



Prevent Substance Use at Every Age

parentingmontana.org/prevent-substance-use-at-every-age

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Introduction

As a parent or someone in a parenting role, you play a critical role in your child's development.¹ Through your child's relationship with you, your child develops intrapersonal skills like being able to

- manage emotions,
- self-regulate, and
- make good decisions.

They also develop interpersonal skills like being able to

- get along with others and
- communicate effectively.

Understanding how children develop can help you successfully guide, shape, and support their growth.² Research suggests when parents or those in a parenting role play an active part in their child's life, children are less likely to experience problems like having trouble managing stress or misusing substances later in life.^{1,2}

The negative impacts of early substance use in children and the resulting adverse effects are indisputable. Early use of substances can lead to more intense, frequent, and problematic use of substances.³ For example, drinking alcohol or using marijuana at younger ages puts children at greater physical and social and emotional risk as they grow up.^{4,5}

Taking an active role and intervening early in your child's life can set their path in a more positive direction.⁶ As a parent or someone in a parenting role, you are the strongest intervention guarding against risk factors that your child will encounter as they develop.

Taking an active role in your child's development supports their growth of social and emotional skills — skills that lead to success in adulthood⁷ like

- emotional and physical wellbeing,
- financial independence, and
- improved job satisfaction.⁸

This document provides information about child development at specific ages and offers parents and those in a parenting role guidance and tips about what they can do at every age to prevent substance use.

Child Development at Specific Ages

As your child ages, it is not just their physical needs that change, but their cognitive, social, and emotional needs develop and change as well. This means that as a parent or someone in a parenting role, you are continually adapting your skills to meet the changing needs of your child.

Your role in shaping your child's development will evolve as your child matures. The ways you support an infant are different than the ways you support a teen. Adjusting your responses to meet your child's needs at each stage of development is important. For example, there are certain transition times in every child's life when they are more vulnerable to risk factors. Examples of such transitions include

- going to a new school,
- divorce,
- puberty, and
- birth of a new sibling.

Helping your child adapt to these changes can decrease their risk of future problems. Added risk factors in the child's environment can negatively influence child development. These risk factors include

- lack of structure,
- stress,
- secondhand smoke, and
- parental neglect.⁶

When preventing future substance use is a goal, there are ways you can support healthy childhood development based on your child's age. Knowing what to look for at specific ages and knowing how best to support their growth during these times are important.

Ages 0-4

Children between the ages of 0-4 are experiencing many rapid changes. Infants and children are learning about themselves, their strengths and limitations, why they feel the way they do, and how they relate to others. Much of an infant's/child's learning is based on creating safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments.⁹ Positive relationships and environments are responsive, loving, dependable, and children feel supported and nurtured within them.⁹ Infants and children come to better understand themselves by interacting with you.

Addressing Substance Use With Children Ages 0-4

You can create safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments by responding to and meeting your child's physical, social, and emotional needs. Being responsive to your child's cries and needs and showing them love and caring is critical in building a child's confidence to explore and interact with their world.

Actions

- Make dedicated time in your routine to be fully present with your child.
- Recognize your infant’s cues (facial expressions, movements, and sounds) and respond to their cues. For example, if they are rubbing their eyes and yawning, offer to rock or cuddle and then put them down for a nap. If they are cooing or laughing, respond positively, smile, talk, and laugh with them.
- Your child learns and explores their world through play. They are eager to engage in imaginative play and, at times, cooperative play with others. Follow your child’s lead and play together.
- Read books or chant rhymes together. Involve your child by letting them pick the book, hold the book, or turn the pages.
- Make music and sing songs. Offer your child a simple instrument, like a rattle or tambourine, to play along.
- Make time to hold your child. Children need physical contact. Rocking your child before bed or holding your child during story time are great opportunities for connection.
- Talk to your child. Narrate what you are doing. For example, you could say, *“I am getting your breakfast ready and then we will eat.”* Involve your child by asking questions such as, *“Would you like blueberries or a banana this morning?”*
- Talk about the importance of taking care of our bodies — eating healthy, exercising, getting plenty of rest, brushing our teeth, bathing, etc.¹⁰
- If alcohol or marijuana is in the home, store it out of your child’s reach and in a location that is not accessible to your child.
- Keep prescriptions, especially prescription pain medication, in a safe and secure place where your child won’t have access to them. And, make sure to dispose of medications that have expired or that are no longer being used.¹⁰
- Keep dangerous substances found in your home like bleach, kitchen/bathroom cleaners, etc out of your child’s reach, but also talk about these dangerous substances and explain why they can be harmful.¹⁰ You could say, *“You don’t want to touch this because it can burn your skin and your eyes.”* Or, *“This is dangerous because it can make you sick if you put it in your mouth.”*
- You are your child’s biggest role model, so model positive behavior.



Tip

If your young child watches you take a prescribed medication or is curious about a medicine bottle, talk to them about only taking medicines that have their name on them or that the doctor has given just for them.¹⁰ You could say, *“This is mommy’s medicine. The doctor gave it only for me to take. It is important to never take someone else’s medicine because it could make you sick.”*

Ages 5-10

Children between the ages of 5-10 are active, excited to learn new skills and try new activities, and like to spend more time with their friends. Between the ages of 5-10, a child’s social development is an important focus. Much of a child’s learning through this phase is based on interactions with others in their environment.

As a parent or someone in a parenting role, promoting your child’s social growth and supporting their independence are essential. This teaches key social and emotional skills like self-awareness and self-regulation. Intellectually, your child is learning the idea of “self” and how to express empathy and relate to others. Your child develops a sense of empathy for others by experiencing it from you. If a child does not experience a nurturing relationship, stress hormones rise and negatively impact brain development.¹¹

The developing brain needs a non-threatening and predictable environment. Without a nurturing environment, a child develops a hyperactive stress response that leads to lowered immunity and increased likelihood of disease later in life.¹²

The ability to understand the difference between what is right and what is wrong is developed at this age and forms the backbone for healthy decision making in the future.

Addressing Substance Use With Children Ages 5-10

Having adults who model positive behavior is critical for children ages 5-10. Consider sports or different activities during these ages to build self-confidence and to engage in positive environmental influences that help support individual growth, autonomy, and their sense of independence.

Actions

- You are your child's biggest role model, so model positive behavior.
- Your child will look for answers to their questions anywhere, so work hard to be the person they turn to for information.
- Get to know your child's friends and their parents.
- If your child asks, answer questions about drug or alcohol use.
- Stay alert to any teachable moment (i.e., at the grocery store, while watching TV, or talking about school).
- Don't exaggerate the truth; stick with the facts.
- Starting at age 8, talking often and consistently about your clear rules and expectations about no alcohol use until after 21 is critical. It's not a one time "big talk"; it's frequent conversations.



Tip

Give your child permission to leave situations that make them feel uncomfortable.¹⁰ You could say, *"If you are with your friends and you get into a situation that makes you feel uncomfortable, you don't need to stay there. Call/text me and I will pick you up."* You could create a code word that lets you know they need you to help them leave an unhealthy situation.

Ages 11-14

Pre-adolescent development is a critical stage consisting of rapid physical and mental growth. The hormonal imbalances during the ages 11-14 may cause some emotional distress for pre-teens.

Intellectually, children/teens ages 11-14 tend to think in concrete ways and have difficulty with the abstract. The front part of their brain is not completely developed at this age, which means their emotional system (also called the limbic system) is running the show. Therefore, children/teens this age can be highly self-conscious, self-centered, dramatic, and some may be involved in [higher risk behaviors](#) such as consuming alcohol.

Socially and emotionally, children/teens of this age may experience more drastic mood swings and be motivated to assert their independence, which may cause conflict. The development of [social and emotional skills](#) is critical at this age to help reduce the risk of using substances.

Addressing Substance Use With Ages 11-14

Early use of drugs or alcohol is a risk factor for problematic use of drugs or alcohol in adulthood.³ Children ages 11-14 are experiencing physical changes. Acknowledging with your child the physical body changes they are experiencing is essential because some of these physical changes may be discomforting.

Furthermore, understanding that at this age your child is not skilled at managing their emotions can help you understand what tools and skills are important for building your child's ability to control their actions. Understanding that, during pre-teen and teen years, children may mask emotional and physical insecurities is important so you can be prepared to find more supportive resources such as counseling.

You can enhance the relationship you have with your child by setting guidelines together, which gives your child more authority over their own decision making as they show responsibility and good choices. Use discipline for skill building to transform poor choices into teachable moments.

Actions

- Engage in conversations with your child about substances. Seek their opinion and be open to their views.
- Model good listening skills. Good listening will increase the likelihood that your child will talk to you about things that are of concern.
- Even short conversations are helpful. Don't worry about trying to cover everything in one interaction. The conversation will come around again, and you can seize the next opportunity.
- Ask your child about their friends and get to know their friends.



Tip

Practice/Role play with your child about what to say if they are offered alcohol, marijuana, or other drugs. Let them know they can always use you as an excuse and say: *"No, my mom [or dad, aunt, etc.] would kill me if I drink."* or *"I can't. There's no way my parent(s) won't smell this on me."*¹⁰



Tip

Agree on a plan to check in when your child is away. You could agree to text or call at certain times or when leaving or arriving at certain locations. You could say, *"Please call/text me when you leave your friend's house and head to the movies."*

Ages 15-19

For teens between the ages of 15-19, the emotional/survival centers of the brain (also called the [limbic or lizard brain](#)) are well developed, but the thinking brain (also called the [prefrontal cortex or the wizard brain](#)) is still going through reorganization. During this stage of development, there can be [physical and emotional discrepancies](#). While bodies mature quickly, emotional maturity and the ability to handle difficult situations may be lacking. It is during this stage that youth exercise their independence, separate from their parents, and spend most of their time in outside activities and with peers.

Addressing Substance Use With Ages 15-19

The influence of peers is strong, and therefore, teens need to learn how to recognize and manage peer pressure. Your teen needs your parental guidance because the standards you set will contribute to what they consider acceptable and in what they choose to take part. Taking an active role in your teen's life at this stage of development is important so that you can be involved in discussions about important life decisions like drinking alcohol, using marijuana, and engaging in other high-risk behaviors.¹³

If appropriate, seek to involve older siblings and other positive role models in your teen's life to influence positive decision making and build skills. Substance use has significant impacts on the teen brain and body, and teens are at higher risk of substance use because their peers are highly influential at this age. Drinking alcohol or using marijuana as a teen increases risk of mortality and the likelihood of progressive use and addiction as they get older.^{4,14}

Actions

- Have open conversations with your teen about [drugs](#) and [alcohol](#) and about the reality of peer pressure.
- Encourage and affirm any positive behavior or positive decision making you see in your teen.
- Avoid falling into the trap of thinking, "It's what teens do; all teens use pot (or alcohol)." It is not what all teens do and has incredibly negative impacts on their brain and body.
- Manage your own emotions as you talk with your teen, so you can have a calm and confident conversation with them.
- Your role is changing from manager to consultant. So, be available and consistent as the consultant.
- Be involved in your teen's schedule and know where your teen is.
- Get to know your teen's friends and their parents.
- Help your teen develop skills to manage peer pressure.
- Have clear conversations about risky and harmful behavior such as drinking and driving. Your teen should have no question about where you stand or what the consequences of their actions will be if they engage in risky behaviors.
- Discuss rules and expectations regularly; affirm when your teen meets the expectations and follow through with consequences as needed when your teen does not.
- Notice changes in your teen's mood, sleeping patterns, school performance, and friends. These changes can serve as red flags that your teen might be engaged in substance use. If you notice changes, get curious. You could say, "*I noticed you aren't hanging around your normal group of friends. Is something going on with your usual friends?*" "*Tell me about your new friends. What are they like? What do they like to do? What do you like about them?*"¹⁰
- Offer [alternative behaviors](#) that teens can engage in so that if they say no to drugs and alcohol, they have alternatives to say yes.
- Have a code word that your teen can use in a text or phone call that lets you know they need you to help them leave an unhealthy situation. Let them know at the time their safety is the most important, no questions will be asked, and you will help them in any way you can. Ask them to include other family members or friends in this safety plan.

For All Ages

We can also help our children develop healthy attitudes about alcohol by modeling how we act. For example:

- If we choose to use alcohol and/or marijuana, doing so responsibly. Not over-consuming in front of them and never driving after drinking or using marijuana.
- Not asking them to serve us or bartend at family events.
- Telling them how you manage yourself to drink responsibly (or why you choose not to drink) and what to do if someone else is not.
- Not lying about your own use.
- [Being aware of the facts about how alcohol and marijuana affect children and teens differently than adults.](#)
- Not hosting drinking parties or providing [alcohol](#) or [marijuana](#) for your child and their friends.
- Not regularly taking your child to an establishment that solely serves adult beverages. Consider hiring a qualified babysitter while you enjoy your adult time.

Closing

Parents and those in a parenting role are the strongest intervention to guard against risk factors that their child will encounter as they develop including the use of substances. Guiding and supporting your child in each stage of their development requires adjusting your responses and adapting your skills to meet the changing needs of your child.

Connect with other Montana parents about underage drinking and drugs at [LetsFaceItMt.com](https://www.letsfaceitmt.com).

Download and print the at-a-glance resource highlighting key information for preventing substance use at every age.

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