



Answering Your Child's Tough Questions



As your child becomes curious about alcohol and other drugs, he or she may turn to you for answers and advice. Use this opportunity to start an open, honest conversation about drinking and drug use, and to establish or reinforce your rules about alcohol and drug use and outline the behavior you expect. Peer pressure can be powerful among youths, and having a plan to avoid underage drinking and drug use can help children make smart choices. Because some questions can be difficult to answer, it is important to be prepared. The following are some common questions and answers about underage drinking and other drugs.

Alcohol-Specific Questions

"Why is alcohol bad for me?"

Don't try to scare your child about drinking or tell him or her, "You can't handle it." Instead, tell your child that alcohol can be bad for his or her growing brain, interferes with judgment, and can make him or

her sick. Underage drinking has severe consequences, including injury or death from accidents; unintended, unwanted, or unprotected sexual activity; academic problems; and drug use. Young people who drink are also more likely to have health issues such as depression and anxiety disorders. Once children hear the facts and your opinions about them, it is easier for you to make rules and enforce them.

"I got invited to a party. Can I go?"

Ask your child if an adult will be present at the party or if he or she thinks children will be drinking. Remind your child that even being at a party where there is underage drinking can get him or her into trouble. Use this time to reinforce your rules about alcohol and remind your children of the behavior you expect. Let them know they can say "no" or text a family member a code word if they're put in a situation that makes them uncomfortable.



"Did you drink when you were a kid?"

Don't let your past stop you from talking to your child about underage drinking. If you drank as a teenager, be honest. Acknowledge that it was risky. Make sure to emphasize that we now know even more about the risks to children who drink underage. Consider telling your children relatable stories about making smart decisions when it comes to alcohol. These could be stories that show the consequences of engaging in risky behavior.

"Why do you drink?"

Make a distinction between alcohol use among children and among adults. Explain to your child your reasons for drinking: whether it is to enhance a meal, share good times with friends, or celebrate a special occasion. Point out that, for adults, drinking in moderation is not harmful to their bodies, and if you choose to drink, it is always in moderation. Tell your child that some people should not drink at all, including underage children.

"What if my friends ask me to drink?"

Helping your child say "no" to peer pressure is one of the most important things you can do to keep him or her alcohol-free. Work with your child to think of a way to handle this situation, whether it is simply saying, "No, I don't drink," or "I have a game tomorrow," or "I have to go to work tomorrow."

"You drink alcohol, so why can't I?"

Remind your child that underage drinking is against the law and for good reason. Point out that adults are fully developed mentally

and physically, so they can handle drinking. Children's minds and bodies, however, are still growing, so alcohol can have a greater effect on their judgment and health.¹

Marijuana-Specific Questions

"Why is marijuana bad for me?"

Tell your children that marijuana use in any form is not safe for the growth of their brain. Explain that if children smoke marijuana, they could have issues with attention, concentration, and learning, which could cause them to do poorly in school, and creates a lack of balance and coordination, which could increase injury risk when playing sports or driving. Once children hear the facts and your opinions about them, it is easier for you to make rules and enforce them.



"I got invited to a party. Can I go?"

Ask your child if an adult will be present at the party or if he or she thinks children will be trying marijuana. Remind your child that even being at a party where there is drug use can get him or her into trouble. Use this time to discuss the risks of marijuana and remind your children of the behavior you expect. Let them know they can say "no" or text a family member a code word if they're put in a situation that makes them uncomfortable.



"Did you try marijuana when you were a kid?"

An estimated 1.2 million youths aged 12 to 17 tried marijuana for the first time in 2017—

that's approximately 3,300 kids each day.² Don't let your past stop you from talking to your child about marijuana use. If you tried marijuana as a teenager, be honest. Acknowledge that it was risky. Make sure to emphasize that we now know even more about the risks of marijuana use for children. Consider telling your children relatable stories about making smart decisions when it comes to marijuana. These could be stories that show the consequences of engaging in risky behavior.

"If marijuana is legal in my state, why can't I use it?"

If marijuana is legal in your state, young people may also have more exposure to the drug. State laws allowing medical or recreational marijuana use for adults could prompt more youths to believe that the drug is safe. It's important to have a conversation with your children and remind them about the drug's potential harms, and that recreational marijuana is still illegal for those under 21.³

"What if my friends ask me to try marijuana?"

Talk with your children about having an "exit plan" if they are offered marijuana. Peer pressure can be powerful among youths, and having a plan to avoid drug use can help children make smart choices.

Talk with your children about what they would do if faced with a decision about drugs, such as texting a code word to a family member or practicing saying "no" in a safe environment. Work with your child to think of a way to handle this situation, whether it is simply saying, "No, I don't smoke," or "I have a game tomorrow," or "I have to go to work tomorrow."

References

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2007). *The Surgeon General's call to action to prevent and reduce underage drinking: A guide to action for educators*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General.

² Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2018). Key substance use and mental health indicators in the United States: Results from the 2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (HHS Publication No. SMA 18-5068, NSDUH Series H-53). Rockville, MD: Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

³ Gorman, A. (2017). In the age of legalization, talking to kids about marijuana gets tougher. Shots: Health News From NPR. From <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2017/11/10/563051543/in-the-age-of-legalization-talking-to-kids-about-marijuana-gets-tougher> (accessed June 20, 2018).