



**Piece by Piece:
Connecting with
Your Kids**

Stronger Relationships Lead to Healthier Futures



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Hey Parents— Your Teens Really Do Hear You!

We know it may not always feel that way. You ask how your teen's day went, and they respond with an eye roll before diving back into their phone or game system. But here's the truth: even when it seems like they're tuning you out, research shows that parents are one of the strongest influences on their teen's choices around drugs and alcohol.



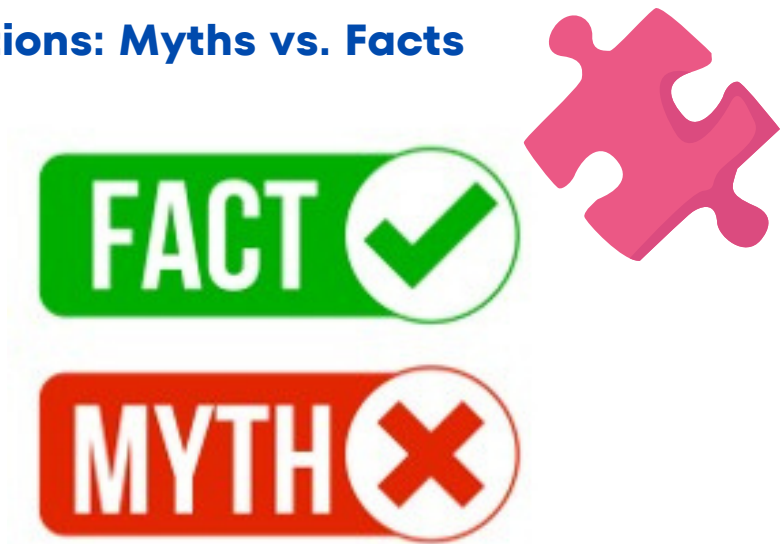
In fact, you are the most important factor in whether your teen decides to use substances. Studies show that teens are 50% less likely to use drugs when their parents talk to them about it. Even more powerful—two-thirds of teens say that not wanting to lose their parents' respect and pride is a main reason they choose not to drink or use drugs.

That influence outweighs any TikTok trend or social media star. Now, more than ever, your steady presence and guidance matter.

Ongoing conversations with your teens may save their life!!

Parent–Teen Conversations: Myths vs. Facts

Talking with teens about tough topics like drugs, alcohol, and peer pressure 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.

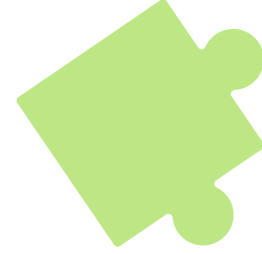
Open communication builds trust and helps teens make informed decisions

Practical Tips for Handling Teen Reactions

Every teen is different, and no two conversations will go exactly the same way. When you bring up sensitive topics like drugs, alcohol, or peer pressure, your teen might respond with silence, eye rolls, defensiveness, or even humor. These reactions are normal and they don't mean your teen isn't listening. The key is to stay calm, avoid turning the moment into a lecture, and keep the door open for future conversations.

Below are some of the most common ways teens react when parents start these discussions, along with practical suggestions for how you can respond in ways that keep the conversation moving forward.



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 future than what other kids might be doing."
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

Building Better Conversations with Your Teen



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.



Most importantly, remember that your teen is the expert on their own world. They often want to be heard and understood. Showing curiosity, listening without judgment, and validating their experiences can help them feel safe opening up — and more likely to come to you when it really matters.

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, more meaningful responses that help adults better understand their perspective

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

See the table below for examples of how to reframe common questions to be more open and supportive

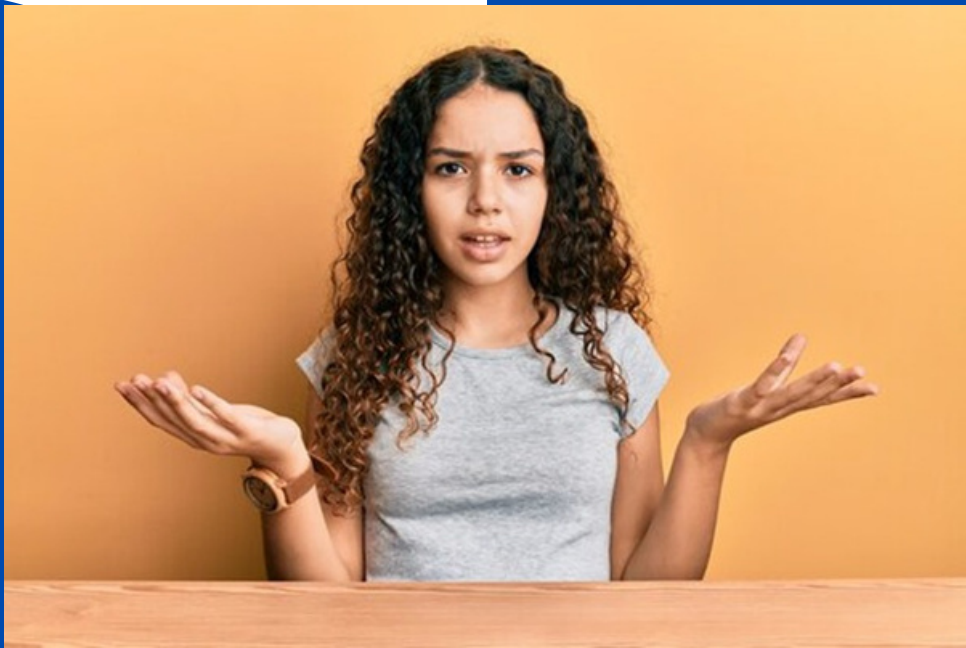
Open-ended and Non-judgmental Language	
Close-ended or judgmental	Open-ended and non-judgmental
"Did you have a good day?"	"Tell me about your day."
"Do your friends approve of drinking?"	"What do your friends think about drinking alcohol?"
"Do you have questions about substance use?"	"What questions 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

Setting Clear Expectations about Substance Use

Teens benefit from knowing where their parents stand. Clear, consistent expectations about alcohol and drug use reduce the likelihood of risky behavior. When expectations are vague or depend on circumstance, teens are more likely to test boundaries. It's not about control, it's about communication, consistency, and care.

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	



Conversation Starters by Age

Different ages call for different approaches. A middle schooler may need shorter, simple talks while older teens may be ready for deeper conversations. Tailor your tone and content to meet them where they are at developmentally and revisit topics often.

See Below for Suggested Starters by Age

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



Role Modeling: What Teens Learn by Watching You

Teens are always watching, even when it doesn't seem like it. How you handle stress, talk about alcohol or drugs, or unwind at the end of the day sends strong signals. Being mindful of the example you set, especially when it comes to substances can reinforce the values you want to pass on.

See below for examples of how behavior can imply certain message:

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



Creating a Supportive and Communicative Environment

A connected home is one of the strongest protective factors against substance use. Daily rituals like shared meals, predictable routines, and emotional safety helps teens feel more secure. It's not about being perfect, it's about being present.

See Below for Suggested Starters by Age

Building Healthy Communication Habits	
Habit	Why it Helps
Family dinners (tech-free)	Builds connection and promotes openness
Asking about their day	Shows ongoing interest and support
Shared downtime or walks	Creates relaxed space for conversation
Respecting their need for space	Balances support with independence

Consistent habits create a foundation for meaningful parent-teen relationships

What To Do If You Suspect Use

If you suspect your teen may be using alcohol, cannabis, or other substances, don't panic. But don't ignore it either. Approach them with calm concern, not accusation. Your goal is to open a dialogue. Remember those open-ended and non-judgmental conversation starters! Seek support if needed; you don't need to navigate this alone.



See Below for Suggested Starters by Age

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

YOU'VE GOT THIS!

Parenting a teen 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.

