Choose a space where your teen can speak freely without worrying about being overheard—like a walk outside, a car ride, or sitting together in their room. Privacy signals that this is a safe space just for the two of you.

-Safety: Create emotional safety by showing patience and empathy. Avoid lecturing or reacting harshly if your teen shares something difficult. A calm, steady tone helps them feel that you're a partner, not a judge.

-Familiarity: Pick a setting your teen already associates with comfort—such as the kitchen table, the living room couch, or your favorite coffee stop. Familiar spaces can make big conversations feel less intimidating.

-Timing: Good timing can make or break the success of a serious talk.

Try to engage when your teen is:

- **Rested:** Avoid late-night talks when everyone's tired.
- **Fed:** Hunger or low blood sugar can make anyone cranky or distracted.
- **Relaxed:** Choose a moment when your teen is calm—not right after an argument, practice, or stressful school event.



Sometimes the hardest part of connecting with your teen is simply figuring out how to begin. Conversation starters can help take the pressure off both of you by giving you a natural way to open up dialogue about everyday life, feelings, and choices.

These prompts aren’t about lecturing or catching your teen off guard—they’re about creating space for real, judgment-free conversation. Whether you’re in the car, making dinner, or just hanging out, these questions can help build trust, encourage reflection, and keep communication strong.

Remember: it’s less about finding the perfect words and more about showing genuine curiosity, listening closely, and letting your teen know that what they think and feel truly matters.

Helpful Prompts for Initiating a Conversation:

- I was wondering if I could ask you about something

- What are your thoughts about [drug/alcohol use, negative social media etc.]

- Did you hear about [drug/alcohol use, negative social media etc]

- What are some obstacles that might get in the way of your biggest dream?

- How would you handle the situation if someone asked you to do something you know is wrong?

- What does the school do about [drug/alcohol use, negative social media etc.]



Age-Appropriate Conversation Starters	
Age/Stage	Sample Conversation Starters
11-13 (early teens)	"What do you think makes someone trustworthy?"
14-16 (mid-teens)	"What would you do if a friend offered you something?"
17-19 (older teens)	"How do you think drinking could impact your goals?"

Tailoring conversations to developmental stages creates more meaningful connections

“I may not be able to give my kids everything they want, but I give them what they need: love, time, and attention. You can’t buy those things.”
– Nishan Panwar

Conversations starter for hard topics

“What do you think makes it hard for teens to say no in certain situations?”

“When you think about your goals or future, what kinds of things help you stay on track?”

“If you ever felt unsure or uncomfortable about something happening around you, what would help you feel safe talking to me about it?”

“What are some healthy ways you’ve found to handle stress, pressure, or big emotions?”

“What do you wish adults understood better about what teens deal with socially?”

“What’s something you’ve noticed lately about how people your age talk about alcohol or drugs?”

“How do you feel when you see things online or at school about vaping, smoking, or substances?”

“What kinds of pressures do teens your age deal with that adults don’t always understand?”

“If a friend was in a situation where people around them were using substances, what advice would you give them?”

“What helps you make decisions you feel good about when you’re with your friends?”



What to do if the conversation doesn’t go as planned?

-Don’t argue

-Ask for clarification

-Don’t judge

-Ensure the teen that you will remain calm and non-judgmental no matter what they share.

-Make your actions match your words.

-Show concern and empathy

-Apologize when necessary.

-Ask where the teen gets his/her information



Steps for Difficult Conversations	
Step	Why It Matters
Take time to calm down	Keeps the conversation from becoming a fight
Choose the right moment	Reduces defensiveness
Express concern, not anger	Builds trust and safety
Ask, don't accuse	Encourages honesty
Know when to seek help	Shows strength, not weakness

Thoughtful approach leads to more productive conversations

“Having a parent who listens creates a child who believes he or she has a voice that matters in this world.” -Rachel Macy Stafford

Maintaining a Strong Connection



Sometimes the hardest part of connecting with your teen is simply figuring out how to begin. Conversation starters can help take the pressure off both of you by giving you a natural way to open up dialogue about everyday life, feelings, and choices.

These prompts aren't about lecturing or catching your teen off guard—they're about creating space for real, judgment-free conversation. Whether you're in the car, making dinner, or just hanging out, these questions can help build trust, encourage reflection, and keep communication strong.

Remember: it's less about finding the perfect words and more about showing genuine curiosity, listening closely, and letting your teen know that what they think and feel truly matters.

Keep Communication Ongoing:

Always end conversations by letting your teen know that you are always there for them and that the door is open to talk at any time. It's not enough to just say that there is an open door. You should always be looking for opportunities to connect and converse with your teen. Actions speak louder than words, and what your teen appreciates most of all is your continued presence in their life.

Use simple, everyday moments to reconnect:

Your continued and engaged presence will show your teen that you see and hear them. Bring up topics briefly during a car ride, while cooking, or walking the dog — relaxed environments reduce tension and pressure.

Be willing to be vulnerable and apologize:

Admit when you were wrong or moments where you didn't communicate effectively. If something you said came out wrong, you can acknowledge that with something as simple like: "I've been thinking about our talk. I realize I might've sounded upset — I was worried, not angry."

"Speak with your child as if they are the wisest, kindest, most beautiful humans on earth, for what they believe is what they will become." – Brooke Hampton



Ask for their input:

Ask them for ways to make future conversations and time together meaningful. Involving them in the process models mutual respect.

Timing:

Good timing can make or break the success of a serious talk.

Try to engage when your teen is:

- **Rested:** Avoid late-night talks when everyone’s tired.
- **Fed:** Hunger or low blood sugar can make anyone cranky or distracted.
- **Relaxed:** Choose a moment when your teen is calm—not right after an argument, practice, or stressful school event.

Celebrate the wins and nurture through the hard times:

Make sure that you follow-up with your teens equally when they are enjoying successes and when they might be struggling through a particularly hard time.

Encourage Long-term Health and Wellness:

Help your teen understand the importance of everyday healthy choices. Support them to understand the importance of getting adequate rest, having a nutritious diet, maintaining healthy relationships, and participating in positive activities. Every seemingly small healthy decision strengthens your child mentally, emotionally, and physically.

Set and maintain clear expectations:

Set clear expectations, family rules, about teen behavior based on facts and not emotion. Be consistent about how these expectations are discussed and followed. Communicate any consequences and next steps that come along with said expectations. Eliminating surprise consequences and wavering expectations allows for trust, security, and openness.

How Adult Behaviors Influence Teen Perceptions	
Adult Behavior	What a Teen Might Think
Drinking wine every evening to relax	"Alcohol is the best way to cope with stress."
Joking about "needing a drink" after work	"Drinking is normal and expected."
Turning off phone to be present at dinner	"Family time matters more than screens."

Teens learn more from what we do than what we say

“If parents want to give their children a gift, the best thing they can do is to teach their children to love challenges, be intrigued by mistakes, enjoy effort, and keep on learning. That way, they will have a lifelong way to build and repair their own confidence.”
– Carol S. Dweck



Healthy Connections Checklist



There are numerous ways to build relationships while teaching valuable life skills that will promote healthy choices. As you continue to build your relationship and connection with your teen, think about how the strategies and ideas listed below can benefit their well-being. No parent is expected to check off all of these boxes, but focusing on one or two items at a time with your teen can make a world of difference in their lives. Remember...you don't have to be an expert or know all of the answer, being present and involved is the foundation.

Fostering Healthy Self-Esteem

- Acknowledge choices that result in positive results
- Help evaluate choices that resulted in negative results
- Help set realistic goals
- Provide choices
- Offer responsibilities
- Focus on teens' strengths without comparisons
- Take all your teen's concerns seriously
- Empower their individuality by normalizing and accepting that your teen's interest might be different than yours
- Reinforce their strengths by reminding them of situations where they made good decisions

Resiliency

- Develop competency
- Perfection is not real
- Mistakes viewed as learning opportunities
- Solution focused view of solving problems
- Teach self-compassion
- Self-care by choosing healthy habits

Emotional Regulation

- Identify emotions
- Teach stress management
- Promote mindfulness and being present

Empowerment and Confidence

- Draw from past positive experiences
- Teach refusal skills
- Be honest about the truth regarding consequences of drug and alcohol use and poor choices
- Provide the teen with refusal skills



"Children are not a distraction from more important work. They are the most important work." – C.S. Lewis

Critical Thinking and Decision-Making

- Teach how to analyze the situation
- Determine what the pros and cons are for different situations
- Make decisions that align with values and goals
- Take time to role play and practice different life skills



Planning for the Future

- Set goal setting (short and long term)
- Teach how to stay motivated and persevere to complete goals
- Celebrate milestones

Fostering Continual Healthy Choices

- Be active in teaching your teens about responsibilities
- Use how, what, and why questions in teaching about decisions making

Clear Expectations vs. Vague Messages

Vague Message	Clear Expectation
"I don't want you drinking...I guess."	"We expect you not to use alcohol or drugs."
"Just be smart about it."	"Even if others are using, we want you to say no."
"Only at parties, I guess?"	"We don't allow underage drinking, period."

Clear expectations help teens understand boundaries and make better decisions

"My parents gave me the greatest gift anyone could give another person: They believed in me." —Jim Valvano

"Encourage and support your kids, because children are apt to live up to what you believe in them." —Lady Bird Johnson

"The way we talk to our children becomes their inner voice."
— Peggy O'Mara

"As your kids grow up, they may forget what you said, but they won't forget how you made them feel." —Kevin Heath



Medication Safety: Safe Use, Storage, and Disposal

Prescription and over-the-counter medications can be helpful when used correctly, but they can also pose risks when misused or accessed without permission. Many young people who misuse medication report that they obtained it from their own home or from a friend or relative's home. For this reason, parents and caregivers play a critical role in helping prevent medication misuse.

Creating a medication-safe home does not require complicated systems. Simple habits—such as monitoring medications, storing them securely, and disposing of unused medications—can greatly reduce the risk of misuse while modeling responsible behavior for your teen.

By treating medications with the same level of care as other potentially harmful household items, parents send a clear message: medications are helpful tools when used correctly, but they should never be taken casually or shared.

Safe Medication Practices for Parents and Caregivers

Practicing medication safety at home protects both your child and others who may visit your home. Consider adopting the following strategies:

Use medications exactly as directed

- Follow dosage instructions on prescription labels and over-the-counter packaging.
- Never take more than the recommended amount or mix medications without guidance from a healthcare professional.
- Avoid sharing prescription medications with others—even if symptoms seem similar.

Store medications securely

- Keep medications in a secure location such as a locked cabinet, lockbox, or high shelf.
- Avoid storing medications in easily accessible places such as kitchen counters, purses, backpacks, or bathroom drawers.
- Be mindful of medications carried in bags or vehicles that teens might access.

Monitor your medications

- Keep track of the quantity of pills or doses remaining.
- Regularly check medicine cabinets to know what medications are in your home.
- Pay attention to missing pills or bottles that appear tampered with.

Model responsible behavior

- Let your teen see that you treat medications carefully and responsibly.
- Explain that medications are powerful substances meant to help when used properly but can be harmful when misused.



Safe Medication Disposal

Unused or expired medications should be removed from the home as soon as they are no longer needed. Keeping old medications increases the risk that someone might misuse them.

Best practices for medication disposal include:

- Use medication take-back programs. Many communities host safe medication disposal events or maintain permanent drop boxes at pharmacies or law enforcement locations.
- Participate in community take-back days. These events provide a safe and environmentally responsible way to dispose of medications.
- Follow FDA disposal instructions. If a take-back option is not available, mix medications (without crushing pills) with undesirable substances such as coffee grounds or kitty litter, place them in a sealed bag, and throw them away in the household trash.
- Remove personal information from prescription labels before disposing of containers.

Proper disposal helps prevent accidental ingestion, misuse by youth, and environmental contamination.

Talking with Your Teen About Medication Safety

Just as parents talk to their teens about alcohol, vaping, and other substances, it is important to talk about medication safety. Many teens mistakenly believe that prescription medications are safer than other drugs because they are prescribed by a doctor. Helping teens understand the risks of misuse can protect them from harm.

These conversations do not need to be long or formal. Small discussions over time—during a car ride, while cooking dinner, or during everyday moments—can be very effective.

When discussing medication safety with your teen:

Explain the difference between use and misuse

- Medication is safe when taken exactly as prescribed to the person it was prescribed for.
- Misuse occurs when someone takes medication that is not prescribed to them, takes a higher dose, or uses it for a different purpose.

Talk about real risks

- Misusing prescription medications can lead to serious health consequences, addiction, or accidental overdose.
- Combining medications with alcohol or other substances can be especially dangerous.

Encourage questions

- Invite your teen to ask questions about medications they hear about at school or see online.
- Keep the conversation judgment-free so they feel comfortable coming to you.

Set clear family expectations

- Make it clear that taking someone else's medication or sharing prescriptions is not acceptable.
- Reinforce that they can always come to you if they feel pressured or unsure about a situation.

Conversation Starters for Medication Safety

Sometimes the easiest way to talk about medication safety is to start with simple, open-ended questions:

- “Have you ever heard students talk about using prescription pills at school?”
- “What do people your age think about sharing medications?”
- “Why do you think some teens think prescription pills are safer than other drugs?”
- “What would you do if a friend offered you a pill they said would help you focus or relax?”

These types of questions encourage teens to share their perspective while giving parents the opportunity to provide accurate information and guidance.

Opioid Overdose Awareness and Naloxone

Opioid overdoses have become a serious public health concern across communities in the United States. Prescription pain medications, heroin, and synthetic opioids such as fentanyl can slow or stop breathing when taken in high amounts or when mixed with other substances.

Many overdoses happen unexpectedly, often involving medications that were originally prescribed for pain or obtained from friends, family members, or counterfeit pills. Because opioids affect the part of the brain that controls breathing, an overdose can quickly become life-threatening.

One of the most important tools for preventing fatal overdoses is naloxone, a medication that can rapidly reverse the effects of opioids. Naloxone can restore breathing in someone experiencing an opioid overdose and give emergency responders time to provide additional care.

Learning how to recognize an overdose and respond quickly can save a life.

Talking With Teens About Opioids and Overdose Prevention

Conversations about opioid misuse and overdose may feel uncomfortable, but open communication can help protect young people.

When talking with teens:

- Explain that many overdoses today involve pills that contain fentanyl, a powerful synthetic opioid.
- Emphasize that taking pills that are not prescribed to them can be extremely dangerous, even if they appear to be legitimate medications.
- Encourage teens to seek help immediately if they believe someone may be experiencing an overdose.

Helpful conversation starters include:

- “What have you heard about fentanyl or opioid overdoses?”
- “Do students at school talk about prescription pills?”
- “What would you do if you saw someone having a medical emergency at a party?”

These conversations can help teens understand the risks and feel more confident about making safe decisions.

Prevention Starts at Home

Parents and caregivers play an important role in reducing the risk of opioid misuse and overdose.

Protective steps include:

- Storing medications securely
- Monitoring prescriptions in the home
- Properly disposing of unused medications
- Talking openly about substance misuse risks
- Keeping naloxone available when possible

By combining education, communication, and prevention strategies, families can help protect young people and strengthen community safety.

What Is Naloxone?

Naloxone is a medication designed to reverse the effects of opioid drugs. It works by quickly blocking opioids from the brain's receptors, which helps restore normal breathing.

Naloxone:

- Works within 2–3 minutes in many cases
- Is safe and easy to use
- Has no effect if opioids are not present
- Can be administered by bystanders, parents, teachers, and community members

Naloxone is most commonly available as a nasal spray and is widely distributed by pharmacies, health departments, community programs, and emergency responders. Because opioid overdoses can occur anywhere—homes, schools, or social gatherings—many communities encourage families to keep naloxone available as a safety measure. Having naloxone does not encourage drug use. Instead, it is similar to having a fire extinguisher or first aid kit—an important tool that can help in an emergency.

Recognizing the Signs of an Opioid Overdose

Recognizing the warning signs of an overdose quickly is critical. An opioid overdose often affects breathing and consciousness.

Common signs include:

- Slow, shallow, or stopped breathing
- Unconsciousness or inability to wake the person
- Blue or gray lips and fingernails
- Gurgling, choking, or snoring sounds
- Pale, clammy skin
- Extremely small “pinpoint” pupils

If someone shows these symptoms, treat the situation as a medical emergency.

"The children are always ours, every single one of them, all over the globe." —James Baldwin

"All adults around the world are responsible for all children."
—Joaquim Trier

What To Do During a Suspected Opioid Overdose

Taking quick action can save a life. If you believe someone may be experiencing an opioid overdose, follow these steps:

1. Call Emergency Services Immediately:

Call 911 and explain that someone may be experiencing an overdose. Emergency responders can provide life-saving medical care.

2. Check for Responsiveness:

Try to make the person bly

- Gently shaking their shoulders
- Rubbing your knuckles firmly on the center of their chest (sternum)

If they do not respond, continue with the next steps.

3. Administer Naloxone:

Use naloxone if it is available. Naloxone nasal sprays are designed for quick and simple use.

4. Provide CPR:

If the person is not breathing normally:

- Pinch their nose
- Give one breath every 5 seconds

Continue until breathing improves or emergency responders arrive.

5. Place the Person in the Recovery Position:

If the person begins breathing again but is still unconscious:

- Roll them onto their side
- Bend their top knee slightly forward

This position helps prevent choking.

6. Stay With the Person

Naloxone may wear off in 30–90 minutes, and overdose symptoms can return. Stay with the person until emergency responders arrive.

How to Use Naloxone Nasal Spray

Naloxone nasal sprays are designed for easy use and require no medical training:

Basic Steps:

- Lay the person on their back.
- Remove the naloxone device from its packaging.
- Insert the tip of the nozzle into one nostril.
- Press the plunger firmly to release the dose.

After administering naloxone:

- Continue rescue breathing if necessary.
- If there is no response after 2–3 minutes, administer a second dose if available.
- Always wait for emergency medical professionals to arrive.

EMERGENCY RESPONSE

FOR OPIOID OVERDOSE
WITH NASAL NALOXONE



1 TRY TO WAKE THE PERSON UP

- Shake them and shout.
- If no response, grind your knuckles into their breast bone for 5 to 10 seconds.
- Tell them you will give them naloxone if they don't respond.



2 CALL 911



3 ADMINISTER NASAL NALOXONE

- Remove naloxone nasal spray from the package. Hold with your thumb on the bottom of the plunger and your first and middle fingers on either side of the nozzle.
- Tilt the person's head back and provide support under the neck with your hand. Gently insert the tip of the nozzle into either nostril, until your fingers touch the person's nose.
- Press the plunger firmly to release the dose.
- If still not conscious after 2-3 minutes, repeat in the other nostril with a new device.

4 CHECK FOR BREATHING

If they are not breathing, CPR or rescue breathing is optional but encouraged.

Give CPR if you have been trained or do rescue breathing:

- Tilt the head back, open the mouth, and pinch the nose.
- Start with 2 breaths into the mouth. Then 1 breath every 5 seconds.
- Continue until help arrives.

5 STAY WITH THE PERSON

- Naloxone wears off in 30 to 90 minutes.
- When the person wakes up, explain what happened.
- If you have to leave, move the person on their side to prevent choking.

Medication Safety Checklist for Parents

A Quick Guide to Protecting Your Family

Prescription and over-the-counter medications can be helpful when used correctly, but they can also be harmful if misused. Many young people who misuse medication report getting it from their own home or from friends and relatives. Simple safety habits can significantly reduce this risk.

Use the checklist below to help ensure your home supports safe medication use and prevention.

Safe Use

- ☐ **I follow the dosage instructions on prescription labels and over-the-counter medication packaging.**
- ☐ **I only take medications that are prescribed to me or recommended by a healthcare professional.**
- ☐ **I never share prescription medications with others.**
- ☐ **I avoid mixing medications unless approved by a doctor or pharmacist.**
- ☐ **I talk with my teen about the difference between proper use and misuse of medications.**

Safe Storage

- ☐ **Medications are stored in a secure location such as a locked cabinet or lockbox.**
- ☐ **Medications are kept out of sight and reach of children and teens.**
- ☐ **I avoid storing meds in easily accessible places like kitchen counters, purses, backpacks, or bathroom drawers.**
- ☐ **I monitor medications regularly to know how many pills or doses remain.**
- ☐ **I am aware of medications that guests or family members may bring into the home.**

Safe Disposal

- ☐ **I regularly check for expired or unused medications in my home.**
- ☐ **I use community medication take-back programs or pharmacy drop boxes whenever possible.**
- ☐ **If a take-back option isn't available, I follow recommended disposal rules prior to placing medications in the trash.**
- ☐ **I remove personal information from prescription bottles before discarding them.**

Talking with Youth

- ☐ **I talk openly with my teen about medication safety.**
- ☐ **My teen understands that taking someone else's medication is dangerous and illegal.**
- ☐ **My teen knows they can come to me if they feel pressured to use substances.**
- ☐ **I ask open-ended questions and listen to their thoughts and concerns.**
- ☐ **I look for everyday opportunities to start conversations about healthy choices.**

Family Action Step

One medication safety step our family will start this month:

[illegible]

Family Activities and Reflection Workbook

Strengthening Conversations and Healthy Choices

Talking with teens about difficult topics such as medication safety, peer pressure, and decision-making can feel overwhelming. This section is designed to help parents and caregivers practice meaningful conversations and build stronger connections with their teens.

The activities below are not tests or assignments. They are opportunities for reflection, learning, and discussion. Parents can complete these worksheets on their own to prepare for conversations, or work through them with their teens to strengthen trust and communication.

You do not need to complete every activity at once. Even small steps—one worksheet or conversation at a time—can help create a stronger relationship and a safer environment for your teen.

Activity 1: Reflecting on Your Parenting Approach

Before starting conversations with teens, it can help parents reflect on their own experiences and communication style.

Parent Reflection Questions

Take a few minutes to think about the questions below and write down your thoughts.

- What do I know about the types of substance that are out there these days? What do I need to learn about?
- What are examples of good conversations that I've had with your child? What worked well in those talks?
- What do I wish I had been handled differently?
- What are my child's biggest strengths? How can I support and nurture those strengths?
- What are my biggest concerns for my child as they grow older? What can I do to support them?
- What strengths do I bring as a parent or caregiver?

Journal Prompt

Write a short paragraph responding to this prompt:

“The kind of relationship I want with my teen is...”

Think about trust, communication, and how you want your teen to feel when they come to you with a problem.

Activity 2: Understanding Your Teen

Every teen experiences different pressures, influences, and emotions. This activity helps parents think about what their teen may be experiencing.

Parent Worksheet

Fill in the spaces below.

My teen’s biggest strengths are:

Things my teen enjoys or is passionate about:

Challenges my teen may be facing, either physically, socially, or emotionally:

Ways I already support my teen right now:

Ways I can better support my teen right now:

Discussion Activity with Your Teen

Ask your teen the following questions and write down their answers.

- What is something adults don’t understand about being a teen today?
- What are some pressures teens experience at school or with friends?
- What helps you deal with stress?

This activity can help you as a parent or caregiver to gain insight into their teen’s perspective.

Activity 3: Practicing Active Listening

Active listening helps teens feel heard, respected, and understood.

Listening Exercise

During your next conversation with your teen:

- Let your teen finish speaking before responding.
- Repeat back what you heard them say.
- Ask a follow-up question.

Example:

Teen: “School has been really stressful lately.”

Parent: “It sounds like school has been overwhelming. What’s been making it the hardest?”

Reflection Questions for Parents

After the conversation, reflect on the following:

- Did my teen seem comfortable talking with me?
- Did I interrupt or jump to advice too quickly?
- What could I do differently next time?

Activity 4: Identifying Family Values

Family values help guide decisions and behavior. Talking about values can help teens understand why certain choices matter.

Family Values Worksheet

Write down 5 values that are important in your home.

Example values may include:

- Respect
- Responsibility
- Honesty
- Health
- Kindness
- Accountability

My family’s values:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Family Discussion

Ask your youth:

Which of these values do you think is the most important?

What does that value look like in everyday life?

How can our family support each other in living out these values?

Activity 5: Medication Safety at Home

This activity helps families create safer habits around medications.

Home Medication Safety Checklist

Check the statements that apply in your home.

- ☐ Medications are stored in a secure location
- ☐ I keep track of prescription medications in my home
- ☐ Expired or unused medications are disposed of properly
- ☐ My teen understands that medications should only be taken as directed
- ☐ My teen knows not to share or take someone else’s medication

Reflection:

What is one change our family could make to improve medication safety?

Activity 6: Conversation Starters

These prompts can help parents start conversations in a natural way.

Try asking your teen:

- “What do teens at school think about prescription medications?”
- “Why do you think some teens think prescription pills are safe?”
- “What would you do if someone offered you a pill to help you study or relax?”
- “What makes it hard for teens to say no to substances?”

Parent Reflection

What are my takeaways from using these prompts in a conversation with my child?

How did my teen respond?

How will I follow up with my child? How should I prepare for our next conversation?

Activity 7: Role-Playing Real-Life Situations

Role-playing helps teens practice responding to peer pressure or uncomfortable situations before they happen.

Scenario 1: A Friend Offers a Pill

A friend says:

“Take this pill. It will help you focus for your test.”

Practice responses together.

Possible responses:

- “No thanks, I don’t take stuff that isn’t prescribed to me.”
- “I’m good. I’d rather not risk it.”
- “My parents would kill me if I took someone else’s medication.”

Ask your teen to come up with their own response.

My	response	would	be

Scenario 2: Peer Interactions at a Party

Someone at a gathering offers medication or substances.

Questions to discuss:

- What are some ways you could say no?
- What could you do if you felt uncomfortable?
- Who could you call if you needed help?

Ask your teen to come up with their own response.

My	response	would	be

Scenario 3: Helping a Friend

A friend says they are using medication to deal with stress.

Discuss:

- What advice could you give that friend?
- Who could they talk to for help?
- Why might it be important to involve a trusted adult?

Ask your teen to come up with their own response.

My	response	would	be

Activity 8: Decision-Making Practice

Good decision-making is a skill that develops over time. Practice these scenarios with your youth to help them see the full arc of their decisions and how to handle possible situations such as these in real life.

Decision-Making Model

- What is the situation?
- What are my choices?
- What are the possible consequences?
- Which choice aligns with my values and goals?

Practice Exercise

Situation 1: A friend offers your youth medication to help you stay awake to study.

Choices:

Possible consequences:

Best decision and why:

Situation 2: Your youth comes home to find a bottle of prescription painkillers sitting on the kitchen counter.

Possible consequences:

Best decision and why:

Situation 3: Your youth goes to a party and where their friends taking edibles that someone had given them.

Choices:

Possible _____ consequences:

Best _____ decision _____ and _____ why:

Situation 4: Your youth sees that their friend has been drinking after the football game and is getting ready to drive.

Choices:

Possible _____ consequences:

Best _____ decision _____ and _____ why:

Activity 9: Journaling Prompts for Teens

Journaling can help teens reflect on their feelings and experiences.

Teens may respond to one or more of the prompts below.

- What are some pressures teens face today that adults may not understand?
- What helps you stay focused on your goals?
- What does a healthy lifestyle look like to you?
- What kind of support do you wish adults provided more often?
- What qualities do you value most in your friends?

Encourage teens to share their thoughts if they feel comfortable.

Activity 10: Building a Family Communication Plan

Strong communication does not happen in just one conversation—it grows over time.

Family Commitment

Sit down and discuss as a family how you can support each other to be better and more engaged communicators for one another. Complete the prompts below with ideas for how you can help one another.

In our family, we promise to support each to:

Listen to each other without judgment by

Speak honestly about difficult topics by

Support each other during challenges by

Ask for help when we need it by

Final Reflection

Healthy relationships between parents and teens are built through trust, communication, and consistency. Every conversation—whether big or small—helps strengthen that connection.

You do not have to be a perfect parent or have all the answers. What matters most is your willingness to show up, listen, and support your teen as they navigate their life’s path!

Communication and Medication Safety

Example Scripts

Below are the complete caregiver–teen conversation examples. These dialogues demonstrate communication techniques for discussing medication safety, peer influence, and decision-making.

Teens are faced with challenges and choices every single day. There is the pressure to do well in school, learn how to cope with feelings of depression, anxiety, and stress in healthy ways, navigate social situations and relationships, to have fun, and discover their interests and strengths as they prepare for adulthood. The way you communicate and connect with them both provides relief in the moment and a model that they can follow.

The following example conversations provide insight into how a parent or caregiver might approach difficult conversations in different ways. Whether or not it is a positive or negative exchange, there are points that we can carry into our conversations with our own teens. As you read the conversation, think about what was and wasn't working for the parent/caregiver and teen in each.

EXAMPLES of conversations. Try to identify what went right and what went wrong.

Positive Conversation

Parent: Hey Billy, I was wondering if I could ask you how you feel about something.

Teen: What's up?

Parent: I read a story on FB about drug, alcohol use, negative social media influence, peer pressure from friends (any topic of a hard conversation). What is your opinion about that?

Teen: Mom, really?

Parent: Yes, seriously. I would like to hear your prospective on this. You're the one in school every day, not me. Would you be willing to help me understand more about what's going on or what you know about?

Teen: I don't know.....sounds like you're accusing me of something. Are you accusing me of using drugs? Did Tommy's mom ask you to ask me?

Parent: No honey. I am sorry that it came across as if I was accusing you of using drugs or spying for Tommy's mom. I honestly value your opinion because you are the one in school every day not me. I am curious to know if the article is accurate.

Teen: Fine.... but I am not ratting out my friends or anything if that's your end game.

Parent: I'm not asking for that. I just know things are different compared to when I was in school. There's so much pressure on teens these days, and I want to understand what that's like for you.

Teen: Mom, you don't understand anything!

Parent: Help me understand. I am here to listen and learn from you.

Teen: You always overreact and try to baby me.

Parent: Billy, I promise I will not overact and baby you. I just want to make sure you know you can trust me.

Teen: Last time, you told Tommy's mom something I trusted you with, and he got in trouble.

Parent: You're right, and I'm sorry for breaking your trust back then. I made a mistake, and I'd like to earn your trust back. Can we work on that together?

Teen: Whatever, Mom.

Parent: Okay. Let's take this slow. Maybe after dinner, we can talk more or go shoot some hoops outside?

Reflection Questions:

What did the parent do well to keep the conversation going?

What moments showed active listening and respect?

How did the parent respond when the teen became defensive?

How did past experiences affect the teen's willingness to talk?

What moments showed active listening and respect?

What might the teen be feeling during this conversation?

Why might the teen react with frustration or skepticism?

What does the teen need from the parent in this moment?

Negative Conversation

Parent: Hey Billy, I was wondering if I could ask you how you feel about something.

Teen: What's up?

Parent: I read a story on FB about drug, alcohol use, negative social media influence, peer pressure from friends (any topic of a hard conversation). What is your opinion about that?

Teen: Mom, really?

Parent: Yes, seriously. I would like to hear your perspective on this. You're the one in school every day, not me. Would you be willing to help me understand more about what's going on or what you know about?

Teen: I don't know.....sounds like you're accusing me of something. Are you accusing me of using drugs? Did Tommy's mom ask you to ask me?

Parent: Watch your tone with me young man.

Teen: Well, I mean, you did go run straight to his mom after I told you about him skipping school and you always overreact to everything.

Parent: That's it. You will not disrespect me in this house. You leave under my roof you go by my rules. Now answer my question. What do you know about drug, alcohol use, negative social media influence, peer pressure from friends (any topic of a hard conversation). Are you taking drugs or alcohol because your behavior clearly says you are. I demand to know, NOW!

Teen: runs out of the room

Reflection Questions:

Where did the conversation start to break down?

What specific words or tone escalated the situation?

How did the parent's response affect the teen's reaction?

What emotions might the teen have been feeling during this interaction?

What emotions might the parent have been feeling?

How were those emotions expressed (or not expressed)?

What is one thing both the parent and teen could do differently next time?

Positive Conversation/Suspected Use

Parent: Hey Billy, I was wondering if I could talk to you.

Teen: ugh ummmm whatever

Parent: I have noticed that you spend a lot of time in bed and on your phone lately or spending hours videogaming. Also, you don't seem to be interested in spending time with your family and friends. Is everything okay?

Teen: Why are you nagging me?

Parent: It may seem like nagging however I am genuinely concerned about you and would like to be here for you. How are you and Tommy enjoying being freshmen?

Teen: What do you know about being a freshman?

Parent: Probably not much anymore! Things have changed since I was your age. But I do remember how hard it could be- the pressures to fit in, the opportunities to make bad choices. I've made mistakes myself.

Teen: Oh Miss Goodie 2-Shoes never made a mistake in her life.

Parent: Well I have fooled you...haha...but that's not true. I have made plenty of decisions that turned out to not be so good. That's why I want to help you avoid some of the mistakes I made. Can you tell me if there's something that is bothering you?

Teen: You'll just overreact and get all emotional like you do when we win a football game or I fail a test.

Parent: Honey, I promise not to overreact and get emotional. Is there something you would like to talk about?

Teen: maybe

Parent: Thank you for sharing that. Can you tell me a little more? And why the change in behavior?

Teen: Mom, I tried 1 pill and now I cannot stop. At first, it felt great, but now it's not working, and I just feel worse.

Parent: Thank you for trusting me with that information. I know that must have been hard to say. I'm here to help you figure this out. Together we can find a way to make things better, whether that's talking to a counselor or finding other support.

Teen: You are not going to yell at me or ground me?

Parent: No, I'm here to support you, not punish you. I am thankful that you can trust me. Let's work together to get through this. I love you.

Teen: Thank you, mom, I love you too!

Reflection Questions:

What did the parent do to create a safe space for the teen to open up?

At what moment did the teen begin to open up, and why?

How did the parent respond to the teen's honesty?

What communication techniques helped keep the conversation calm and supportive?

How did the parent handle the teen's defensiveness or sarcasm?

What role did empathy and reassurance play in this conversation?

How did the parent approach a sensitive topic without immediately judging or punishing?

Why is it important that the teen felt safe admitting their situation?

What could have happened if the parent reacted differently?

What supportive actions did the parent offer after the teen shared their struggle?

How can the parent continue to support their teen moving forward?

What are some healthy next steps the family could take together?

Negative Conversation/Suspected Use

Parent: Hey Billy, I was wondering if I could talk to you.

Teen: ugh ummmm whatever

Parent: I have noticed that you spend a lot of time in bed and on your phone lately or spending hours videogaming. Also, you don't seem to be interested in spending time with your family and friends. Is everything okay?

Teen: Why are you nagging me?

Parent: It may seem like nagging however I am genuinely concerned about you and would like to be here for you. How are you and Tommy enjoying being freshmen?

Teen: What do you know about being a freshman?

Parent: Look young man, I am trying to be a supportive parent here, but you are making it very difficult.

Teen: Me?...me?...making it very difficult. YOU are the problem.

Parent: ME? I am not the one laying around all day, wasting my life away playing video games and probably messed up taking drugs or alcohol.

Teen: WOW....I hate you!

Parent: That's it..I am taking your phone, gaming console, and TV. How do you like that, young man?

Teen: pulls covers over his head.

Reflection Questions:

At what point did the conversation escalate into conflict?

What words or tone contributed to the escalation?

How did both the parent and teen react to each other?

What might the teen have been feeling during this interaction?

What concerns was the parent trying to express?

How did assumptions impact the conversation?

What communication barriers are present in this conversation?

How did accusations or labels affect the teen's response?

What could the parent have said differently to keep the teen engaged?

How might this interaction affect trust between the parent and teen?

What are possible long-term effects of repeated interactions like this?

YOU'VE GOT THIS!

Parenting and/or raising a child isn't easy and conversations about substance use can feel especially overwhelming. But the fact that you're here reading this means you care deeply. And that matters more than you know!

Your influence is powerful. Your presence is protective. Even when it seems like your teen isn't listening, they are. Every honest conversation, every moment of connection, and every time you show up, even imperfectly, helps shape their choices and their future.

There's no perfect script or no one-size-fits-all approach. But by staying curious, calm, and connected, you're creating a foundation your teen can count on.

Keep showing up. Keep Talking. Keep listening.

Because the conversations you have today can help your teen make safer, healthier decisions tomorrow!

