

# Frequently Asked Questions: Setting Family Guidelines for Underage Substance Use

Parents often have some questions related to setting family guidelines for underage substance use. Some of the most frequently asked questions and answers to them are shown below. The most important thing to know is that talking about substance use with your children and letting them know that you care about their health and wellbeing will not lead to early substance use! Read on for more information that will help you set guidelines that work for your family.

## **WON'T DEVELOPING FAMILY GUIDELINES ON SUBSTANCE USE MERELY ENCOURAGE YOUNG PEOPLE TO TEST THE RULES AND BREAK THEM?**

No, developing guidelines in a manner that involves your children will not encourage limit testing and rule breaking. Parents can have an important influence on young people's decisions regarding substance use, particularly when they talk with them in a respectful way and listen to their point of view. Remember that "influence" is not "control." Trying to control your preteen, or any child, by using ultimatums, threats, and harsh consequences may lead to power struggles. When this happens, children may retaliate by breaking rules and escalating problem behaviors. The bottom line is that parents can't completely control young people's behavior, but they can strongly influence their choices. Clear and specific family guidelines communicated with warmth and care provide young people with "guardrails" to guide their decisions. And preteens who feel bonded closely to their parents are more likely to live within these guidelines.

## **ISN'T EXPERIMENTING WITH SUBSTANCE USE JUST A PART OF GROWING UP?**

No, as "Facts About Underage Substance Use" under More Resources for Parents shows, about 40% of teens do not try any substances—even the more common ones like alcohol, marijuana, and vaping—before they finish high school. This means a lot of youth remain drug free!

The longer young people's first experience with drugs can be prevented, the more likely they will be to develop other more positive ways to have fun and cope with the challenges that come with being a teen.

What's more, even one-time use can result in car crashes, overdose, violence, or sexual assault. Plus, the effects of substances can be very reinforcing for certain people. Some young people use once or twice and decide that alcohol or other drugs don't do much for them. But others find they really like the effects of drugs and will be more likely to continue use. Since we don't know how any young person will respond, it's best to set guidelines that discourage underage use.

### **HOW CAN I EXPECT MY CHILD NOT TO TRY ALCOHOL?**

Each family must determine its own position on underage alcohol use, but consider sharing the following with your pre-teen as you discuss your family guidelines:

- ▶ No one can predict how alcohol will affect someone when they try it for the first time. Some teens like alcohol and want to keep using it. When this happens, they are more likely to develop problems with alcohol and alcohol use disorder.
- ▶ Young people who try alcohol at an early age run a much greater risk in general of having problems with alcohol or other drugs later.
- ▶ Alcohol is a "gateway drug." People who use highly addictive drugs like opioids, heroin, or meth usually begin by using alcohol.
- ▶ Alcohol (and marijuana, vaping, and cigarettes) are illegal to use for those under age 21.
- ▶ Remember that even one-time use can result in death by overdose or accident or cause other serious problems for young people or those they are using with.

For all these reasons, the safest strategy is to encourage all your children to delay alcohol use until they are of legal age.

### **WHAT IF MY CHILD OFTEN HAS HEARD ME TALK ABOUT MY HEAVY USE OF ALCOHOL AND/OR OTHER DRUGS WHEN I WAS YOUNG?**

Parents who have shared details of their own earlier substance use can honestly acknowledge that they used when they were young. They may wish to add, "I did, and I wish I hadn't. We now know a lot more about the risks and harmfulness of alcohol, cigarettes, and other drugs. I don't want you to become addicted or have the problems I had."

### **WHAT ARE APPROPRIATE CONSEQUENCES FOR MEETING—OR NOT MEETING—THE FAMILY GUIDELINES AND EXPECTATIONS?**

Consequences, like guidelines, vary from family to family and from child to child. The concept of "Freedom Boxes" can frame consequences in terms of expanding or reducing freedoms as children grow and live within family guidelines. You'll find this document under More Resources for Parents.

In general, large material rewards aren't necessary when your children follow the rules. Small special treats—including a show of affection, appreciation, or thanks—tend to work well and build bonds. Show your appreciation often. You might also choose from among the following rewards:

- ▶ Do them a special favor.
- ▶ Buy tickets to a movie.
- ▶ Have friends over for a sleepover.
- ▶ Ask them for an appropriate reward.
- ▶ Continue privilege (such as use of cell phone).

Negative consequences provide course corrections when your preteen’s behavior violates the guidelines. They need to be consistent, appropriate, and moderate. Examples:

- ▶ No allowance.
- ▶ No use of cell phone, TV, video, or internet for a period of time.
- ▶ Extra chores.

Remember to make the negative consequence fit the violation and be something you can live with. Grounding your preteen for a year would be excessive and hard for you both to live with. Whether the consequences are positive or negative, it’s important to be consistent and to follow through without waiting too long. Otherwise your preteen may not take guidelines seriously.

If you are having trouble identifying consequences that fit your family, you can ask your children what they think appropriate consequences should be during a family meeting.

### **DOESN'T SETTING CONSEQUENCES SUGGEST YOU DON'T TRUST YOUR CHILD, AND THAT YOU EXPECT THEM TO BREAK THE RULES?**

No, talking with your children about your expectations around substance use and discussing consequences with them before they are needed has several positive effects. It communicates your understanding of some challenges they face as pre-teens and teens and that you want to help them avoid risks to their health and wellbeing. Most pre-teens and teens actually want to hear what their parents think and have their support for dealing with hard challenges! What’s more, when you talk with them in a way that considers their opinions and ideas, you are also signaling respect.

And knowing about positive consequences ahead of time can help motivate your pre-teen to stick to the family position. But be careful: If you don’t follow through on consequences you’ve all agree to, your child may believe they can get away with ignoring the guidelines. So, as mentioned above, you want to establish consequences you all can live with.

### **IS IT FAIR TO HAVE DIFFERENT GUIDELINES FOR MYSELF AND MY CHILD?**

Yes, it is fair. One simple reason is that parents are of legal age to use certain substances while their underage children are not.

But it’s helpful if parents can clearly explain the reasons for any difference in expectations for different family members. For example, many parents who use alcohol expect their teenage children not to use it for the following reasons:

- ▶ Use of alcohol or any substance in the pre-teen or teen years greatly increases the risks that young people will have problems with substances throughout their lives.
- ▶ Because young people's bodies, including the liver and brain, are still developing, using alcohol, tobacco, and other substances may have profound consequences. For example, early alcohol use can damage a young person's brain and liver.
- ▶ Laws that make alcohol use and possession illegal for those under 21 are there to protect them until they are old enough to decide about drinking with less risk to themselves and others around them.

### **SHOULD THE SAME GUIDELINES AND EXPECTATIONS HOLD FOR CHILDREN OF DIFFERENT AGES?**

All guidelines inevitably depend on the family's values. However, just as expectations for bedtime may vary depending on the child's age, so family expectations about the use of alcohol may vary with age. For example, some families may allow older children to have a glass of wine with the family. (However, research shows that a child who starts using alcohol or other drugs at a young age greatly increases his or her risk of later developing an alcohol or other drug problem.)

### **DO I NEED TO SET GUIDELINES IF MY CHILD ALREADY KNOWS WHAT I THINK ABOUT UNDERAGE SUBSTANCE USE?**

Parents may assume their children know how they feel about underage substance use, but it's best not to take this for granted. Young people are also unlikely to know the consequences for use unless their parents clearly discuss them, along with the reasons for the family guidelines and consequences.

### **HOW DO YOU TALK ABOUT CONSEQUENCES WITHOUT COMING ON TOO STRONG?**

It will help to "begin with the end in mind." You care about your children's health and wellbeing and are having a family meeting to talk with them—not at them—about how substance use can be a big problem for young people. When you come to discussing consequences, begin your discussion by identifying positive consequences for following family guidelines. It may also be helpful to introduce the topic of negative consequences by asking your pre-teen what they think should happen if the rules aren't followed.

### **ISN'T POSTING THE FAMILY GUIDELINES EMBARRASSING?**

Posting the position reminds family members exactly of what the rules and consequences are. In addition, it shows that what the family did in the meeting is important. Although you may not want to post them too publicly, like on the refrigerator, they should be easy to find and reference. Some families post them on the inside of a kitchen cupboard or on a bulletin board in a workspace. You might even want to set up a family text and share them that way.