

# VIP Value In Parenting

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## It's Never Too Early For Prevention

By Danette Shepard, Alcoholism & Drug Abuse Council, and Virginia Brown, Education for Parenting Ministry

All children face decisions about whether to use tobacco, alcohol or other drugs. Among 9 to 12 year olds, almost 3 out of every 10 children were offered drugs in 1997 (up 47% since 1993). When is a good time to begin protecting your children from tobacco, alcohol and other drugs? Actually, it's never too early!

**What's the big deal?** Some parents say, "Every kid has to deal with alcohol and other drugs in their teen years. It's part of growing up to face peer pressure and experiment a little." Actually, it *is* a big deal. Since their bodies are still growing, the harmful effects of alcohol and other drugs are much greater for kids. The earlier kids use, the better their chance of becoming addicted. Youth like to drink in excess, which puts them at risk of alcohol poisoning.

**Who's at risk?** All children need substance abuse prevention. However, kids at highest risk are those who have:

- ◆ easy access to alcohol and other drugs
- ◆ a family history of addiction
- ◆ a community that accepts youth who use
- ◆ trouble in, or do not commit to school
- ◆ behavior problems
- ◆ moved from school-to-school or home-to-home
- ◆ families who are very poor

### What can parents do to protect their children?

Recognize and believe that your kids are at risk. While 43% of parents believe children using drugs is a national crisis, only 8% believe the problem is in their local schools, and 6% in their communities. There are youth in every community who use alcohol and other drugs.

Parents can help keep their children safe by forming close relationships with their kids, communicating healthy and clear values and standards, and teaching life skills such as problem solving and resisting peer pressure. Parents can also help kids develop their abilities, recognize their accomplishments and reward positive behavior.

- ◆ Kids are smart! Be ready to teach your kids about the dangers of alcohol and other drugs. Educate yourself first. Attend a class, use the internet, or read!

- ◆ Attend a parenting class. Learn tips to form a stronger relationship with your child.
- ◆ Practice with your child ways to get out of tough situations. For example, "Don't have the money," "You must be joking!" or "I'm on the track team."

### Parents are children's most important teachers

It is important to explore our own values and beliefs. How do we use alcohol, for instance? Do we use it in our religion? What is its value in our culture? Is there wine at our holiday table or do we drink most every day?

Most parents lead busy and stressful lives, working long hours. Parents have family responsibilities, money worries and time pressures. Do we always drink alcohol when we are stressed instead of dealing with the problem?

Drugs are illegal. If children see adults using illegal drugs, they will become curious and may also break the law. Children need to see adults use medications the doctors give them responsibly.

Children try what they SEE, rather than do what we say. It is important that **what we do** sends healthy and clear messages to our children about drug and alcohol use. What message do you think you are giving to your children? Is this the message you want to teach them?

It is important for our children to see us have fun without always having to drink. (Fun does not = drinking.) It also is

important for us to be honest with ourselves; do we use alcohol in good ways or do we abuse alcohol or other drugs?

**Stress.** How a parent manages stress teaches and sends a powerful message to their children about how to deal with life's pressures and problems at home, with their friends and at school. Rather than denying or avoiding stress, kids need to see themselves as problem-solvers. People who are problem-solvers do not need to drink if stressed! If there is a problem: think about it, talk it out, brainstorm possible solutions, and then create a plan of action.

When your children show signs of stress: listen to their worries and feelings; serve healthy meals; plan time to exercise; make sure they get a good night's sleep; and teach them how to breath slowly and relax.

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## Protecting Your Children From Substance Abuse

Sudden or extreme behavior changes may be a flag for parents regarding their children's drug or alcohol use.

- ▶ A drop in marks at school
- ▶ Sudden mood or attitude changes
- ▶ They don't want to do things they usually enjoy
- ▶ They look messy
- ▶ They don't come to family affairs
- ▶ Erratic Eating

Spend time with your children, and get to know their "normal behavior."

Remember, what your children need most is you!

## Linking Kids With Support

**Youth Programs.** Provide opportunities for your children to join youth programs, such as 4-H, Scouts, church youth groups or volunteer activities. These opportunities develop skills and provide meaningful roles so children gain confidence. These activities also help children and parents get to know others in the community.

**Support school.** Help your child succeed in school. Set goals and work toward them. Express high, but reasonable expectations. Show your kids the value of what they learn. Work together with teachers. Get involved in the PTA.

**Get involved in your community.** Make sure your community is safe and truly drug-free. Join an anti-drug community coalition, such as Community Alliance for Prevention by calling 294-9000.

**Be aware that transition times are risky.** Whether the move is from one house to another, from elementary to middle school, or an adjustment after divorce, children find these events stressful. Keep healthy routines and provide a safe and structured environment. Help your kids reach out to others for support, and let them see you seek outside help if things are difficult at home.

## Other Ways a Parent Can Help

**Explore media messages.** Discuss messages on TV, in the movies, in magazines, on billboards. What do they tell us about alcohol? Who are they trying to sell to? You might be surprised that the target is our young people.

**Communicate!** Listen as well as teach. Building this foundation takes time and begins when kids are very young. It forms strong and loving relationships. Open the door so that children will come to you when they face decisions that are risky or dangerous.

**Empower children.** Teach your children to assess dangerous situations. Help them trust their inner feelings. Teach them when to keep a good secret and to tell a bad secret.

**Spend time with your children.** Research has shown that children who find their parents and caregivers "emotionally available" are at lower risk for drug and alcohol use. Spend both quality AND quantity time with your children every day.

*"The most important work in drug prevention doesn't take place in the halls of Congress or in the classroom, it takes place around the family dinner table. Despite what parents may sometimes think, teens and pre-teens do listen to them when it comes to these difficult topics."*

*Barry R. McCaffrey,  
Office of National Drug Control Policy Director*

Good times to talk with your kids about drugs include:

- ◆ while you're cooking;
- ◆ at the dinner table;
- ◆ during halftime at a football game;
- ◆ while you're watching TV;
- ◆ while driving in the car.

## Family Stories

*Mary's father always made big promises before the holidays; but when he drank, he could never follow through. Mary tries really hard not to promise her children more than she can do or give. She doesn't want them to be disappointed. She also knows that what makes holidays special are the people she is with, the food, and the preparations, not the presence of alcohol.*

*The Rodriguez family hosted an alcohol-free family party so that the kids could see everyone having fun without drinking. To avoid pressure from family and friends, they simply had the party at a place that did not allow alcohol to be served.*

*Tammy and John have made sitting down to dinner each night a priority. But the kids (ages 4, 6, 9) were often terrible at the table! To solve the problem, they started "Family Talk Time" to foster closer relationships. The ground rules are simple: everyone has a turn to talk (one person at a time, please!), share what happened during the day, it's ok to talk about feelings (good or bad), no one interrupts or puts anyone down. The kids now look forward to their time to talk about their day!*

## For more information:

Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Council: 294-9000  
Parent Education Ministry: 342-0908  
Mental Health Association: 294-7411; 1-800-832-1200  
Cornell Cooperative Extension: 344-1234

## Awareness Quiz

Parents, please take this quiz and use as a discussion tool with your children.

1. At what age does the average child begin using alcohol?

A. 10      B. 11      C. 12      D. 13      E. 14

2. What is the earliest grade in which alcohol and other drug use was reported on the NYS School Survey?

A. 3rd      B. 4th      C. 5th      D. 6th      E. 7th

### True or false:

3. 31% of students had their first whole drink of alcohol before age 13.      True / False

4. 21% of 9th graders binge drink (5 or more drinks at one time).      True / False

5. Youth drugs arrests are 62% higher in Orange County than the state average.      True / False

6. 213 teens in Orange County were arrested in 1998 for DWI\*.      True / False

\*driving while intoxicated - having a blood/alcohol level of .10

1-C; 2-C; 3-True; 4-True; 5-True; 6-True.  
\*When people binge drink, they risk alcohol poisoning, which is fatal 1 in 10 times.

Answers to the quiz

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For more information on parenting education and/or the Orange County Parenting Coalition Action Team, contact Cornell Cooperative Extension at 845 - 344 - 1234.  
[www.cce.cornell.edu/orange](http://www.cce.cornell.edu/orange)



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