

Talking to Kids about Alcohol & Smoking

Smoking is one of the worst things kids or adults can do to their bodies. Yet every single day about 3,900 kids between the ages 12 and 17 start smoking. Most middle school students don't smoke — only about 1 in 16 does. And most high school students don't smoke either — about 1 in 5 does (that means 4 out of 5 don't).

But why do those who smoke ever begin?

There's more than just one simple answer. Some kids may start smoking just because they're curious. Others may like the idea of doing something dangerous — something grownups don't want them to do. Still others might know lots of people who smoke and they might think it's a way to act or look like an adult.

Ages 4 to 7

Kids this age still think and learn mostly by experience and don't have a good understanding of things that will happen in the future. So keep discussions about alcohol and cigarettes in the present tense and relate them to things that kids know and understand. For example, talking with the child about smoking or drinking in movies can provide a chance to talk about the messages they may receive. Encourage kids to ask questions too.

Kids are interested in how their bodies work, so this is a good time to talk about maintaining good health and avoiding substances that might harm the body. Talk about how alcohol hurts a person's ability to see, hear, and walk without tripping; it alters the way people feel; and it makes it hard to judge things like whether the water is too deep or if there's a car coming too close. And it gives people bad breath and a headache!

Ages 8 to 11

The later elementary school years are a crucial time in which you can influence a child's decisions about alcohol use. Kids at this age tend to love to learn facts, especially strange ones, and are eager to learn how things work and what sources of information are available to them.

So it's a good time to openly discuss facts about alcohol: its long- and short-term effects and consequences, its physical effects, and why it's especially dangerous for growing bodies.

Kids also can be heavily influenced by friends now. Their interests may be determined by what their peers think. So teach your child to say "no" to peer pressure, and discuss the importance of thinking and acting as an individual

Teaching Kids to Say "No"

Teach kids a variety of approaches to deal with offers of alcohol:

- Encourage them to ask questions. If a drink of any kind is offered, they should ask, "What is it?" and "Where did you get it?"
- Teach them to say "no, thanks" when an alcoholic drink or tobacco are offered.
- Remind them to leave any uncomfortable situation. Make sure they have money for transportation or a phone number where you or another responsible adult can be reached.

- Teach kids never to accept a ride from someone who has been drinking. Some parents find that offering to pick up their kids from an uncomfortable situation — no questions asked — helps encourage kids to be honest and call when they need help.

The Effects of Alcohol Abuse

Alcohol interferes with a person's perception of reality and ability to make good decisions. This can be particularly hazardous for kids and teens who have less problem-solving and decision-making experience.

Short-term effects of drinking include:

- distorted vision, hearing, and coordination
- altered perceptions and emotions
- impaired judgment, which can lead to accidents, drowning, and other risky behaviors like unsafe sex and drug use
- bad breath
- hangovers

Long-term effects include:

- cirrhosis and cancer of the liver
- loss of appetite
- serious vitamin deficiencies
- stomach ailments
- heart and central nervous system damage
- memory loss
- an increased risk of impotence
- high risk for overdosing

The Effects of Smoking

Smoking and tobacco use can cause cancer and heart disease. But sometimes kids can't really think that far into the future to worry about an illness they might not get for many years. So let's talk about the problems that might affect kids more quickly:

- bad breath
- yellow teeth
- smelly clothes
- more colds and coughs
- difficulty keeping up with friends when playing sports
- empty wallet — cigarettes and tobacco products are very expensive!

Tobacco smoke contains over 4,000 different chemicals!! At least 50 are known carcinogens (cause cancer in humans). What are some chemicals found in cigarettes?

- Benzene- obtained from coal & petroleum
- Formaldehyde- highly poisonous. Used to preserve dead bodies!
- Ammonia- often found in cleaning fluids, toilet cleaner
- Acetone- nail polish remover
- Nicotine- insecticide
- Carbon Monoxide- same gas that comes out of car exhausts
- Arsenic- rat poison