

# Stronger Connections, Safer Choices: Connecting with Our Youth

Presented by Challenge of Tarrant County

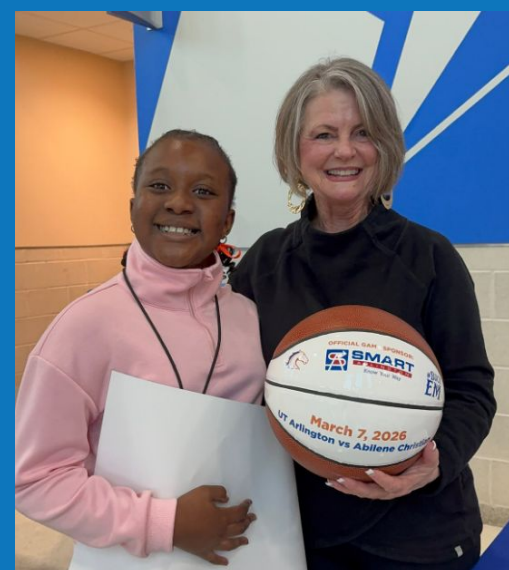


# Who We are!

Challenge of Tarrant County was founded in 1984 and has always been dedicated to confronting substance misuse in our community

- identifying needs
- educating the community
- mobilizing resources
- promoting collaboration
- advocating for sound public policy

We do all of this through our five coalitions and through the Family Recovery Court program.





# Presentation Overview

## Today's Focus:

- Why communication matters
- What gets in the way of connection
- How to start conversations
- Skills that help navigate difficult topics
- Practicing real-life scenarios
- Presentation and accompanying resources created in collaboration with UTA School of Social Work and UNT Health Science





# The Importance of Open Communication

Parents are the #1 influence on youth decisions about substances!

Youth who talk with parents are more likely to:

- Delay substance use
- Make safer choices
- Come to parents for help
- Better navigate peer influence





# Where Might Youth Need Support

## Difficult Topics for Adults to Address w/ Youth:

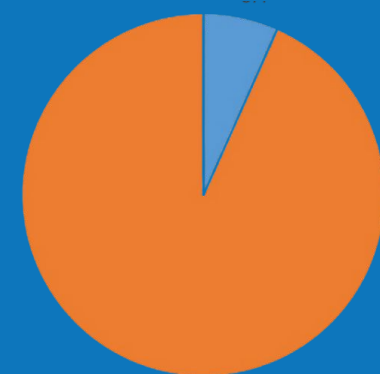
- Relationships and Dating
- Mental Health
- Social Media/Digital Life
- Sense of Self and Peer Influence
- Future Planning
- Substance Use





# Common Substances Used by Teens

- Vaping Nicotine & Tobacco products
- THC & Marijuana products
- Prescription or Fake Prescription Drugs
- Alcohol
- Other illicit drugs



## The Real Majority:

Roughly 3 out of 4 teens say they have been drug and substance free in the past year!





# Check-in #1

## Quick Reflection:

Think of a trusted adult from your childhood.

What made it easy (or difficult) to talk to them?



# The Goal of Communication

Remember: The goal is NOT control.

- Listen actively
- Avoid judgment
- Ask open-ended questions
- Share your experiences
- Be patient

Think: CONNECTION before correction!





## Check-in #2

Which of these is the main reason youth give for not talking openly with adults?

- A. Lack of time
- B. Fear of being judged or getting in trouble
- C. Not knowing enough about drugs
- D. Social media





# Shifting the Approach

## Instead of:

- Interrogating
- Lecturing
- Reacting emotionally

## Try:

- Asking
- Listening
- Staying calm
- Being curious





# One Big Talk vs. Many Small Talks

Effective communication is:

- ✓ Ongoing
- ✓ Casual
- ✓ Built into everyday life

Examples:

- Car rides
- Shared activities
- Doing everyday things around the house (walking the dog, cooking, etc.)

“Sixty 1-minute conversations are better for connecting and building trust than 1 sixty minute conversation.”





# Check-in #3

True or False:

You only need to have one serious conversation about drugs.





# Everyday Opportunities

Look for natural moments: Connection is best when it is natural. Remember to look for genuine connection in even the little, everyday moments and opportunities.

- Discussing a hobby, interest, and/or a current event story
- Social media
- School or extracurricular events
- Things happening in the home or community

These moments feel less forced and more natural!





# Starting the Conversation

All conversations should begin by making the environment as safe and distraction free as possible. Conversations should all start with showing love, connection, and understanding.

## Simple prompts for initiating topics like substance use:

- “What are kids your age hearing about vaping or drinking?”
- “Have you ever been in a situation where someone offered something?”
- “What do you think about what we just saw/heard?”



# Open-Ended vs. Closed Questions



Closed questions (Interrogative):	Open-ended questions (Approachable):
"You're not vaping, are you?"	"What have you heard about vaping at school?"
"Do your friends do drugs?"	"I've heard that some kids got caught with marijuana at party, what do you and your friends think about that?"
"Don't you know drugs are bad?"	What do you know about how drugs affect the brain?"





# Check-in #4

Which is the healthier way to engage with a hard subject?

- A. “You’re not using drugs, right?”
- B. “What situations do kids at your school run into with drugs or alcohol?”



# The Power of Listening

Listening builds trust more than talking! The goal of every conversation and connection is to build and strengthen trust.

Key skills:

- Don't interrupt
- Reflect back what you hear
- Validate feelings (without agreeing)
- Stay calm

Example:

“I hear that you feel pressured in those situations.”





# Responding Without Overreacting

When kids share something difficult:

Avoid:

- Immediate punishment
- Panic reactions
- Shutting down conversation

Instead:

- Pause
- Ask follow-up questions
- Provide Information and Resources
- Thank them for sharing
- Keep the door open

Kids are more likely to return to conversations when they feel safe talking.





# Check-in #5

What is the best first response?

- A. “You’re grounded.”
- B. “Why would you do that?”
- C. “Thank you for telling me. Can you share more with me about how you are feeling?”
- D. “That’s not a big deal.”





# Balancing Warmth and Boundaries

Effective parenting includes:

- ✓ Support + connection
- ✓ Clear boundaries

Too strict → fear

Too lenient → confusion

Balance builds trust and accountability.





# Setting Clear Expectations



## Youth need:

- Clear rules
- Consistent expectations
- Understanding of consequences
- Consequences related to the behavior

## Examples:

**“In our family, we don’t use substances because we value our healthy and safety and that of those around us.”**

**“If you ever feel unsafe in a situation or need a ride, you can call anytime–no punishment for asking for the help you need.”**

**“You were driving after curfew. Next time, you will lose your driving privileges for X days and will discuss this more before privileges are restored.”**

**“I want you to know that I am disappointed in the choice you made, but I love you. We are going to work through this together. We will follow through with the consequences and revisit the matter together in X days. I am always here to support you!”**



# Handling Peer Influence

## Help kids prepare by asking:

- “What would you say if someone offered you something?”
- “What’s an easy way to get out of that situation?”

## Teach:

- Exit and refusal strategies
- Saying no confidently
- Identifying safe people that they can trust to seek out for support or help in a crisis.



# Conversation Didn't Go as Planned... Now What?



## How to Reset the Conversation:

- **Pause the moment**  
“I think we both got frustrated. Let’s take a break.”
- **Take ownership**  
“I came in a little strong earlier—sorry about that.”
- **Reopen the door**  
“Can we try that conversation again?”
- **Lead with connection**  
“I care about you more than being right.”

## Reset Example:

“Hey, I’ve been thinking about earlier. I don’t think I handled that the way I wanted to. Can we start over? I really want to understand your side.”

Repair builds more trust than getting it perfect the first time.



# What If You Don't Know the Answer?

It's okay to say:

“I’m not sure—let’s find out together.”

This models:

- Honesty
- Problem-solving
- Lifelong learning





# Check-in #6

Which is most effective?

- A. Strict rules only
- B. Friendship only
- C. Support + clear expectations
- D. Avoiding the topic



# Practicing Conversations

Activity: Turn and Talk

Scenario:

Your child says:

“Everyone else is doing it—it’s not a big deal.”

Parents respond using:

- Open-ended questions
- Calm tone
- Curiosity





# Check-in #7

What communication skill did you feel you used well? Where might you need to keep practicing?

- Open-ended questions
- Listening
- Staying calm
- Avoiding judgment





# Building Long-Term Trust

Trust is built through:

- Consistency
- Follow-through
- Being present
- Respecting your child's voice

Communication is a long game!





# Check-in #8

What builds trust the most?

- A. One serious talk
- B. Consistent small conversations
- C. Punishment
- D. Avoiding hard topics





# Key Takeaways

Parents are the most powerful prevention influence.

Remember:

- Talk early and often
- Listen with curiosity
- Set clear expectations
- Secure medications
- Stay connected to your child

Stronger conversations lead to safer choices.





# Final Reflection

Write or reflect:

What is one conversation you will start this week?

How will you prepare for this conversation?





# Questions & Discussion



# Thank You!!!

Visit the QR code below to download our communication guide along with other important resources.



The cover of the guide 'Piece by Piece: Connecting with Your Kids'. It features a heart shape made of colorful puzzle pieces. Text includes 'Stronger Relationships Lead to Healthier Futures' and logos for Challenge of Tarrant County and UTA School of Social Work.

**Stronger Connections, Safer Choices:**  
Connecting with Our Youth

Presented by Challenge of Tarrant County



The cover of the guide 'Stronger Connections, Safer Choices: A Guide to Meaningful Communication with Youth'. It features a photograph of a family (father, mother, and child) talking. Text includes 'A Guide to Meaningful Communication with Youth' and logos for Challenge of Tarrant County and UTA School of Social Work.

