

Children

How can you talk with children about your addiction?

Children who have lived with addiction have the right to understand why and how it happens. Now that you're out of treatment, you may not know exactly what to say to your children or how to interact with them. This can be a confusing time for children, and they may deal with hurt emotions by acting as if everything is fine or by being aloof and angry. Like most parents, you really love your children and want only the best for them.

Because you are a recovering addict, you might feel hypocritical talking to your kids about the dangers of alcohol and drugs or about things like trust. Put those thoughts aside; your job as a parent is to inform and protect your kids. If you send them honest, consistent messages, they will listen. One of the first things you can do to repair your relationship with your children is to help them understand what addiction and treatment are all about.

Examine your motives

Be honest about why you want to talk to your children. Do you want to keep your children away from alcohol and other drugs? Do you want to create a more honest relationship? Are you trying to relieve your own guilt? Identify some positive things you would like to accomplish, such as establishing trust or communicating love, and keep the conversation focused on that goal.

Check your expectations

Don't expect to heal your relationship in one talk. Make sure your expectations are realistic. Your children may respond with anger or by being aloof. Or they may try to take care of you or protect you. It takes time for children to take in the information, digest it, and make sense of it. You don't have to convince them of anything; start out with the simple expectation that you will share and be heard.

Move forward

Let go of fear, guilt, and shame. The discussion should come from a place of honesty and acceptance of the disease and of yourself. What your children want to know most is that you love them, that you're sorry, that you take responsibility, and that you will abstain from alcohol and other drugs.

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How can you establish trust with your children?

You may have damaged your relationship with your children. They may have pulled away from you as your addiction became worse. If you are like many who suffer from the disease of addiction, you may have been through treatment several times. Even though your children may not say it, the first things they will want to know are “Are you sober?” and “How long will you stay sober?”

How can you develop trust again with your children? Remember, in early recovery your first job is to stay clean and sober. If you’re not clean and sober, you can’t be the trustworthy, dependable parent your kids need.

It may take time for your kids to trust you again. Your recovery may stir up lots of different emotions for your children. They may react with anything from hope and happiness to resentment and anger. Be patient; allow your kids to feel, express, and process these emotions.

Your children may have learned to take on a lot of responsibility, parenting themselves while you were drinking and/or using. They may feel “Who are you to come back and start telling me what to do?” If your children have showed a lot of maturity and self-care during that challenging time, respect that maturity. Let them know that you trust them and their capabilities by giving them tasks that match their maturity level, like creating their own weekly homework and entertainment schedule.

Another way to build trust is to spend quality time with your kids. While you were drinking and/or using, your kids probably had to step up and be responsible for themselves, which left little time for play. Create fun ways to connect with your kids and their friends. Learn more about their lives by doing things with them, like engaging with them in athletic events, going to movies, listening to music, or helping them excel in other healthy activities they are interested in.

Rebuilding trust and repairing relationships with your children can create a lot of stress for you, and it could be hard on your recovery. Make sure you get some support to keep your emotional life in balance. Join an AA group and connect with members who have gone through the same family struggles that you are facing. In early recovery, it’s important that your goals be realistic. You won’t be able to fix everything with your kids right away. Give it time. Your most important goal should be to stay clean and sober. Make sure your environment

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is free of triggers and using situations. Go to meetings and stay in contact with your sponsor. Get enough rest, food, and exercise. As you slowly rebuild trust in yourself, you kids will notice, and they'll start to trust you more as well.

How can you break the cycle of addiction in your family?

Studies show that children of addicts are more likely to develop substance use disorders than children of non-addicts. This doesn't mean that if your children drink they will become alcoholics. It means that their brain chemistry may make them much more vulnerable to addiction. Your children are not alone; one in four children lives in a family with alcohol abuse or alcoholism.

Some parents new to recovery feel awkward about talking with their kids about alcohol and other drugs. They feel like they're saying, "Do as I say, not as I have done." This awkward time is really an opportunity for parents to talk about the addiction experiences that have relevance to their children's lives.

Use your experiences to stress that drinking and driving should never be mixed, to empathize with kids, and to understand the attraction they have to alcohol and other drugs. This encourages young people to discuss their own feelings, experiences, and problems. It isn't enough to say, "Just say no to alcohol and other drugs." Saying no only works with very young children; older kids need the whole message. You'll need to acknowledge how tempting alcohol is to young people, how it loosens them up and makes them feel more confident at first. But balance this with the second part of the message: alcohol and drugs are dangerous, drinking and driving can kill you, and so can drug use.

How can you teach your children about the dangers of alcohol and other drugs?

As a parent or caregiver, you play a vital role in influencing your child. You serve as a role model on the use of alcohol, control the availability of alcohol in your home, and help set your children's expectations concerning drinking behaviors. A recent study shows that children whose parents are involved in their lives—hold regular conversations, attend after-school events, and listen to their problems—are less likely to drink or smoke.

Clarify your own standards

Until you have really given it some thought and are clear about your own standards on alcohol use or nonuse, it's difficult to communicate with any credibility.

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Set clear, firm standards for your children that reflect spiritual beliefs, personal values, and family health issues. If you are inconsistent with your messages, you open up the possibility for kids to create their own standards.

Rules and expectations need to be clearly spelled out with young people before drinking opportunities present themselves. Young people need to be prepared to say no to alcohol in advance of drinking opportunities. Parents need to help them choose parties where there will be no alcohol. Parents need to deliver a clear message: alcohol or substance use of any kind is not acceptable.

Research indicates that little or no use of alcohol is strongly associated with young people who perceive that their parents would be upset if the young people use alcohol. What's more, parents can teach responsible decision making through the most powerful means available: the parents' own example.

Explain the risks

It's essential to provide young people with two key facts that are powerful arguments for abstinence:

1. Alcohol is a drug that's potentially addicting.
2. Underage drinking is illegal.

Present the basic consequences of drinking and using

- addiction
- fatal automobile accidents
- physiological damage (brain, liver, and cellular damage)
- teen pregnancy
- greater risk of STDs
- crime
- poor academic performance

What really sinks in for young kids is how alcohol will hurt them today. So tell your kids that alcohol impairs coordination and judgment, which may lead to serious injury, and will make them sick the next day. Tell them that drinking will impede athletic performance. Tell them the human brain is in peak development at their young age and that heavy drinking can hinder intellectual development.

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Why do children drink and use?

When asked about why kids drink, parents often name external forces: lax supervision at school, families who let children take unreasonable risks with alcohol, peer pressure. But kids themselves often name internal factors: the desire to experiment with something new, to take risks, and to “see how I’d feel.”

Help your kids practice refusing alcohol. Instead of offering vague advice to “just say no,” do some role playing. Parents can pretend they’re someone offering their kids a drink, and then they can ask the kids how they would respond. Help your kids decide exactly what to do and say. Parents who help their kids prepare for sticky situations give them powerful tools for staying clean and sober.

Many adolescents find the need to fit in so strong that they will do virtually anything to be accepted. Some students, such as those who are not in sports or other school activities, may feel especially isolated and vulnerable to peer pressure. For many kids, the easiest group to belong to is the group that uses. They accept pretty much anybody. As long as you drink or use, you’re in.

The desire to fit in, combined with young people’s easy access to illegal chemicals and parental indifference about alcohol use, means that kids need to learn specific skills in order to successfully resist peer pressure to drink or use.

As adolescents grow and mature, they will experience different social situations in which peer pressure will come up.

How can you help your children battle peer pressure?

Teach kids this five-step model to resist peer pressure:

1. Ask questions. Size up the situation before “going along.” For example, a classmate might say, “Hey, let’s go hang out at the mall,” when he or she has shoplifting in mind. To be responsible, ask, “What are we going to do? How long will we be there?” These questions will help you make informed decisions before getting into a problem situation.
2. Name the trouble. After you identify the situation, state the possible problem: “Drinking and then driving to a movie sounds like a bad idea to me.”
3. State the consequences. Use the threat of punishment as an excuse not to drink. Say something such as “My parents would ground me for months” or “I could get kicked off the soccer team.”

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4. Offer an alternative. If a friend invites you to drink or use, suggest an alternative, such as “Let’s go get pizza.” If the friend pressures you more, walk away but leave the door open. You could say, “Hey, that’s fine. We will be eating pizza if you change your mind.”
5. Get out of trouble. If you find yourself in a problem situation, get out immediately and call a responsible adult for help.

What can you do if your child is using alcohol or other drugs?

Often when recovering parents find that their child has a problem with alcohol or other drugs, they’re tempted to rush to get their child into treatment without assessing the seriousness of the use.

Children, especially teenagers, may not be fully honest about their use patterns. To find out whether they’re a frequent user, dependent, or addicted, it’s helpful to meet with an addiction specialist for an evaluation and suggestions for resolving the situation.

If you find that, despite your efforts to intervene, your kid is “going down the tubes” because of alcohol or other drug use, then you will need to get him or her into a substance abuse treatment center. This will be a hard and emotional time for you as a recovering person, and you’ll need to make sure you get the support you need from other AA members, your sponsor, Al-Anon, or Families Anonymous (FA) to handle the emotional stress of dealing with an addicted child.

Take faith and inspiration from the fact that you have been through treatment. You can help your child understand the disease of addiction and start living his or her own recovery plan one day at a time.

Web resources

There are many resources out there. The websites for the following organizations were chosen for their usefulness and user friendliness.

National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) for Teens

NIDA’s teen website offers facts on drugs, answers to common questions, and real-life stories of teens who have recovered from using alcohol and other drugs.

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Talking With Kids About Tough Issues

Talking With Kids About Tough Issues is a national campaign by Children Now and the Kaiser Family Foundation. The website offers tips on discussing topics such as alcohol and other drugs, sex, violence, and HIV/AIDS with children.