Parent Toolkit:
How to Talk with Your Kids about Alcohol, Marijuana & Other Drugs

You are the most important person in your child’s life.
Kids whose parents talk to them about not using alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs are up to 50% less likely to use than those who don’t.¹

About This Kit

As a parent, there are going to be times when you need help discussing issues both big and small. That’s why we created the Parent Toolkit with ideas on how to start talking to your child about underage drinking and marijuana use. You are the most important person in your child’s life. The more you talk with your kids about not drinking and using marijuana, the more you can influence and encourage them to make healthy choices that will help them succeed in life.

d-RAP (Denver Resource for Awareness and Prevention) provides information and resources on teen drinking and other drug use to parents, youth, service providers, and the local community.

For more information on Denver RAP and our efforts to keep Denver a safe and healthy place, please connect with us:

➤ Find us online – www.denverrap.org
➤ Get dialed in – 720.944.2825
➤ Email us – denverrap@denvergov.org

¹ Partnership Attitude Tracking Survey, The Partnership at Drugfree.org
“Binge drinking” is defined as drinking 5 or more drinks on one occasion; About 90% of the alcohol consumed by youth under age 21 in the U.S. is in the form of binge drinking.\(^2\)

One quarter of Denver’s middle and high school youth reported using alcohol in the past month.\(^3\)

72% of high school students in Denver reported ever having used alcohol, compared to 66% nationally.\(^3\)

54% of Denver high school students who used alcohol in the past 30 days also used marijuana in the past 30 days.\(^3\) This demonstrates that students may use alcohol and marijuana together.

You must be 21 or older to have or use retail marijuana and it is illegal to give or sell retail marijuana to minors.

\(^2\) Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
\(^3\) Healthy Kids Colorado Survey 2013, Denver sample
27% of Denver high school students used marijuana in the past month.³

59% of Denver high school students think that there is no risk or slight risk to using marijuana regularly.³ Research shows that as teens perception of marijuana’s risks goes down, their marijuana use increases.

Adolescents are highly influenced by media, and marijuana is advertised in Colorado in places youth often frequent, including public transportation, radio stations and alternative newspapers and magazines.⁴

Marijuana abuse/dependence is the No. 1 reason why youth in Colorado are admitted for substance-abuse treatment.⁵

Using marijuana at a young age can affect memory and the ability to think clearly. This makes it difficult to concentrate, learn new things and make sound decisions.⁶

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³ Healthy Kids Colorado Survey 2013, Denver sample
⁴ Understand the Big Deal: How Marijuana Harms Youth, University of Colorado, Center on Antisocial Drug Dependence
⁵ NSDUH, 2010
⁶ Learn About Marijuana (learnaboutmarijuanawa.org), University of Washington, Alcohol & Drug Abuse Institute
Why is it important to talk to your child about alcohol and marijuana?

Kids whose parents talk to them about not using alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs are up to 50% less likely to use than those who don’t.

You’re proud of your child and want to do what you can to help them be their best.

- It’s illegal for kids under 21 to drink or use marijuana, so they can get in trouble with the law if they do drink and/or use marijuana.

- Alcohol affects brain development, which can lead to lower grades, dropping out of school, and decreased decision-making skills.

- Alcohol is addictive; research shows that youth who begin drinking before age 15 are 4 times more likely to develop alcohol-related problems later in life.
- Drinking can increase the likelihood of **serious injury**; alcohol is a factor in the four leading causes of death among youth ages 10 - 24: motor vehicle crashes, unintentional injuries, homicide, and suicide.

- THC, the main chemical in marijuana that actually gets you high, impacts the parts of the brain that controls learning and attention. It can lower IQ, impair memory, and effects may continue for weeks after use.

- Individuals who use marijuana and drive are two times more likely to have an auto accident than those who don’t.

- Marijuana impairs judgment, slows movement, and decreases coordination for up to 3 hours after smoking.

- Studies show that 10% to 15% of marijuana smokers become **dependent**, about the same as other drugs.

- Marijuana activates the same pleasure centers in the brain that are targeted by heroin, cocaine and alcohol.

- Driving high is considered impaired driving and will result in a **DUI**.

- Marijuana potencies have been increasing for the last two decades, resulting in a much stronger drug than what was used 20 years ago.
Marijuana and the Teen Brain

The brain’s limbic system (reward system) develops early in adolescence, and the prefrontal system (which controls judgment) is slower to develop. This graphical representation of a 2008 study shows that there is a period in adolescence when the brain’s drive for pleasure and new experiences is strong, but its “brakes” are not mature. This is why adolescents have more trouble than adults in controlling their impulses, and why adolescents may know what they should be doing but have trouble doing it. This graphic also explains why adolescents are more vulnerable to becoming addicted to substances. Adolescents who try marijuana are over nine times more likely to develop symptoms of cannabis dependence than adults who try marijuana.
**Marijuana Intoxication**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brain Function</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impulsivity</td>
<td>Increased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Memory</td>
<td>Decreased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention</td>
<td>Decreased in occasional users, normal in long-term users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Making</td>
<td>Slowed response time, decreased accuracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Decreased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Fluency</td>
<td>Normal in regular users</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**How does THC affect behavior? It depends on where the CB receptors are in the brain.**

**Brain Structure** | **Regulates** | **THC Effect on User** |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amygdala</td>
<td>emotions, fear, anxiety</td>
<td>panic/paranoia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basal Ganglia</td>
<td>planning/starting a movement</td>
<td>slowed reaction time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brain Stem</td>
<td>information between brain &amp; spinal column</td>
<td>antinausea effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cerebellum</td>
<td>motor coordination, balance</td>
<td>impaired coordination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hippocampus</td>
<td>learning new information</td>
<td>impaired memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothalamus</td>
<td>eating, sexual behavior</td>
<td>increased appetite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neocortex</td>
<td>complex thinking, feeling, &amp; movement</td>
<td>altered thinking, judgment, &amp; sensation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nucleus Accumbens</td>
<td>motivation and reward</td>
<td>euphoria (feeling good)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spinal Cord</td>
<td>transmission of information betw. body &amp; brain</td>
<td>altered pain sensitivity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The brain structures illustrated above all contain high numbers of CB receptors.*
Teachable Moments

Talking to your kids about not using alcohol and marijuana is one of the most powerful tools you can use to protect and connect with them. Finding the right opportunities to bring the topic up can be tough. Here are some easy ways to start talking with your child about the risks of alcohol and marijuana.
Everyday Examples to Start the Conversation

**The Movies:** You just finished watching a movie with your children in which the main character, José, drinks excessively. This gives you an opportunity to discuss the film and the lead character’s behavior with your children. You can start the conversation by asking them what they thought of José’s alcohol use. “Did you think he was cool?” “Why do you think José drank so much?” This is also a good time to let your child know what YOU think of excessive drinking. Be clear with your expectations for your children around underage drinking.

**A Celebrity:** Your son or daughter’s favorite star was just in the news for going into drug treatment for his/her alcohol addiction. You can open a conversation with your child by expressing concern for the star’s image as a role model and sympathy for their addiction. You can help your child identify other positive role models including relatives, neighbors, or celebrities who avoid alcohol and marijuana or choose to use it responsibly.

**A Friend:** A few teens in your child’s school were caught driving after they had been drinking and using marijuana. Discuss with your son or daughter the dangers of driving after drinking and using marijuana, the consequences of getting caught, and the reasons you never want your child to get into a car with a friend who has been drinking or using marijuana. Let your child know that if s/he is ever in a situation where there isn’t a safe way to get home, you will always be there to pick your child up and get him/her home safely.
Answering the Tough Questions

When you start talking with your kids about alcohol and marijuana, they’ll likely have some questions for you. What happens when your child asks you about your past? For many parents it’s tough to answer the question, “Did you ever drink or smoke pot when you were younger?” Unless the answer is an honest “no,” most parents stammer through a response and leave their kids feeling like they haven’t learned anything, or that their parents are hypocrites.
Honesty is the Best Policy
Give an honest answer to your child’s question. Kids know that most adults have drunk alcohol and that many have used marijuana; by giving an honest answer you can build trust between you and your child.

Keep it Simple
Don’t divulge every detail about your past. As with conversations about sex, some details can and should remain private; avoid giving your child more information than what s/he asked for. Use accurate information, like alcohol is a depressant and marijuana interferes with learning, when talking about your past. For example, “Yes, I tried alcohol when I was younger, but it made me sad and depressed so I didn’t like it. It wasn’t worth feeling so unhappy.” Or, “Marijuana just made me forgetful so it just didn’t feel like doing it anymore.”

Ask Questions
Ask questions of your child in return. For example, “Is there some reason that you’re asking me about this now?” This will help you understand why s/he may be asking these questions and can help open up a conversation about why you don’t want your child to drink or use marijuana.

The conversation doesn’t have to be awkward, and you can turn your child’s question into a teachable moment. Here are three easy tips how:
What to Do & Say

You’re teaching your children valuable skills by helping them resist peer pressure and turn down alcohol and marijuana offered to them. Acting out tough situations with your child is a fun way to teach them some good excuses to use when they’re feeling pressure to drink or use marijuana. Let them know that sometimes humor can be a great way to ease the tension of the tough situation of being asked by their friends to drink alcohol or use marijuana.

When talking with your children about how to turn down offers to drink or use marijuana, encourage them to stay R.E.A.L.

**REFUSE** – State firmly and clearly that they don’t want to drink or use marijuana

**EDUCATE** – Give an example of what could happen if they do drink or use marijuana

**AVOID** – Suggest something else to do instead of drinking or using marijuana

**LEAVE** – Leave the situation if they’re still feeling pressured to drink or use marijuana
Good Excuse!  
At the Party

When helping your child know what to say to turn down alcohol or marijuana, help him or her develop firm, but friendly responses. Acknowledge that your child’s friends may or may not like your child’s decision to not drink or use marijuana, but reaffirm that good friends respect healthy choices.

Your child goes to a party at a friend’s house and someone has brought a bottle of vodka to drink or a bag of pot candy to eat. The other kids start to drink and your child is asked, “You want some?” Take the role of the child offering the vodka or the marijuana, and your child can practice what to say to turn down the offer. Here are some good excuses your child can use to get out of this tough situation. And remember, stay R.E.A.L.

**REFUSE** – “I can’t. If my mom or dad ever found out, they’d be really upset.”

**EDUCATE** – “No, thanks. I want to stay in control tonight and too much alcohol and marijuana makes you do stupid things and causes blackouts.”

**AVOID** – “No, that just doesn’t sound fun. What if we went to a movie instead?”

**LEAVE** – “No thanks; my mom just called, so I have to go.”
Good Excuse! At a Sleepover

Peer pressure can be hard to deal with, especially if it’s coming from a good friend. Before your child has to face this situation, you can help him/her practice ways to say “no” to accepting alcohol or marijuana from friends.

Your child is spending the night at a friend’s house. After eating some pizza and watching movies, your child’s friend says s/he is bored and that the night would be more exciting if they drank or used marijuana. Here are some good excuses your child can use to get out of this tough situation. And remember, stay R.E.A.L.

REFUSE – “No, thanks. It’s just not my thing.”

EDUCATE – “No way! After a few drinks or using marijuana we’ll just get clumsy and could get hurt doing something stupid; I can’t risk being injured for the soccer game tomorrow.”

AVOID – “Nah… isn’t the mall still open? How about we do that instead?”

LEAVE – “My mom said she could really use help watching my younger brother tonight. I should go and help her out instead.”
Good Excuse! After School

One of the hardest things for youth to deal with is peer pressure. You can support your children by helping them learn to say “no” to alcohol and marijuana and not be embarrassed by it.

Your child and his/her friends always hang out after school. They usually go to a convenience store to get a snack, which is right next to a liquor store or a retail marijuana dispensary. Your child’s friends decide they want to get drunk or high and try to decide what customers to ask to buy them alcohol or marijuana. When your child says s/he doesn’t feel like drinking or using marijuana, the other kids try to pressure your child into finding someone to buy for them. Here are some good excuses s/he can use to get out of this tough situation. And remember, stay R.E.A.L.

**REFUSE** – “Nah, I don’t drink or use marijuana, it makes me too sick.”

**EDUCATE** – “No way! I could get into trouble with my parents or even with the cops if I drink or use marijuana. It’s not worth it!”

**AVOID** – “No, I really want to try out this new video game I have. Want to come to my place and play that instead of staying here?”

**LEAVE** – “I can’t! I have to go. I just remembered I was supposed to help make dinner tonight.”
It Takes a Village

Everyone in your family and neighborhood can work together to create a community where your children can grow up and feel good about themselves without drinking or using marijuana. Here are some suggestions of other adults who can support you and your child.
Other Family Members: Everyone in your family can work together to help keep your kids healthy and safe. To make sure they know how to support you, let them know your rules about alcohol and marijuana. Ask them to respect your rules by never providing alcohol or marijuana to your child. Also, work together to model responsible alcohol use by not drinking too much at family gatherings or celebrations.

School Staff: Teachers, school counselors, and school resource officers can know a lot about your kids. They may be some of the first people to notice changes in your child. If you’re suspecting something isn’t right, talk to school staff to see if they’ve noticed your child is behaving differently.

Other Parents: The parents of your child’s friends are other adults who can support you in raising a healthy kid. Especially if your kids are good friends, your child may be spending a lot of time at their house. Take the time to get to know your child’s friends and their families, and talk about how you can all work together to prevent underage drinking and marijuana use.
Online, visit www.drugfree.org or call 1.855.DRUGFREE for more information and tips on talking to your kids about alcohol, marijuana and other drugs.

Local Prevention Resources:

- **Denver Parks and Recreation** – Call 311 to find the recreation center closest to you.

- **Denver Public Libraries** – Call 720.865.1111 to find your neighborhood’s branch.

- **211** – Call this number for non-emergency information about the city, including youth programs, health, and human services related resources.

- **MY Denver Card** – All Denver students ages 5-19 receive free access to the city’s 23 recreation centers and 29 pools. Visit denvergov.org/mydenvercard to learn more.

To find out more about FREE, local prevention programs for your child and your family, call 720.944.2TALK (2825).
What Should You Do if You’re Worried About Your Child?

You know that underage drinking is harmful and can lead to sexual assaults, violent acts, and other mental health or behavioral issues. That’s why you do all that you can to help keep your kids from using alcohol and marijuana. Sometimes despite parents’ best efforts, youth will still use alcohol and marijuana and develop a substance use disorder. What should you do if you’re worried about your child? Call Metro Crisis Services at 1.888.885.1222 to speak to a trained counselor about the next steps you and your family can take.
Start Talking!

Hard conversations with your kids can be easier if the lines of communication are already open. Use these questions to help spark conversation with your kids. At the dinner table, while you’re shopping, or even in the car — these are great questions to start talking!
What do you like most about our family?

What stresses you out? What are some things you like to do to let off steam?

Who is your favorite teacher? What does s/he do that makes him/her your favorite?

What’s one thing you’ve always wanted to do but haven’t yet?
What’s your favorite thing to do together as a family?

What’s your favorite thing to do to relax?

What are some of the things you admire about your best friend?

Write your own question to get the conversation started...
Caught you looking!
Don’t worry this page is all about YOUnth!

You’re pretty good at handling tough situations, but sometimes, it’s easy to have quick excuses ready to go if you’re feeling the pressure to do something you don’t want to. What should you do to get out of a sticky situation? Just remember to stay R.E.A.L.

**REFUSE** – State firmly and clearly that you don’t want to drink or use marijuana
**EDUCATE** – Give an example of what could happen if you do drink or use marijuana
**AVOID** – Suggest something else to do instead of drinking or using marijuana
**LEAVE** – Leave the situation if you’re still feeling pressured to drink or use marijuana

**REFUSE** – “No, thanks. It’s not my thing.”
**EDUCATE** – “Do you know how much trouble I could get in? Disappointing my parents is bad enough; getting in trouble with the cops would be the worst.”
**AVOID** – “I really wanted to go shopping this afternoon. Want to come with me instead?”
**LEAVE** – “I’ve gotta get home soon anyway. I’ll see you later.”

Even if you know how to handle yourself in these situations, there may still be questions you have about alcohol and marijuana. If you want to talk to your parents about drinking or using marijuana, stress or pressure, or other things you’re dealing with, but you don’t know how to bring up the topic, you can use these questions to help get the conversation going.

➤ What did you do when you were a kid when your friends tried to get you to do something you didn’t want to?
➤ What mistakes did you make when you were my age? What would you have done differently?
➤ What did you and your friends do when you hung out?

This Parent Toolkit is made possible by support from the Colorado Division of Behavioral Health. Special thanks to the Partnership at Drugfree.org for providing parents and services providers with resources and tools for talking to kids about alcohol and drugs.