

FCD and your school know that the most important adults in students' lives are their parents and family. While national research suggests that parents who share the risks of substances with their teens can reduce teen problems with alcohol and other drugs by half, FCD's own surveys show that, when it comes to a teen's decision to use or not use substances, no other adult opinion is as important as a parent's. In addition to having ongoing, open discussions with your child about alcohol and other drugs, their risks, and your family's own rules concerning these substances, FCD recommends that parents consider the following:

Know the Substances

We know that when it comes to teenagers, any use of alcohol or another drug comes with some risk. In the United States, the three substances most often abused by students are alcohol, marijuana, and tobacco. It is important for parents to understand the risks of these three substances, so that they can speak to their students about the risks, and consider students' health when setting family limits.

Alcohol

The adolescent brain finishes primary development in the 20s, so it is more vulnerable to damage from alcohol in the younger years. Adolescents may progress to addiction over a shorter period of time than adults. Where it might take years for an adult to become alcoholic, it often takes only 6 to 18 months for an adolescent to become dependent. However, most young people do not use alcohol regularly. Doing so puts a student in a category of higher-risk for addiction, as well as limits his or her ability to study, socialize, and achieve goals like the majority of their peers are able. Some of the possible long-term health effects of alcohol use are liver damage, heart damage, brain damage, and deadly accidents, suicide, or other violence.

Marijuana

The earlier teens start smoking, the greater the deficit in learned social behaviors, and the greater the eventual harms. Basic learning, in addition to the development of maturity, emotional strength, and healthy sense of self are all adversely affected by adolescent marijuana use in particular. People who are dependent on marijuana are at a higher risk of suffering from the negative consequences of using the drug, such as short-term memory impairment, mental health problems, and respiratory diseases. Habitual marijuana users are likely to experience a significant loss in energy and a progressively decreased inability to tolerate discomfort. Low energy and discomfort then promotes more marijuana use, which then leads to further nullification of emotion, increased confusion, lack of motivation, and further avoidance of discomfort.

Tobacco

Tobacco smoke is especially harmful to children. Children who smoke or spend time with smokers get sick more often with lung problems, colds, ear infections, asthma, and allergies. If a person waits until he or she is 21 to use cigarettes at all, he or she has much less of a chance of developing dependency. In fact, the older one gets, the less likely one is to smoke. On average, smokers die 13 to 14 years earlier than nonsmokers. Some of the possible long-term health effects of tobacco use are emphysema, ulcers, heart disease, stroke, cancer, and death.

Know the Risks and Protections

Addiction is the repetitive, compulsive use of a substance (or performance of a behavior) that occurs despite negative consequences to the user. In order to protect children from the disease of addiction, we encourage parents to become familiar with the risk and protective factors of teen alcohol and other drug use, abuse, and dependence:

Risk Factors

The primary risk factors for the development of an alcohol or other drug addiction include a family history of substance abuse, the person's age at first use of a substance, feelings of craving or tolerance toward the substance, and the surroundings in which a young person is maturing:

- Family – A person with a family history of addiction is at higher risk for addiction him/herself.
- Age – The earlier a person starts using, the greater his/her chance of becoming addicted.
- Craving – The stronger a person's compulsion to use, the more likely he/she is to become addicted.
- Tolerance – A high tolerance to alcohol or other drugs is an early warning sign of addiction.
- Surroundings – Inappropriate exposure to alcohol and other drugs “normalizes” use and increases substance availability, making a person more vulnerable to use and abuse.

Protective Factors

Children are more likely to lead healthy and productive lives if they have the following internal and external protective factors in place:

- Strong problem-solving skills
- Social skills such as empathy, good communication, and a sense of humor
- Good self-esteem and a sense of purpose and future for their lives
- Autonomy and independence
- Realistic and positive expectations from family, school, community, and self
- Meaningful participation in the world
- Support of family, school, and community
- Healthy ways to manage stress

Know What Else is Out There

Media portrayals of use can send very mixed messages that distort kids' normative beliefs about what's really going on in the world. For instance, even as the number of U.S. smokers dropped to less than 25% of adults, in 2002, 74% of all U.S. movies depicted smoking, including 75% of youth-rated movies. Our concern is that films, alongside popular music, memes, and even news media, can exaggerate the true prevalence and acceptability of alcohol and other drug use and abuse in our world. This promotes substance use as the “norm” and is one reason why kids tell us, “everybody does it.” Our challenge as adults is to get students to think about their environment and the mixed messages it can sometimes send about use and its consequences.

Understand the Social Norms Approach

The social norms approach to prevention is a simple concept with a profound implication: that sharing healthy realities can reduce student use of alcohol and other drugs. The fact is most upper school students in the United States do not binge drink, do not drink alcohol regularly, and many have never used alcohol or any other drug at all. Yet, students tend to overestimate use of substances by their peers, which can lead them to feel an internal pressure to use as a means of “fitting in.” It is our job as adults to encourage healthy behavior, but also to debunk false myths about teen use of alcohol and other drugs time and time again for our children. If we can reduce false teen perceptions of use, we can reduce the actual use of risky substances by teens too. So in your discussions with your children, always keep in mind that:

- Most students have not used alcohol in the past 30 days, and far fewer drank heavily this month.
- The majority of all high school students in the United States have never used tobacco or marijuana.

Informed by a health-perspective, FCD encourages and supports the parent and family role in prevention. We are confident that family prevention efforts can lead to healthy student and family choices for the future!