

what every
Parent
should know
about

Drugs and Alcohol

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Common Sense
PARENTING®

Your children face many dangers and temptations in their day-to-day lives. As a parent, you are aware of some of these struggles but may be afraid to know the rest. You may find yourself reluctant to talk with your child about your fears. Here are some insights from the parenting experts at Girls and Boys Town to help you recognize warning signs that indicate your child may be heading for trouble, as well as ideas on what you can do to prevent such problems or deal with them when they occur.



Peer Pressure

Your child is affected by peer pressure from the first time he or she plays with siblings or other children. You can't make peer pressure go away, but you can teach your child how to deal with it.

Having friends is an important part of normal development for children. Although we often think of peer pressure as bad, it is possible for your children's friends to influence them to do good things as well.

Here are some ways to help your children resist negative peer pressure:

- ♦ **Develop a good relationship with them.** Children who are close to their parents are less likely to follow bad examples than children who are not.
- ♦ **Teach your children to think about what others want them to do and why.** Is it wrong? Is it illegal? Why are they tempted to go along? Are they afraid to be laughed at?
- ♦ **Teach them to decide for themselves whether something is right or wrong, helpful or harmful.** Bring up examples of situations they may be in; then explore what might happen if they respond a certain way. Let them think about the consequences of

their actions. If they have an uneasy feeling, something is probably wrong.

- ♦ **Sometimes children just need help getting away from a bad situation. Provide them with some responses they can use to resist peer pressure.** Encourage them to avoid giving an immediate "Yes" or "No" answer when friends want them to do something questionable. They can buy time to make a good decision by saying, "Maybe later," or "I'll wait and see." Let them use you as an excuse: "I will be grounded forever if I try that."
- ♦ **Practice situations with your child, trying various responses that your child is comfortable saying.** Let him or her play both roles. Ask your child what gives him or her trouble when faced with a tough decision, and incorporate that in the practice. Use it to help your child build confidence in his or her ability to say "No."
- ♦ **Have your child practice the following steps to resist peer pressure:**
 1. *Look at the person.*
 2. *Use a calm voice.*
 3. *Say clearly that you do not want to engage in that activity.*
 4. *Suggest another activity. Give a reason.*
 5. *If the person tries to convince you, keep saying "No."*
 6. *Ask the person to leave, or you leave.*

Divorce

Recent studies show that divorce almost always has painful effects on the children involved, no matter how unhappy the marriage has been. Children are almost always troubled by their parents' decision to divorce, even when they have witnessed chronic or violent conflict between them. When divorce does occur, parents need to protect their children as much as possible.

Children show emotional stress in a variety of ways. Preschool children often have nightmares, temper tantrums, bedwetting episodes, and fears of abandonment. Older children have nightmares, excessive moodiness, headaches, and stomach-aches. Teenagers are likely to have academic and behavioral problems at school. They may become disrespectful or show signs of giving up, such as failing to complete homework assignments.

If you divorce, what can you do to minimize the problems your children face?

- ♦ **Try to resolve your conflicts with your former spouse, or at least keep them private.** Come to some type of agreement, and if you can't agree, at least keep your differences out of your interactions with your child. Don't criticize or blame the other parent, and don't use your child to manipulate your former spouse's behavior. For example, don't have your child deliver messages and criticisms: Discuss issues directly.
- ♦ **Work on having a caring, supportive relationship with your child.** Address fears openly. Your child may be worried about where he or she will spend most of the week, or whether he or she will ever get to see the noncustodial parent. Separate marital and parenting matters, and make this difference clear to your child: "These are the issues that affect Dad and Mom; these are the issues that involve you."
- ♦ **Take advantage of whatever family and social support systems are available.** Look for support groups and family counseling. There are groups specifically for kids of divorced parents. Contact social service agencies, your child's school counselor, favorite teacher or principal, or your clergyman for information about resources in your area.

Drugs and Alcohol

Abuse of dangerous drugs by children is widespread—not just marijuana, heroin, and

cocaine, but also alcohol, tobacco, anabolic steroids, and a variety of inhalants, stimulants and tranquilizers, both prescription and over-the-counter. Some easily-obtained substances seem harmless but can be deadly: room deodorizer, spray paint, nail polish remover, paint thinner, liquid paper, gasoline, and insecticide. These are rapidly absorbed by the brain and can cause convulsions, blood vessel damage, heart attacks, and death.

Kids are offered drugs at an alarmingly early age. It is imperative that parents know and watch for early signs of drug abuse:

- ♦ Problems in schoolwork: low grades, assignments not completed
- ♦ Skipping school
- ♦ Memory lapses
- ♦ Short attention span
- ♦ Bloodshot eyes
- ♦ Carelessness about appearance
- ♦ Withdrawal from parents and family
- ♦ Breaking away from old friends/having a new set of friends
- ♦ Loss of interest in hobbies and favorite activities
- ♦ Possessing drug-related magazines
- ♦ Violent behavior
- ♦ Listlessness

If you believe there is a problem, here are some steps to take:

- ♦ **Learn all you can about drugs and alcohol.** Find out about the drug problems in your community and schools. Talk to other parents and school personnel.
- ♦ **Get involved with community anti-drug groups.** Look for support groups, such as NarAnon and Families Anonymous.
- ♦ **Discuss your suspicions with your child in a calm manner, and not while he or she is under the influence of alcohol or other drugs:**
 1. *State the concern and the signs: "Tony, I'm concerned about...."*
 2. *Have a plan to deal with denial. Don't set your child up to lie. If you already have*

evidence, state it clearly.

3. Give your expectation for correcting the problem, for example, having a consequence and another adult to help you enforce it.

♦ **Seek help from drug counselors.**

The best course of action is prevention. Don't wait until your child shows signs of a problem. Begin talking about the dangers of alcohol and other drugs while your child is young. Model good behavior—don't talk about the dangers of smoking as you light your cigarette. If you are a smoker, at least let your child know that you would like to quit, and let him or her see you make an effort.

Above all, keep communication lines open. Be a good listener, and let your child know that he or she can talk to you about any subject, no matter how sensitive.

Gangs

Criminal street gangs are one of our nation's most serious problems. They recruit new members every day in cities and small towns across our country, and many of these new recruits become career criminals.

Here are some ideas for you to help your child stay out of a gang:

- ♦ Get him or her involved in activities, such as sports or music lessons.
- ♦ Get involved in your child's school.
- ♦ Establish rules; set limits; be consistent, firm, and fair.
- ♦ Get to know your child's friends, as well as the friends' parents.
- ♦ Show respect for his or her feelings and attitudes.
- ♦ Do not buy or allow your child to dress in gang-style clothing.
- ♦ Educate yourself about gang and drug activity in your community.
- ♦ Know where your child is. Be aware that

3 - 6 p.m. is not a safe time if your child is not supervised.

- ♦ Demonstrate love and acceptance at home. Many kids join gangs to feel a sense of connection and approval.

Here are some signs that your child is involved with a gang; he or she:

- ♦ Admits having friends who are gang members.
- ♦ Is obsessed with one particular color of clothing, particularly blue or red.
- ♦ Wears jewelry with distinctive designs.
- ♦ Is obsessed with gang-influenced music or movies.
- ♦ Withdraws from or shows disrespect toward family.
- ♦ Associates with new friends.
- ♦ Shows excessive need for privacy and secrecy.
- ♦ Uses hand signs with friends.
- ♦ Has peculiar drawings or language on schoolbooks.
- ♦ Has unexplained cash or expensive clothing or jewelry that he or she can't afford.

It is extremely difficult for a gang member to get out once he or she has been initiated. If your child is already in a gang, don't try to handle the situation on your own. You may think that by moving or sending your child to live with relatives in a small town, you can get your child out, but gangs have a long reach, and you may find the same gang in your new location. Or your child may become leader of a gang in the new location.

If you do move your child, you need to draw on all the resources possible to ensure your child's success. You have to build a community of experts around your child who know what to do. Find out about anti-gang organizations in the community. Contact local law enforcement personnel, school administrators and counselors, and clergy. Let your child know that all these supports are there to ensure his or her safety from gang activity. At the same time, these supports are observing his or her behavior as well. This gives a clear message that the community is not going to tolerate any gang infiltration.

Suicide

How can you recognize suicidal thoughts in your child before it is too late?

There is no foolproof method, but here are some signs of trouble:

- ♦ A previous attempt—eight of ten suicide attempts involve people who have tried to kill themselves before.
- ♦ Threats or conversations about death—seven of ten who attempt suicide had told someone that they wished to die, saying things such as, “I’d be better off dead,” or “You all would be better off without me.”
- ♦ Problems in school, especially sudden problems, such as a drop in grades, falling asleep in class, emotional outbursts, or withdrawal.
- ♦ Fear of punishment or parental criticism.
- ♦ Problems with alcohol or other drugs.
- ♦ Changes in physical appearance or habits, disturbed sleeping and eating habits, depression, expressions of low self-esteem.
- ♦ Detachment from family and friends.
- ♦ Giving away personal possessions.
- ♦ Lack of interest in previously enjoyed activities.
- ♦ Statements of hopelessness.

What can you do? It is not true that talking about suicide will give the idea to your child. In fact, *not* discussing your fears with your child is far riskier because he or she may take that as a sign that you don’t care. If you suspect that your child is thinking about committing suicide, get a professional opinion immediately. Seek help from a therapist or counselor. Don’t deny his or her feelings; validate them instead. Express love and sympathy, and acknowledge his or her pain and fear. Be a good listener. Your child may deny thinking about suicide, but you should always leave the door open for conversation. Continue to monitor your child’s behavior, and come back to the topic later. Most kids will eventually open up.

Encourage your child to get involved in a group at school—sports, drama, music, chess club. Being with others can help him or her feel connected to the world.

If you suspect that your child is using threats of suicide to manipulate you, you should still take the threats seriously. Don’t take chances. It is difficult to know if your child is being truthful. Manipulation can be determined through professional help. Your child is crying out for help regardless of the immediate motivation. Get him or her that help right away.

Who can help? There are more than 200 suicide prevention centers throughout the U.S.

Calling the Girls and Boys Town National Hotline at 1-800-448-3000 can put you in touch with someone who can help.

Depression

Depression is a condition that sometimes accompanies suicidal thoughts, yet often appears on its own. We often forget that a child can be depressed even if he or she is part of a happy family.

Growing up is much more stressful than we may realize, and a child can be thrown off by normal situations, such as the following:

- ♦ Teasing by classmates
- ♦ Not making the athletic team
- ♦ The breakup of a romance
- ♦ The onset of puberty, with all its physical and emotional changes
- ♦ Loss of a loved one, through death or relocation
- ♦ Problems in school (grades, feeling that the teacher doesn’t like him or her)
- ♦ Problems with friends or family, getting in trouble at home, school, or with the law

As a parent, you can take some steps before stressful situations arise to help your child handle situations that can challenge his or her emotional

stability. You can help your child deal with upcoming life changes, such as a divorce or move, by discussing them before they occur. Encourage your child to talk about fears and anxieties, and help with a plan to deal with the coming changes. Allow him or her to take part in as much of the decision-making as possible. For example, if you are moving to a new neighborhood, take your child with you as you look for a new house, and include his or her input in the decision.

Unfortunately, your child may become depressed without a clear reason. It is helpful to teach a child how to deal with stressful and painful events by expressing feelings and by asking for help. Here are the steps for expressing feelings appropriately that your child can use when he or she interacts with others:

1. *Remain calm and relaxed.*
2. *Look at the person to whom you are talking.*
3. *Describe the feelings you are currently having.*
4. *Avoid profanity and statements of blame.*
5. *Take responsibility for your own feelings.*
6. *Thank the person for listening.*

Teach your child to follow these steps if he or she goes to someone else for help with a concern:

1. *Look at the person.*
2. *Ask the person if he or she has time to help you (now or later).*
3. *Clearly describe the problem or state what kind of help you need.*
4. *Thank the person for helping you.*

There are times when, despite our best efforts, our children do not let us know that they are depressed.

Here are some signs of depression:

- ♦ Sleeping too much or not enough
- ♦ Significant mood swings
- ♦ Lack of interest in pleasurable activities
- ♦ Loss of interest in things he or she used to like
- ♦ Tearfulness—especially in boys
- ♦ Complaints about aches and pains
- ♦ Emotional withdrawal

- ♦ Hopelessness
- ♦ Thoughts or dreams of death

It is important to identify and respond to the signs of depression. Although only about five to ten percent of depressed people attempt suicide, two-thirds of those who attempt suicide are depressed.

If you see signs of depression in your child, talking together about what's happening in his or her life may help. However, if the depression persists or if your child is not responding to your efforts to help, seek medical attention.

Self-Injury

Self-harming is an increasingly common problem among troubled teens. It can take a variety of forms, one of the more serious of which is “cutting,” a form of self-mutilation in which people, most often girls between the ages of 11 and 13, injure themselves with scissors, knives, razor blades or other sharp objects. It can also involve burning or hair pulling.

Cutting can be a symptom of another psychiatric problem, such as anorexia or schizophrenia, and is often accompanied by alcohol or substance abuse. It is difficult to identify because sufferers cover their wounds, usually on the forearms, with long sleeves. In general, the goal of self-mutilation is injury, not death.

Self-injury is also hard to deal with because it is so far outside many parents' experience. We don't hear that much about it. Still, it is a growing problem. If you suspect your child of cutting herself, you should examine her arms and legs for scars, and ask her directly if she has been harming herself.

Treatment can include medication, therapy, or a combination of the two. The first step is to contact your child's pediatrician, who can

refer you to a psychiatrist or psychologist, or contact the **Girls and Boys Town National Hotline** at **1-800-448-3000**.

Eating Disorders

Western society currently places great emphasis on being thin. Many young people find themselves striving for the unrealistic physical “perfection” depicted in the media. Others get involved in sports, such as gymnastics or wrestling, where weight can be a major concern. The result is sometimes an eating disorder.

Anorexic and bulimic individuals share a preoccupation with food and an irrational fear of being fat. Anorexia is characterized by a dramatic weight loss from self-starvation or from severe dieting. Bulimia is characterized by bingeing and purging (excessive eating followed by forced vomiting or the use of laxatives), with frequent weight gain and loss rather than a drastic weight loss. Both can have very serious health consequences: Hospitalization is often required, and severe cases may even result in death.

Anorexia or bulimia can occur at any age, but young people seem more susceptible at two particular times: just before or after puberty, and just before or after moving away from home. Major stresses, such as divorce or death of a parent, a broken love relationship, or ridicule by others for gaining weight may also trigger anorexia or bulimia.

There are some things that you can do to help your child avoid eating disorders:

- ♦ Focus as a family on nutrition and exercise, not dieting and weight.
- ♦ Be careful when discussing your own weight: You may be surprised to find how many times you speak negatively of your own appearance.
- ♦ Avoid driving your child to excel beyond his or her capabilities.

- ♦ If your child begins to diet, find out why.
- ♦ Work to help your child feel successful and in control.
- ♦ Stay aware of what is going on with your child at home as well as in school.

Here are some signs to look for if you suspect your child is suffering from an eating disorder:

- ♦ Extreme weight change
- ♦ Insomnia
- ♦ Skin rash and dry skin
- ♦ Loss of hair and nail quality
- ♦ Dental problems
- ♦ Unusual eating habits
- ♦ Hyperactivity and compulsive exercising
- ♦ Use of laxatives, diuretics, vomit inducers, and diet pills
- ♦ Distorted body image and denial
- ♦ Inability to think clearly
- ♦ Low sense of self-worth and self-control
- ♦ Perfectionism

If you suspect that your child is developing an eating disorder, your first step should be to schedule an appointment with his or her doctor for a thorough physical examination. Provide the doctor with information concerning any of the above symptoms that you have observed. The doctor can then work with you and your child to develop an appropriate treatment plan.

Setting Boundaries

We have all been in a situation where someone is standing too close to us, and we find ourselves wanting to take a step back. Our personal space, or boundary, has been invaded. Physical boundaries protect our bodies and help us decide how and by whom we can be touched, and emotional boundaries protect our thoughts and emotions.

Children begin setting boundaries at an early age. How can you help your child set healthy

boundaries? You can guide your child in the process of deciding when to share personal thoughts and feelings. For example, private thoughts and feelings are best shared with close friends and family members. Casual friends should talk about non-personal topics, such as sports, school, and movies.

Before your child can develop healthy relationships, he or she needs to understand the importance of creating a personal “safe space.” Appropriate boundaries protect a person’s body, thoughts, and feelings. When boundaries are too open, the result can be dangerous, both physically and emotionally.

Here are some signs that your child’s boundaries are too open; he or she:

- ♦ Shares personal information with acquaintances or strangers.
- ♦ Wears tight or revealing clothing.
- ♦ Stands too close to others.
- ♦ Makes sexual comments about other people’s body parts.
- ♦ Has a tendency to believe everything people say.

Perhaps your child has found out that someone considered a good friend has told personal information about him or her to others. You can help your child to understand that such a violation of trust is also a violation of boundaries. People who don’t respect boundaries are not good choices for friends. You can encourage your child to establish friendships slowly, sharing private thoughts and feelings gradually and making sure the trust is mutual and deserved.

Talking About Sex

Teaching your children about the importance of physical boundaries also can help them make responsible decisions about sex. This may not be a topic you are comfortable discussing. However,

sex education gives young people valuable information that will help them learn how to make healthy decisions regarding sexual behavior and prevent them from making disastrous mistakes.

If you are uncomfortable, try these suggestions to overcome your reluctance:

- ♦ Talk with a counselor or other professional.
- ♦ Read books on sexuality, or watch videotapes on ways to teach youth about sexual issues.
- ♦ Try to relax. Practice beforehand what you want to say to your child.
- ♦ Be honest about your discomfort with your child: “It’s hard for me to talk about this, but...”
- ♦ Approach the discussions with a sense of humor.
- ♦ Answer your child’s questions simply and directly. Don’t accuse; rather, ask questions: “What do you know about...?”

The essence of your teaching is that sex is a natural topic for discussion and should be discussed before your children find out about it through their own experimentation or from their peers. Your kids are bombarded by media images of their culture’s sexual value system. Their first opinions should be shaped by your values, not the media’s.

Solving Problems

Kids who avoid trouble often have good problem-solving skills. You can help your child develop these skills before difficult situations arise by following these three steps:

First, help your child look at the situation or problem.

- ♦ Ask specific, open-ended questions. This helps you piece together what really occurred. For example, ask, “What happened after you said that?” instead of a question that can be answered with a “Yes” or “No.”
- ♦ Teach your child to focus on the entire situation rather than just part of it.

- ♦ Summarize what happened in simple, specific language.
- ♦ Ask your child if your summary of the situation is correct.

Second, identify the options—the different ways your child could respond to the situation.

- ♦ Let your child list both good and bad options.
- ♦ List no more than three options.
- ♦ Suggest options if your child is having trouble coming up with them.

Finally, decide on a solution.

- ♦ Make sure that your child knows the possible outcomes of each solution.
- ♦ If the decision doesn't need to be made immediately, let your child take some time for additional thought.

Sometimes children choose options that parents don't like. In general, if a decision won't hurt anyone and is not illegal or contrary to your moral or religious beliefs, then let your kids make the choice and learn from their decision. If a decision would be harmful, illegal, or immoral, you should clearly state your disapproval, and let your child know the consequences of making that choice. Then follow through.

Instilling Values

An important aspect of a strong family is a spiritual base. Sharing in religious events can help families build a sense of oneness and allow parents to model the importance of spirituality to their children. Make a big deal out of baptisms, First Communion, Bar Mitzvahs, and other religious events the family may be involved in.

Here are some other ideas to help your children develop positive values:

- ♦ **Encourage participation as a family in volunteering or community service.** This will help them develop a sense of moral obligation to the world around them.
- ♦ **Set an example of respect and kindness at home.** If you treat your children with consideration, the odds are good that they will treat others the same way.
- ♦ **Share emotional times.** As both happy and sad events happen in your lives, be open to your children's feelings, even if they do not match your own. Sometimes children do not know how to verbalize what they are feeling, so it is important to talk about your own feelings. When you take time to express your feelings, you help them to identify their own.
- ♦ **Show respect for your child's teachers and others in authority.** Teaching is a difficult job under the best of circumstances. If a teacher calls to report on your child's behavior, take the report seriously. If your child has engaged in inappropriate behavior, discipline the child. Let your child know that your expectations for his or her behavior in school are the same as the teacher's. If you do disagree with a teacher, discuss your concerns in private, never in front of your child.
- ♦ **Help your child learn how to get along with others, follow instructions, and accept criticism.** Here is a sample skill-builder for your child to practice accepting criticism:
 1. *Look at the person to show you are paying attention.*
 2. *Say "Okay" in a pleasant voice to show that you understand.*
 3. *Don't argue—stay calm, and try to learn from the criticism. If you disagree, wait until later to discuss the matter.*
- ♦ **Let your child know that you are in charge and have positive expectations for his or her behavior.** When you place limits on your child, you are lessening the odds of long-term problems.

Using Praise

Praise helps your child grow emotionally, but many of us don't use it as often as we should. Focusing on the negative is easy: It takes more effort to see the good things our children do.

- ♦ Start by focusing on things your child already does well that you have been taking for granted, such as getting along with siblings or getting up on time in the morning.
- ♦ Add praise for improvements in behavior.
- ♦ Give praise for any attempts your child makes to acquire new skills.

Here are the steps to help you use praise consistently:

1. *Show your approval.*

We all like to be appreciated! Kids who hear things like "I'm impressed!" and "That's great!" will work to receive more praise in the future, especially if the words are combined with a smile and a hug.

2. *Describe the positive.*

Make sure your child understands exactly what he or she did well. For example, say "Mario, thank you for helping your brother do his chores."

3. *Give a reason.*

Children benefit from knowing the consequences of their actions: "Since you did your homework right after school, you'll have more time for your own activities."

Remember: Praise works as long as it is genuine. Don't offer praise for every small thing. If you pay attention, you will find plenty of praiseworthy behaviors in your child.

Building Relationships

You are more likely to be an influence in your children's lives if you work to create a warm, open

relationship with them. It doesn't happen overnight, but you can create the type of atmosphere in which your child will feel comfortable confiding in you, sharing both joys and concerns.

Here are some suggestions that may help you:

- ♦ **Work to improve communication in your home. Spend time together as a family—all of you.** If your children resist conversation about their lives, try to make the setting relaxed. Work on a project together, such as baking cookies, raking leaves, or running errands. The awkwardness of "Let's sit and talk about you," becomes a natural conversation over a shared task.
- ♦ **Make your conversation non-threatening.** Rather than saying, "Don't hang out with that kid," say something like, "I'll bet you're a good influence on your friend." Ask questions, and help your child come up with decisions on his or her own. Use praise throughout the process as your child works to make those decisions.
- ♦ **Listen to your child.** Give your child your full attention without thinking about what you're going to say next. Let your child know that he or she can bring up any subject. When there are problems, make sure you address what's really happening, not what you fear might be going on. Talk about what has been learned.
- ♦ **Do things with your child.** Share your time: eat meals together, play games, watch TV, or go places with your child. Kids thrive on attention and acceptance. It is vital to be around to listen to, praise, or console them.



If you need help with serious parenting or family problems, call toll-free anytime:

Girls and Boys Town National Hotline
1-800-448-3000

Do you work with kids and families?
 Call 1-800-282-6657 for a free
 catalog or visit our website.
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