

Raising Drug-Free Kids: Advice by Age

Grades 4-6



Preteens: They're on a quest to figure out their place in the world. When it comes to the way they view that world, they tend to give their friends' opinions a great deal of power while, at the same time, they're starting to question their parents' views and messages. Your advice may be challenged — but it will be heard and will stay with your child much more than he will ever admit.

Here are eight tips to help you help your preteen live a healthy, drug-free life:

1. Make sure your child knows your rules — and that you'll enforce the consequences if rules are broken. This applies to no-use rules about alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs — as well as bedtimes and homework. Research shows that kids are less likely to use alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs if their parents have established a pattern of setting clear rules and consequences for breaking those rules.

2. Act out scenes with your child in which people offer her drugs. Kids who don't know what to say or how to get away are more likely to give in to peer pressure. Let her know that she can always use you as an excuse and say: "No, my mom [or dad, aunt, etc.] will kill me if I smoke a cigarette." Explain why she shouldn't continue friendships with kids who have offered her cigarettes, alcohol or pills.

3. Tell your child what makes him so special. Puberty can upend a child's self-esteem. Feelings of insecurity, doubt and pressure may creep in. Offset those feelings with a lot of positive comments about his life and who he is as an individual — and not just when he brings home an "A".

4. Give your children the power to make decisions independently of their peers. You can reinforce this message through small things such as encouraging your child to pick out the sneakers he likes rather than the pair his four friends have.

5. Base drug and alcohol messages on facts, not fear. Kids can't argue with facts but their new need for independence may allow them to get around their fears. Also, kids love to learn facts — both run-of-the-mill and truly odd. For drug and alcohol facts, visit www.drugfree.org and look at the Drug Guide.

6. Preteens aren't concerned with future problems that might result from experimentation with alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, but they are concerned about their appearance — sometimes to the point of obsession. Tell them about the smelly hair and ashtray breath caused by cigarettes. Make sure they know that it would be hard to perform in the school play while high on marijuana.

7. Get to know your child's friends — and their friends' parents. Check in by phone or a visit once in a while to make sure they are giving their children the same kinds of messages you give your children about alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.

8. Help children separate reality from fantasy. Watch TV and movies with them and ask lots of questions to reinforce the distinction between the two. Remember to include advertising in your discussions, as those messages are especially powerful.

Substances in your fourth- to sixth-grader's world can include: Tobacco, Alcohol, Ritalin, Adderall, Inhalants, Marijuana.