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# What We Can All Do to Prevent Youth Substance Use

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# HELPING YOUTH SUCCEED

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## What We Can All Do to Prevent Youth Substance Use

As parents, grandparents or others who care about youth, we wonder how to help youth succeed and avoid the problems so common today, including substance use. Sometimes even young people with good families and opportunities to be involved in positive things will experience problems. There are many positive and negative influences on our youth today. Even with all these influences, parents, families, and other concerned adults are still the key factors in helping youth avoid substance use. How can that influence be the most positive and effective?

There are some things we can do that will greatly increase the likelihood that youth will choose positive friends and activities and avoid negative ones. By sending youth clear messages against substance use, strengthening our relationships with youth — especially in the family, and providing opportunities for youth to develop themselves in positive activities, we can greatly reduce the risks that youth will be involved with alcohol and other drugs. Sending clear messages against substance use means that we need to let youth know, both by our example and what we say, that we do not condone or accept any use of alcohol, tobacco, or illegal drugs by youth. How youth respond to those rules depends on a couple of things: 1) How we involve them in making those rules, and 2) The relationship that we have with them. **So, children need to know clearly what we think, but they also need to care what we think.** That's where the relationship part comes in.

1. Send clear messages against substance abuse
2. Strengthen relationships with youth.
3. Provide opportunities for youth to develop their talents.

### STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUTH

There are many things that are important in having a good relationship with a young person. Three are mentioned here: spending time, listening, and managing conflicts.

#### Make Time for Fun

Children and youth spell love, "T-I-M-E." One of the consistent research findings about youth who succeed is that they have adults who spend time with them. Parents, grandparents, and other adults can have great influence with youth if they will take the time to have fun together. Relationships can be strengthened by just enjoying the youth and by listening to them.

Time together is not leftover time after everything else is done. It needs to be a priority. It happens when families make the effort to plan activities and do things together. It happens when grandparents do things with grandchildren. It happens when teachers, youth leaders or neighbors take an interest in youth and their activities. Family time doesn't have to be elaborate or expensive. The most simple activities can become the most important — laughing together at family jokes or having some favorite traditions that the family does regularly, like Saturday morning breakfast or popcorn on Sunday nights.



*"Usually we try to find time. We make (or set aside) time for everything else, but try to find it (use extra time as it becomes available) for our kids."*

- Frank Main

## Family Dates

In families it takes some planning and creativity to make these family times something that all members will enjoy. That is more likely to happen if everyone is involved in deciding and planning what the family will do.

Give everyone in your family a sheet of paper. have them make four columns on the paper and label the columns with the following headings:

- Things I'd like to do:
- Time needed:
- Supplies or preparation:
- Cost

Prioritize by cost or time or interest, then get out the calendar and set some dates when you will do one or more of the activities. If someone else tries to schedule your time you can say "I've already got a commitment there."



## Limit Television/Video Time

Free up time by limiting TV watching. TV watching consumes 7 hours per day in the average household. That's time that could be spent doing other enjoyable and valuable things. Different families use different ways to control the TV time in their households. Here's some possibilities:

### 1. Time per day.

Decide how much TV children and youth can watch per day. You might set one amount on school days, a different amount on weekends.

### 2. Chores first.

Some families say no TV until after homework, practicing (music or hobbies), or chores are completed.



### 3. Pay TV.

Give children coins or tokens that represent a ½ hour each of TV viewing. You decide how many tokens for the week. Each time they watch TV they put the token in a jar on top of the TV. They only watch as much as they have tokens for.

### 4. Post some reminders.

Put notes on the TV. "Is your homework done?" or, "Is this the best use of your time?"

### 5. Keep 'em busy.

Provide other activities for kids to do so there isn't so much time to fill with TV.

### 6. Watch by the program.

Plan the time that will be spent watching TV, rather than turning on the TV to "see what's on."

## Overlap Activities

Another way for families to be together more is to overlap activities. For example, one place for families to spend more time together is by having meals together. Other ideas for increasing time together include:

- \* Take up an exercise that can be shared with your youth.
- \* Work together on household chores rather than assigning separate tasks to each member.
- \* Make your community service something that will involve you with your child such as coaching a team or being a club leader.
- \* Turn off the television and play a game. If watching television, discuss the program together.
- \* Have at least one meal together every day.
- \* Develop the habit of chatting with your children while preparing or cleaning up after a meal.

## Listening So Youth Will Talk

Listening is a powerful way to say “You’re important to me.” If we will take the time to listen, show respect, and take the ideas of youth seriously, we will build strong ties. Often, peers gain greater influence with teens because the teens don’t feel listened to, respected, and taken seriously at home or by other adults.

Children and teens need to feel understood. One way to show understanding is to accept their feelings. Too often we say things like: “You don’t really mean that,” “You’re just tired,” or “Worrying about it won’t help.” Has this conversation, or one like it, ever happened at your house?

Teen: I’m not really hungry.

Parent: Of course you are, it’s dinner time.

Teen: I don’t feel like eating.

Parent: You’re not leaving this table, so just settle down.

Teen: I hate this stuff.

Parent: Don’t use that tone of voice with me!

When we disregard a youth’s feelings, we create resentment and resistance. We may even teach children or youth to not trust their own feelings. Here are some examples and results of disregarding feelings of others:

Denial of Feelings- You don’t really mean that.

Philosophical Response- Life is full of challenges.

Advice- You should ...

Questions- Why didn’t you...? How come you...?

Defense of the Other Person- Did you ever stop to think about their side?

All of these things may be true, but they’re not very helpful to a young person who is upset. It is more helpful to show understanding of the child’s feelings. Adults can show understanding in several ways.

### 1. Listen with full attention.

Face the youth, look at them, and show you’re interested.

### 2. Acknowledge feelings.

Words are only one part of the message. Feelings are the more important part. When we try to tell a child they don’t really feel a certain way, or they shouldn’t feel a certain way, it just adds to their frustration.

### 3. Show understanding.

A general statement like “I understand,” is not as effective as a more specific response that rephrases a youth’s feelings and shows interest and understanding. “You’re feeling left out” or “I can see why you’re upset.”

## Talking So Youth Will Listen

Have you ever wondered if youth are listening? Their eyes glaze over, they fold their arms, and they let out a long sigh. Sometimes this display of boredom is a defense against criticism. Maybe the way we say things makes it hard for youth to listen. Try taking a positive approach.

### Notice strengths rather than faults.

♥ “You’re really determined once you’ve decided.” (instead of “You’re so stubborn”); or, “You’re spontaneous” (not “You never plan ahead”).

♥ Notice effort regardless of the finished product. “You really tried hard.”

♥ Notice improvement. “That’s better than you’ve done before.”

### Offer an encouraging word.

♥ “I’ll bet you feel good about that.”

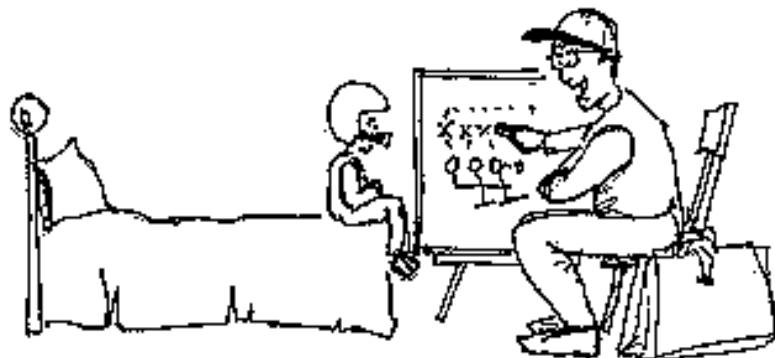
♥ “It was nice solving this together.”

♥ “I couldn’t have managed without your help.”

♥ “After you’ve thought about it, I’d like to know what you decide.”

♥ “You really stuck with that.”

♥ “That was your best one yet!”



## Managing Conflicts

Conflicts arise in all families. Conflicts between youth and adults in most any activity is to be expected. The trick is to manage conflict in such a way that it is constructive. When there are differences between youth and adults, there are some common responses that seldom work.

**Criticism.** Being critical puts others on the defensive. “Where’d you get that crazy idea?”

**Manipulation.** Using guilt or shame to get what you want makes people feel used. “After all the time I’ve spent on this, the least you could do would be to show a little appreciation.”

**Indifference.** Perhaps the most hurtful message we can give a youth is that we don’t think they’re even worth our time or effort. “How should I know? Do whatever you want, just don’t come crying to me.”

A more useful approach to conflicts is to relate first, resolve second. In other words, let the young person know you care before you try to solve the problem. Do a little listening first and then take some steps for constructive problem-solving.

- 1. Describe the concern.** This clarifies the issue and shows you’re interested in understanding. “So you’d like those shoes because...”
- 2. Ask for feedback.** Sometimes just clarifying the issue clears up misunderstandings. “Is the problem having to come home at 12 or having to come home before everyone else?”
- 3. Brainstorm for solutions.** When youth have a say in decisions they are more likely to rally behind a solution. Seeking their ideas shows respect. “What alternatives do you see?” Try not to criticize any suggestions until all have been presented. “OK, that’s one idea. There are probably some other possibilities. Let’s make sure we’ve thought of all the possibilities.”



**4. Evaluate Alternatives.** Focusing on areas of agreement, try to find a solution that both can support.

**5. Develop a Plan.** Remember, now it’s not my goal or your goal, but our goal. Work out the details of the solution by developing a plan.

Although we usually view conflict as negative, it can actually be helpful if managed constructively. It can provide families with the opportunity to communicate, work together, and learn about each other’s needs. If our focus is problem-solving and not finger-pointing, an acceptable compromise can often be found.

## SENDING A CLEAR MESSAGE AGAINST SUBSTANCE USE

Youth need to hear clear messages about substance use from every significant adult they know. Parents, grandparents, teachers, youth leaders, coaches, employers, and neighbors can all help do this. The message comes across to youth through what we say and what we do. The better our relationships with youth, the greater our influence can be.

Our actions will always have more influence than our words. Parents who smoke or drink themselves are more likely to have youth who do those things. If we self-medicate, using legal or illegal substances to help us cope with the ups and down and stresses in our lives, we increase the chances that our youth will develop more acceptable attitudes toward substance use.

Sometimes we assume that youth know what our values are because of our behavior, when in fact, they might not. Youth are good observers, but not always good interpreters. They may not always understand the reasons behind our actions. If they think, “Mom doesn’t drink because she worries about what the neighbors would say,” that has a different impact than if they think “Mom doesn’t drink because she’s made a commitment to her health (or she doesn’t believe in it, or she has seen the problems it can cause).”

Grandparents and other respected adults can sometimes say things with more effect than parents can. A grandparent can say, “I want you to always be the great person you are today. I hope you’ll always stay away from alcohol or other drugs. You mean so much to me.” A respected teacher can say,

“You’ve got a great future ahead of you. Don’t let anything like alcohol or drugs spoil it. You can really go places with your talents.”

So, youth need to understand our values and how we arrived at them. If we talk **with** youth when sharing these beliefs, rather than **at** youth, it can help our message come across better. One good way to do this is to first ask what he or she thinks about something. The news or an event at school can usually provide an opportunity to talk about a value we want to discuss. Then we have to be prepared to not over-react. Youth need to know they can trust us to be understanding. Once we have listened to them, they will be more willing to listen to us as we share our beliefs and our reasons for them.

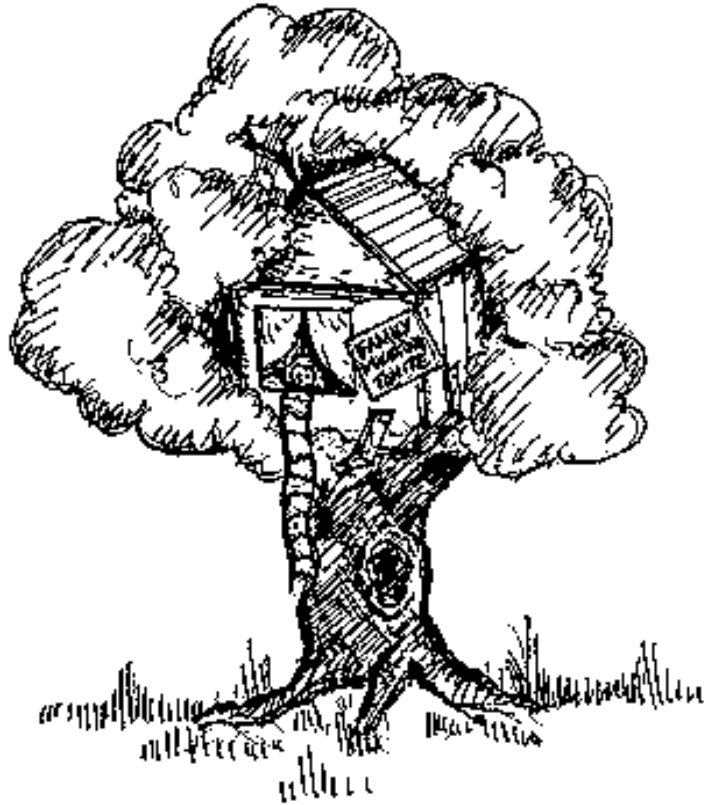
Another way to share your values is to comment on TV shows or news events just by talking out loud to no one in particular. For example, while watching the TV and a beer commercial comes on with beautiful young adults you could just observe, “Well, I can see they don’t use their own product or they’d all have beer bellies. That stuff’s loaded with calories.” Or, “I wonder how well that stuff would sell if they used somebody paralyzed from a drunk driver to give their pitch?” A little of this can go a long way, so don’t overdo it, but it’s another opportunity to get your message across.

## HELPING YOUTH DEVELOP THEIR TALENTS

Youth who feel successful in some aspect of their life, are less likely to feel the need to use alcohol or drugs to fit in or feel worthwhile. If they do experiment out of curiosity, youth who feel successful in some way are less likely to develop more serious problems. Helping youth develop their talents is a key way to help them feel worthwhile.

Helping youth develop their talents needs to be based on three principles:

- \* **Everyone has a talent or gift of some kind**
- \* **No one has every gift**
- \* **Talents and gifts are given to us to help others**



Talents or gifts include the obvious things - getting good grades, having musical ability, or being a good athlete. But being a good listener, being persistent, or having a great laugh are also gifts.

This may sound a lot like self-esteem, and that’s probably part of it, but self-esteem often becomes too close to self-centeredness or selfishness. In that sense, self-esteem doesn’t necessarily lead to good behavior. A lot of criminals or juvenile delinquents have high self esteem — they think their rights are the only ones that matter. Lot’s of people have accomplished much in the world who didn’t necessarily have “high” self-esteem.

### **How do we help youth develop these attitudes towards their talents?**

1) Give them opportunities to discover and develop their talents. Provide opportunities for them to pursue their interests and discover those that really interest them. Lessons, clubs, extra-curricular activities, field trips, or structured youth activities can provide the spark.

2) Avoid comparisons with others whose gifts are different. Celebrate the unique talents of each individual rather than trying to get everyone to excel in the same things. Recognize the less obvious gifts, such as being good with animals or being sensitive to other people's feelings.

3) Give them opportunities to contribute using their talents. Being recognized for useful and worthwhile contributions fills the need to feel important. If youth can fit in by doing positive things, there is less need for them to try and find their niche doing negative things.

## EVERYONE'S A YOUTH BUILDER

Parents have the primary role in helping youth be successful and helping them avoid involvement in substance use. Parents efforts can be greatly enhanced, however, by other adults who come in contact with youth if we will recognize that we all have a stake in youth. Grandparents can be such a great resource when they have warm relationships with their grandchildren, communicate good values, and believe in their grandchildren's abilities and potential. School teachers, church leaders and teachers, youth leaders, coaches and caring neighbors can be vital resources to youth if they recognize it.

Because we worry about the problems like substance abuse that face our youth, we often spend our time and efforts trying to eliminate the problems, only to find that the same problems continue or get replaced by new ones. Many times, society has focused on the problems. But there is a different approach - one that focuses on strengthening youth so that so they will make good choices and avoid the problems.



### What's Essential?

1. Choose to have a good ATTITUDE.
2. RESPECT others and yourself.
3. Be HONEST
4. WORK hard
5. Have a passion to LEARN
6. Enjoy life. Remember to LAUGH.

-Hal Urban

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In addition to the ideas presented here on strengthening relationships, sending clear messages, and giving youth opportunities to develop their talents, there are other ways parents, grandparents, and other concerned adults can help youth succeed. Based on research conducted throughout the country, the Search Institute has identified 40 things they call "assets" that help youth be successful. The more of these a young person has, the more likely they are to be successful. The average number of assets nationally in the Search Institute's research is only 18. Ideally, youth should have 30 or more. These 40 Developmental Assets provide another practical way for us to think about things we can do as parents, grandparents, and other concerned adults to help youth succeed. Each of us can be important in the lives of youth and in helping them avoid substance abuse and other problems prevalent today. Youth need adults who care, who will take time, who will show the way, and who will provide opportunities for success. Be a youth builder.

*One cannot participate in this mysterious act of living with any hope of satisfaction unless one understands a few simple rules.*

-Og Mandino

### Things we can all do

- \* Smile at youth.
- \* Learn the names of youth in your neighborhood or congregation.
- \* Take an interest in the activities of youth. Talk to them about their interests.
- \* Support community efforts to see youth as resources rather than problems.
- \* Recognize people who are dedicating their time to children and youth.
- \* Involve youth in the decisions that affect them - in the home, in the church, in the school and community.
- \* Volunteer to work with youth.
- \* Provide good work environments for youth as an employer.
- \* Support policies that allow employed parents needed flexibility to be involved in the lives of youth.

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