

Substance Abuse Prevention

Kidpower is an educational charitable organization that, since 1989, has brought "People Safety" education to over 1.2 million children, teenagers, and adults, including those with special needs, from many different cultures - close to home and around the world. For publications; free articles, podcasts and e-newsletter; and information about our services and locations, please visit www.kidpower.org.

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Personal safety can be affected in various ways by substance abuse. Many adults are concerned about the numbers of young people whose lives are damaged or cut short by substance abuse. Substance abuse is a form of violence to oneself and potentially to others. As with all areas of personal safety, it is important to accept that nothing works all the time. Substance abuse is a difficult complex problem. The following overview uses Kidpower's approach to teaching self-protection skills to suggest some possibilities for adults who want to help.

Understand Why Substance Abuse Exists

Throughout recorded history, people have sought to change the way they feel or perceive the world by taking potentially dangerous substances into their bodies by swallowing them, inhaling them, or absorbing them through their skin. People have done this with alcohol, legal and illegal drugs, glue, mushrooms, tobacco, and gasoline, to name just some substances.

People both use and misuse substances because they are curious, lonely, looking for enlightenment, bored, wanting to be accepted by their peers, wanting to copy their elders, seeking stress reduction, enjoy the feeling of being high, trying to relax, or seeking relief from emotional or physical pain.

Be Blunt About the Problem

Young people need to understand that what changes using a substance from *use* to *abuse* is when this behavior becomes destructive to themselves or others. You can be direct about personal safety consequences by saying something like, "Reckless driving because your mind is not fully aware can kill or injure people. Having poor judgment because your mind and feelings are altered can put you at greater risk of being assaulted, of being provoked into getting into a fight, of making poor decisions about sexual behavior, or of having accidents. Doing something illegal can land you in jail or juvenile hall, which is a miserable place to be. Being with other people who are breaking the law can make you more vulnerable to violence. Some substances are poisonous and can damage your body or destroy your mind. Overdosing on some substances can cause you to become permanently injured or killed."

Recognize Addictive Behavior

Young people need to understand what addictions are, how to recognize addictive behavior in oneself or others, and how to get help. Some behaviors and substances are addictive, which means that someone can easily become emotionally or physically dependent on them. This can make it very hard to stop using these substances or to stop repeating this addictive behavior once you start, even if you really want to. Some people are much more vulnerable to becoming addicted than others which means that, just because someone else has no problem stopping, does not tell you whether or not you are likely to have a problem.

Be Realistic

Demonizing substance abuse (or the people who use drugs or alcohol) is not effective. Those young people who are most at risk will not believe you unless what you say sounds factual and balanced. Access to potentially dangerous substances and to people abusing them can be anywhere—in any home, school, neighborhood, or community with groups of any income, race, or culture.

Lots of adults model abusing substances and being dependent on other self-destructive, addictive behaviors that affect their personal safety and well-being. Our society is very inconsistent about what is and is not socially acceptable or against the law.

Initiate Conversations Even if Young People are Resistant

Many experts believe that discussions on this issue are a major factor in prevention. Even if they roll their eyeballs, make sarcastic remarks and tell you that the subject bores them to tears, the young people in your life really do care about what you think and want your respect. Instead of getting sidetracked or upset with what looks like disrespectful behavior, see this as a sign of discomfort. In the interest of their personal safety, stick with your intention with humor and compassion.

Remember that boys are more likely to feel comfortable with conversations where you are sitting shoulder-to-shoulder. This means they won't be looking at you, because you will be facing in the same direction. Girls are more likely to be comfortable talking face-to-face. No matter how you do it, be clear, respectful and persistent about expressing your concerns and your values.

Make Substance Abuse and Other Dangerous Behavior Unfashionable and Against the Rules

Schools and youth groups need to communicate a consistent, strong personal safety and community safety message that smoking, underage drinking, reckless behavior, violence, bullying, and drug abuse are all *not* cool and *not* acceptable. Expose young people to school leaders, sports stars and entertainers who they are likely to see as fashionable role models and have them give the message for you. Choose these leaders carefully according to their behavior as well as their message to help young people identify with role models who reinforce your goal. Have realistic, fair consequences and enforce them consistently.

Accept that Addictions Need Treatment, Not Blame

The shame and blame that go with addictive behavior make it harder to seek treatment and support. This makes it harder for people coping with addiction to improve their personal safety and well-being. Just as some people are vulnerable to allergies or heart disease, some people are more vulnerable to becoming addicted.

Set a Good Example

Are you misusing substances, even legal ones? Are you demonstrating other kinds of addictive behavior such as being a workaholic or a compulsive gambler? Are you doing unethical things because “everybody does it”? Do you show that you are unable to stop yourself from losing control? Are you justifying self-destructive behavior by saying “I can’t help myself”? Are you engaging in other behaviors that jeopardize your personal safety? If so, you will have difficulty persuading young people to do differently than they see you doing.

Set a good example to the young people in your life by stopping self-destructive, addictive behavior. If you cannot do this on your own, model for the young people watching you your own commitment to self care and personal safety by going to a counselor, joining a support group, considering a twelve-step program, etc. Keep reaching out until you get the help you need.

Make Sure Young People Know You Care

According to many experts, having good relationships with concerned adults is a major factor in preventing substance abuse. During their teenaged years, young people might act irritated or as if they don’t want to be bothered by the adults around them. Insist on spending time with them anyway.

Try to find activities that both of you enjoy. Do your best to encourage young people to talk to you about their concerns by listening without judgment or lectures, helping them to find their own solutions.

Make Sure Young People Have Good Boundary-Setting Skills

Telling someone, “Just say no,” is not very helpful. Knowing what you are supposed to do is not the same as actually being able to do it.

Young people need the opportunity to develop personal safety skills such as assessing a situation and resisting pressure from others. In real life, people are more likely to do what they've practiced, so try acting out role-plays together. Ask kids for their help so you can set up situations and dialogue that seem realistic to them. Have them take on the role of being the person who pressures. Young people often need coaching about how to say, "No" and walk away, without losing face in front of their friends.

If you can't get kids to practice with you, insist that they have this opportunity with another adult you trust. Programs like Kidpower and Teenpower can help young people learn and practice personal safety skills such as how to set appropriate boundaries with themselves and with others. Young people can also learn to recognize and take the power out of emotional triggers that often make it hard to stick to their boundaries.

Empower Young People by Involving Them in Solving the Problem

Ask young people for their ideas. Help them organize activities that provide alternatives and education.

Stay Out of Denial

Don't ignore symptoms or problems. If something concerns you, speak up. Intervene quickly if you see signs of substance abuse or other destructive behavior that can affect personal safety and well-being. Be persistent about finding solutions.

Work Together With Other Concerned People

Explore the pros and cons of resources offered by organizations and groups in your area. Remember that

you are not alone in your concerns.

Seek Counseling or Other Treatment Sooner Rather Than Later if There is a Problem

Dealing with addictions is not simply a matter of willpower. If you suspect or know that a young person has a problem, talk to as many people as you can find to see what kinds of support are available.

Honor Yourself Even if Things Go Wrong

Most people look back with regret at things they wish they had known to do differently. No matter how much you care about a young person, no matter how much you tried to do the best you could to take care of her or him, and no matter how good a person that individual is, she or he can still end up being damaged by substance abuse. Instead of beating yourself up, you can set a terrific example to young people by acting as if you believe that one does not have to be perfect to be a good person. Honor yourself for being loving and courageous and for looking for help now.

Remember Kidpower's Underlying Principle: Safety and Self-Esteem are More Important Than Anyone's Embarrassment, Inconvenience, or Offense

You may need to push past your own embarrassment or awkwardness. You might get offended by the response you get from young people when you reach out to them. Go beyond those obstacles. Stay focused and calm. Let children know that you won't overreact to any admissions that they might make about already using substances.

Personal safety for young people needs adult support. The chances are much better that kids will talk to you if you can be calm and compassionate in your words and action as you deal with the subject. Because some issues might be just too hard to talk about with immediate family members, make sure young people have another safe adult who they can also go to for help.