

# GRAND RESOURCE

*Help for  
Grandfamilies  
Impacted by  
Opioids and Other  
Substance Use*



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# Preventing Harmful Drug Use by Children

**“ We don’t hesitate to tell to our children that the stove is hot or about running in the street with cars but sometimes we think that they are too young to talk to them about sex and drugs. Drugs are showing up in elementary school as young as third grade. When the children are young they listen to us”**

*Victoria Gray, Grandparent Caregiver*

If you are raising your grandchild, niece, nephew or another relative child because the child’s birth parents are struggling with a substance use disorder, you may be concerned or unsure about ways to talk about drugs and alcohol with the child. Although having a parent with a substance use disorder can put children at increased risk of developing a substance use disorder later in life, many of these children will not develop one, and there are many things you can do to help prevent your relative child from developing a substance use disorder.

## **What is a substance use disorder?**

It is important for you to know what a substance use disorder is, so that you can take reasonable preventative measures with the child.

Many people know substance use disorders by their stigmatized name, “addictions.” The National Institute on Drug Abuse defines a substance use disorder as “a chronic, relapsing brain disease that is characterized by compulsive drug seeking and use, despite harmful consequences.”<sup>1</sup>



Substance use disorders often start with a person using drugs recreationally in a social setting or, particularly with opioids, with medications prescribed to the user or someone they know.<sup>2</sup> The rate at which a person becomes physically addicted to a drug varies greatly by the type of drug, the method by which the drug is used, and by the person using the drug.<sup>3</sup> The human body very easily creates a dependence on opioids. Over time, regardless of whether opioids are taken as prescribed or recreationally, the body will build up a tolerance for the drug and need more to achieve the same effect.<sup>4</sup> This tolerance can create a physical dependence on the drug.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the physical dependence, many people use drugs to self-medicate underlying emotional challenges. This self-medicating, combined with the physical dependence and painful withdrawal symptoms, may make drug users do anything to get the drugs they are dependent on.

## **Talking with the child about alcohol and other drugs:**

### **How do I prepare to talk with the child I am raising about drugs and alcohol?**

First, educate yourself by reading up on the topic. Some of the best places to get accurate information are government agencies including the National Institute on Drug Abuse, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and the National Institutes of Health. Many state and local governments also have forums or events on the topic, as do local schools, churches, and libraries.

You will need to determine what is appropriate information to share with the child based on their age and maturity, but you should also recognize that you will not be able to control all aspects of how they learn about this topic. These issues are talked about much more than they used to be, so children are exposed to information in school, on television, and online. It's important to never lie to your relative child and to try and be as factually accurate as possible. If you do not know the answer to their question, let them know that and offer to look it up.

If you are not comfortable having this conversation with your relative child, you should find a professional or someone the child trusts to have this conversation with them.

### **When should I talk with the child about drugs and alcohol?**

You should talk about alcohol and other drugs frequently in a normal conversational way, whatever that means for you and the child. If you already have established routines where you tend to talk about more serious topics, like bedtime or dinnertime, talk then. You should directly tell the child that they can come to you at any time for help and that you will not judge them. You may think the child knows this, but stating it verbally is crucial.

You should talk to the child before you think you need to. Many children start learning about drugs in elementary school and may be exposed to them before they start middle school. It's important to start these conversations before your relative child is exposed to alcohol or other drugs.



### **What should I say when I talk with the child about drugs and alcohol?**

Have ongoing and normalized conversations with them about alcohol and other drugs and talk about their increased risk for developing substance use disorders. Start these conversations by asking open-ended probing questions periodically to see what they know, what they are thinking about alcohol and other drugs and what their feelings toward them are. Try not to focus on their parent(s) drug use and instead talk about the general risks of drinking alcohol or using drugs (including prescription drugs and over-the-counter drugs that are easily misused). State your disapproval of underage drinking and recreational drug use. While talking with them about alcohol and other drugs, do not lecture them. Talk with them and let them know that if they ever do use drugs or alcohol they can always come to you with any issues.

### **What else can I do to prevent the child from developing a substance use disorder?**

**Build a warm and supportive relationship** with them while setting clear boundaries and limits so they learn to be responsible for their actions. Have reasonable consequences for when they disobey the boundaries and rules you set to teach them about personal responsibility. Discuss their interests, do things together, strive for honest and direct communication with them, offer encouragement for small and large achievements, and allow appropriate degrees of independence. When you build a sense of connectedness and trust with them during the routine parts of life, they are more likely to come to you when they need to talk about more difficult or stressful decisions and experiences.

#### ***Safe Storage or Disposal of Prescription Medication***

If prescription medications in your home are not properly stored or disposed of, children or adults with substance use disorders may access and be harmed by them. The national “Lock Your Meds” campaign of the National Family Partnership recommends adults take a pledge to do the following:

- Secure medication to prevent children and guests from accessing it.
- Take regular inventory of your medicine to make sure nothing is missing.
- Safely dispose of unused or expired medication.
- Teach the children in your life the difference between helpful medicine and harmful drugs - and to only take medicine that is prescribed to them by a doctor and given by a parent or caregiver.
- Spread the word and encourage family and friends to take a stand against prescription drug misuse

Learn more at [lockyourmeds.org](http://lockyourmeds.org)



**Affirm the child.** Help them build self-esteem by telling them often that they are valuable and loved. Sometimes drugs and alcohol are used to self-medicate when sad, depressed and not feeling valued. Children who perceive that parents have chosen drugs over them may feel this more so than other children.

**Be a good role model when it comes to drinking, taking medication, and handling stress.** Children watch the behavior of those they look up to. Modeling desired behavior for a child is a powerful prevention tool. If you choose to drink, only drink small amounts and do not become intoxicated. If you have a history of substance use challenges, be sure you are connected to a strong support system. If you choose to talk with the child about it or if they ask you questions, be honest but concise, explain what it cost you and how your life is different now. If you are using prescription medications read the instructions carefully, safely store your current medications, and dispose of unused medications. Don't save them for later. Practice self-care and talk to them about doing the same.

**Know the child's risk level.** Consider family history and the child's history with mental health and behavioral disorders, past trauma, and any issues with impulse control. Talk with the child's doctor or other professional about their risk levels and what you can do to best help them.

**Know the child's friends.** Have conversations with your relative child about their friends and ask questions about them. Have conversations with their friends whenever possible to get to know them and whether they are good influences. Talk to your relative child about how it's normal to want to be accepted by others but it's best to find and focus on friends who accept you for who you are. Emphasize the importance of having supportive, healthy friendships and how to be a good friend.

**Be present and aware of what the child is doing.** Know where your relative child is and who they are with. Help them with homework and projects. Be present and involved during recreational activities and parties or ensure another responsible adult is.

**Be familiar with the child's progress and setbacks.** Monitor academic performance, successes and challenges in extra-curricular activities. Be aware of any challenges they are having, or sudden, significant changes.

**Set firm, reasonable, and age-appropriate boundaries** with your relative child. Boundaries can be things like setting bedtimes when younger and curfews when older, notifying you when plans change, and letting you know who is driving them around. Explain that you set boundaries because you love them and want them to be safe. Setting boundaries for children can help them build life skills such as responsibility, problem-solving, patience and self-discipline.<sup>6</sup> It also provides an opportunity to affirm them when they succeed in following the boundaries. Have consequences if they do not stick to the boundaries, but do not make them overly harsh.



## **How do I tell the difference between experimental drug use and a substance use disorder?**

While it is not uncommon for some teens to experiment with alcohol and other drugs, and it can be upsetting, most children will not develop substance use disorders.

It is helpful to be aware of signs of a substance use disorder in order to distinguish it from experimental drug use. Signs of a substance use disorder may include:

- Loss of control over using
  - » Using more than they wanted
  - » Using for longer than they wanted
  - » Using despite not planning on doing so
- Neglecting other activities
  - » Spending less time on activities that used to be important (example - hanging out with friends or family, exercising, and hobbies)
  - » Missing more work or school
- Risk taking
  - » Taking serious risks to obtain drugs
  - » Engaging in other risky behaviors that are out of character
- Relationship issues
  - » Acting out against those closest to them
  - » Complaints from coworkers, supervisors, teachers or classmates
  - » Change in friends
- Secrecy
  - » Hiding the amount they are consuming
  - » Hiding their actions or activities
  - » Unexplained incidents, injuries, or accidents
- Changing appearances
  - » Changes or deterioration in hygiene or physical appearance (example - not showering or wearing unclean clothes)
- Continued use despite negative consequences
  - » Despite the problems their drug use is causing, they continue using
- Problems at school or work - changes in quality of work
- Physical health issues
  - » Changes in energy levels
  - » Gaining or losing weight suddenly
- Financial issues
  - » Increased or sudden requests for money
  - » Stealing money or other items<sup>7</sup>

If the child is exhibiting some of these signs, it may be time to get help from a doctor, counselor, or therapist.



### **Further Resources - Prevention**

- Center on Addiction “What is Addiction”
- Addiction Policy Forum “How do you really keep your kids safe from addiction?”
- Child Mind Institute “How to Talk to Your Teen About Substance Use”
- Parents.com “Talking to Your Child About Drugs”
- SAMHSA “Tips for Talking to Your Kids About Underage Drinking”

### **Further Resources - Grandfamilies**

- grandfactsheets.org
- grandfamilies.org
- gu.org
- www.brookdalefoundation.net/RAPP/rapp.html



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