

The background features colorful silhouettes of a family: a purple silhouette of a woman on the left, a green silhouette of a child in the center, and a blue silhouette of a man on the right. The text is overlaid on these silhouettes.

Wondering How to Talk to Your Child or Teen About Alcohol and Other Drugs?

Learn how to talk to them, recognize substance use and find help if they need it.

Why talk about alcohol and other drugs?

- **Young people hear about substance use every day**— in person and through media. What you do and say sets expectations and can help them stay healthy.
- **Parents are the biggest influence on a young person's decision not to use alcohol and other drugs.** Begin having age-appropriate conversations as early as preschool and do not stop.
- **The earlier you start talking,** the more they internalize your messages, but it is never too late to start.
- **If you or a relative is misusing substances,** your child or teen has an increased risk of misusing substances too. Talk about it to protect them over time.

How should I talk about these things?

- **Be honest and open.** Let children and teens know they can ask you questions and discuss important topics.
- **Base information on facts, not fear.** Explain your concerns clearly. For example, "Your brain is still developing, and I want you to be the best you can be. Alcohol and drugs can get in the way."
- **It is OK not to have all the answers.** Share your values and look for more information together.
- **Focus on what they should do,** rather than what they should not do.
- **Set clear expectations.** Most parents think they have told their child or teen where they stand. Less than half of 7th through 12th graders in New York say their parents have talked to them about underage drinking.¹
- **Talk about what you see in the media,** including on social media, and in real life. Share how you feel about the behavior you see. Find out how it makes your child or teen feel.

¹ Youth Development Survey 2014-15 Report, New York State Office of Addiction Services and Supports, page 102, table 76.

Why do young people use substances?

- **Some expect it to be fun or to give them courage** in new or scary situations.
- **Some think it is expected of them** and want to fit in with their peers.
- **Some use substances to mask unpleasant feelings** caused by depression, social anxiety, stress-related disorders, physical or emotional abuse, and physical pain.
- **Some use substances to cope with stress.** Young people who drink or use drugs to cope may never learn other ways to reduce stress. This increases their risk of misusing substances as life's stresses increase.
- **Some use substances to stay awake or work faster** (performance enhancement).
- **They are following your example.** Young people who are around adults who use alcohol and drugs are more likely to use them.²

What are the signs that my child or teen may need help?

This list of changes may point to drug or alcohol misuse, relate to medical and mental health disorders, or indicate a departure from typical adolescent development.

• Physical Changes

- Dilated pupils
- Unusual cravings
- Sleepiness
- Shaking or tremors
- Repeated nosebleeds
- Constant licking of lips
- Messy appearance
- Gaining or losing weight (outside the rates on growth charts)

² Yule AM, Wilens TE, Martelon M, Rosenthal L, Biederman J. Does Exposure to Parental Substance Use Disorders Increase Offspring Risk for a Substance Use Disorder? *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*. 2018;186:154-158. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2018.01.021>.

• Social Changes

- Changing friend or peer groups (has new friends or no longer talks to previous friends)
- Skipping class
- Losing interest in social or fun activities
- Acting out or with unacceptable behavior (breaking rules)
- Constantly borrowing money
- Increasing isolation

• Emotional Changes

- Extreme mood swings
- Withdrawn (no longer talking or hanging out)
- Hyperactivity or agitation
- Anxiety (fear of doing things or going places)

While these signs do not prove your child or teen is misusing drugs or alcohol, they might show your child is dealing with another issue or multiple issues.

How should I respond to my child or teen?

- **Listen** and let them know you are there to help.
- **Remember** that young people can feel ashamed and worried about how you will respond.
- **Act, rather than react.** Reacting can push them away and make it harder to help them over time.
- **Prepare for the discussion,** especially if you have not talked with your child or teen before. If you are not ready for the full conversation, take some time to step back or get the help of another trusted adult.
- **Assess the risk with them.** Are they experimenting or do they feel compelled to use (peer pressure, dependence, etc.)? Are they asking for help?
- **Create a safety plan together,** whether they need a plan for escaping a peer situation where alcohol or drugs are being used or they need professional help.

Where can I get help?

Refer to the resources on the back of this brochure for help with talking to your child or teen and getting access to treatment options, if needed.

Action steps to help your child or teen:

1. Talk to your child early on about alcohol and drugs. Let them know you are there to help.
2. Note how alcohol and drugs are used and discussed within your family, and what your child or teen may see in everyday life.
3. Store alcohol and prescribed medicines (including opioids) in locked cabinets and throw away any medicine you are no longer using. Encourage family and others who care for your child or teen to do the same. For safe disposal tips, visit [dec.ny.gov](https://www.dec.ny.gov) and search for **Safe Medication Disposal for Households**.
4. If your child or teen has an issue and is misusing substances, refer to one of the resources on the back of this brochure.
 - a. You can also ask any potential health care provider about their experience treating adolescents or young adults.
 - b. Find out if the provider offers medication as part of treatment. This is a best practice for opioid use disorder and can also help with alcohol misuse.
5. If your child has surgery or suffers from pain, talk to their provider about the safest ways to manage their pain, and avoid opioid prescriptions whenever possible.

+ Resources and Support

- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)**
 - Visit [samhsa.gov/underage-drinking](https://www.samhsa.gov/underage-drinking) for information about how to talk to your children and teens early on about drinking alcohol and using other drugs.
- **New York State Office of Addiction Services and Supports**
 - Visit [talk2prevent.ny.gov](https://www.talk2prevent.ny.gov) for information about youth substance use and to find resources about connecting, communicating and consequences.
- **National Institute on Drug Abuse for Teens**
 - Visit [teens.drugabuse.gov](https://www.teens.drugabuse.gov) for science-based information about teen drug use and its effects, including interactive resources for teens, teachers and parents.
- **NYC Well**
 - For 24/7 support from staff trained to listen and refer New Yorkers to resources, call 888-NYC-WELL (888-692-9355), text “WELL” to 65173 or chat on [nyc.gov/nycwell](https://www.nyc.gov/nycwell).
- **Partnership to End Addiction**
 - This helpline offers one-on-one support to parents and caregivers of children or teens who are using substances. To connect with a trained specialist, call 855-378-4373, text 55753 or visit [drugfree.org/helpline](https://www.drugfree.org/helpline).