

# Preparing your young children for a healthy, drug-free future



**Kids watch. Kids listen. Kids learn.**

Massachusetts Department of Public Health  
Bureau of Substance Abuse Services



**You are your children’s strongest role model. What you do and say makes a big impression on your children — and can help put them on a healthy drug-free path for life.**

Young people have messages about substances — especially alcohol — coming at them from all directions. Ads, movies, TV shows, and music commonly portray alcohol use, but almost never show its negative consequences. In addition, parents, other adults, and the larger community are sending messages about alcohol and other substances. All these messages can influence children who are forming beliefs about alcohol and other drugs.

**The good news is that these years are an ideal opportunity for you to protect your children from future substance use.**

The tips in this booklet have been gathered from studies that look at what helps children to thrive. You may already be doing many of the things that protect your children, but it is always helpful to learn as much as you can about keeping your children away from alcohol and other drugs.



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**Children whose parents talk with them about substance abuse are much less likely to use drugs.**

## **Alcohol and inhalants: The biggest risks**

Alcohol and inhalants are the substances usually used at the youngest ages. Many people do not realize how damaging they can become since they are both common and legal. This is why setting rules about alcohol and other substances before middle school is so important.

Few elementary-aged children are using alcohol. However, children of this age are heading into a time of change and experimenting with alcohol may become more appealing. Parents, grandparents, and other caregivers can help put children on the path to a substance-free future.

Inhalant abuse is the intentional breathing of gas or vapors to alter one's mood. Inhalants are found in over 1,000 common household, school, or industrial products. Inhalants can include glues, fuels, cleaners, paint thinners, Freon, and anything in an aerosol can. The late elementary years are an ideal time to make it clear that your children should not put anything into their bodies unless it is given by a trusted adult.

## **Alcohol: The facts**

Alcohol is especially harmful to children. Alcohol can damage the developing brain and cause learning problems. It is linked to behavior problems, depression, violence, and death, including suicide. The younger people are when they try alcohol, the higher their chances of developing an alcohol problem later in life.

**Now is your opportunity to build healthy habits and beliefs in your children.**



*"Kids pick up the good and  
the bad."*

**– COASTAL COMMUNITY PARENT**

## Modeling healthy alcohol-related behavior

Alcohol is legal for adults over 21 years old, of course. Alcohol is often portrayed in the media in glamorous or humorous ways. The harm it can cause is left out. Alcohol affects children's ability to make good decisions. For all these reasons, it's important to teach your children that alcohol should be used only by adults who choose to drink.

What parents say — and especially what parents do — are some of the biggest factors influencing children's decisions now and in the future.

*"If you as a parent witness something and you don't say anything, your kids will think it's OK. You have to acknowledge what is not right."*

**– URBAN PARENT**

Cultural or religious customs may affect your family's beliefs about alcohol. Think about this as you set family rules and expectations about alcohol, and explain this to your children.



## Take Action

Here are some tips parents have found useful for showing their children how to make healthy choices:

- If you or other adults in your life use alcohol, use it moderately.
- Don't communicate to your children that alcohol is a way to relax or handle problems. Demonstrate other, healthier ways to relieve stress, such as exercising or talking things over with someone close to you.
- Keep alcohol out of reach, ideally in a locked cabinet, starting when your children are young.
- Be aware of how you talk about drinking. Don't tell stories that make drinking glamorous or funny.
- Never drink and drive, or ride in a car with a driver who's been drinking.
- When entertaining adults, provide alcohol-free beverages and food. Not serving anyone who's had too much to drink, and making plans for them to get home safely send a strong message.
- If your children see someone using alcohol in an unhealthy way, you may need to explain it. See "When a family member or friend abuses substances" (page 28) for ideas.
- Your elementary school-aged children are aware of your attitudes related to teen drinking. Do not provide alcohol to teens and their friends.



## Protecting your children from inhalants

Like alcohol, inhalants are legal, and they are found in common household and office products, such as aerosol sprays. Other examples include some glues, fuels, gases, or auto, cleaning, or beauty products. This can make inhalant prevention a challenge. Your child may hear about inhalants before you do.

### **Inhalants can cause serious short-term and long-term harm to children, including:**

- Sores on the nose and face
- Accidental injuries
- Weight loss
- Damage to the liver, kidneys, and central nervous system
- Problems with judgment, reasoning, and long-term memory
- Addiction
- Even death, which can occur after the first or many uses

Some children start using inhalants as early as age 9 or 10.



## Take Action

Right now is your best opportunity to reinforce the dangers of inhalants with your children:

- Model the proper use of household products.
- Read product labels and follow directions, such as using products in an area with plenty of fresh air.
- Don't talk with your children about the "high" inhalants may cause, and do not point out particular products that could be used as inhalants.
- Make sure they know the dangers caused by exposure to too much of a product.
- Supervise the use of any products that could be used as inhalants, and use water-based alternative products when possible.
- Keep household products that could be used as inhalants in a locked storage space, and check them regularly to make sure that your children have not used them.

### MORE RESOURCES:

**Massachusetts Department of Public Health's Parent's Guide to Preventing Inhalant Abuse:** Booklet for parents that offers a list of safer alternative products and ways to help protect your children. Download or order online at [www.mass.gov/maclearinghouse](http://www.mass.gov/maclearinghouse) or call 1-800-952-6637; TTY: Use MassRelay at 711 or 1-800-720-3480.

**New England Inhalant Abuse Prevention Coalition:** Online training program to help parents prevent inhalant use and abuse.  
[www.inhalantabusetraining.org](http://www.inhalantabusetraining.org)



## Building strong communication with your children

Creating regular and open lines of communication on many topics is important to reducing your children's risk of substance use. Talk frequently about substances. Ask them about what they are hearing and tell them your expectations.

### **Here are some tips parents have found helpful for developing strong communication with children:**

- Be a good listener. You can repeat what your child has said to be sure you understand.
- Ask open-ended questions that encourage conversation (rather than questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no).
- Take the chance to learn something new from your child. Listen without interruption, and ask your child to explain slang or concepts that are new to you.

*“Deep down inside, they may have some answers you haven't even thought about.”*

**– URBAN PARENT**

Many parents find the easiest way to discuss the topic of substance use is to take advantage of “teachable moments,” like when it is shown in a news story, on TV, or in music. Here are some ideas for starting to talk:

- If a character on TV is using substances, ask “Where do you think this person would really end up?” or “What do you think her family thinks?”
- If a tragic story involving substance use has been on the news, explain how substance use was involved and ask for your children’s thoughts.
- Use times of change to discuss substance use, such as starting in a new school, joining a new club, or starting a new activity. Make sure they know that most children don’t use alcohol or drugs. Talk about your child’s hopes and fears, the possibility that your child may be exposed to substance use, and how to handle it. (See “Preparing your children to deal with peer pressure,” page 25.)
- Ask your children what they know about substances — particularly alcohol — and listen carefully. Take the opportunity to talk about your rules for not using alcohol while underage, and how it can affect doing the things they like to do.

These discussions do not need to be long. Being clear about your expectations and asking your children’s thoughts can take only a few moments. This can be when you’re taking them to school or other activities, or even when you’re doing household chores together.

*“Ask your child, ‘How was your day?’ and don’t let them just say ‘OK.’ Ask what they did and what happened.”*

**– URBAN PARENT**



**MORE RESOURCES:**

For more information on prevention for youth ages 10 and older, see the Strengthening Families Program DVD. This interactive DVD teaches youth skills and gives parents actions they can take with their children. Doing the fun activities with your child has been shown to help prevent substance use. Order online at [www.mass.gov/maclearinghouse](http://www.mass.gov/maclearinghouse) or call 1-800-952-6637 (TTY: Use MassRelay at 711 or 1-800-720-3480).

### **What if my child asks if I used substances?**

It's natural to worry about this question, and it helps to be ready for the question if it does come up. One way of handling the situation can be to keep the conversation focused on your child.

You can say something like:

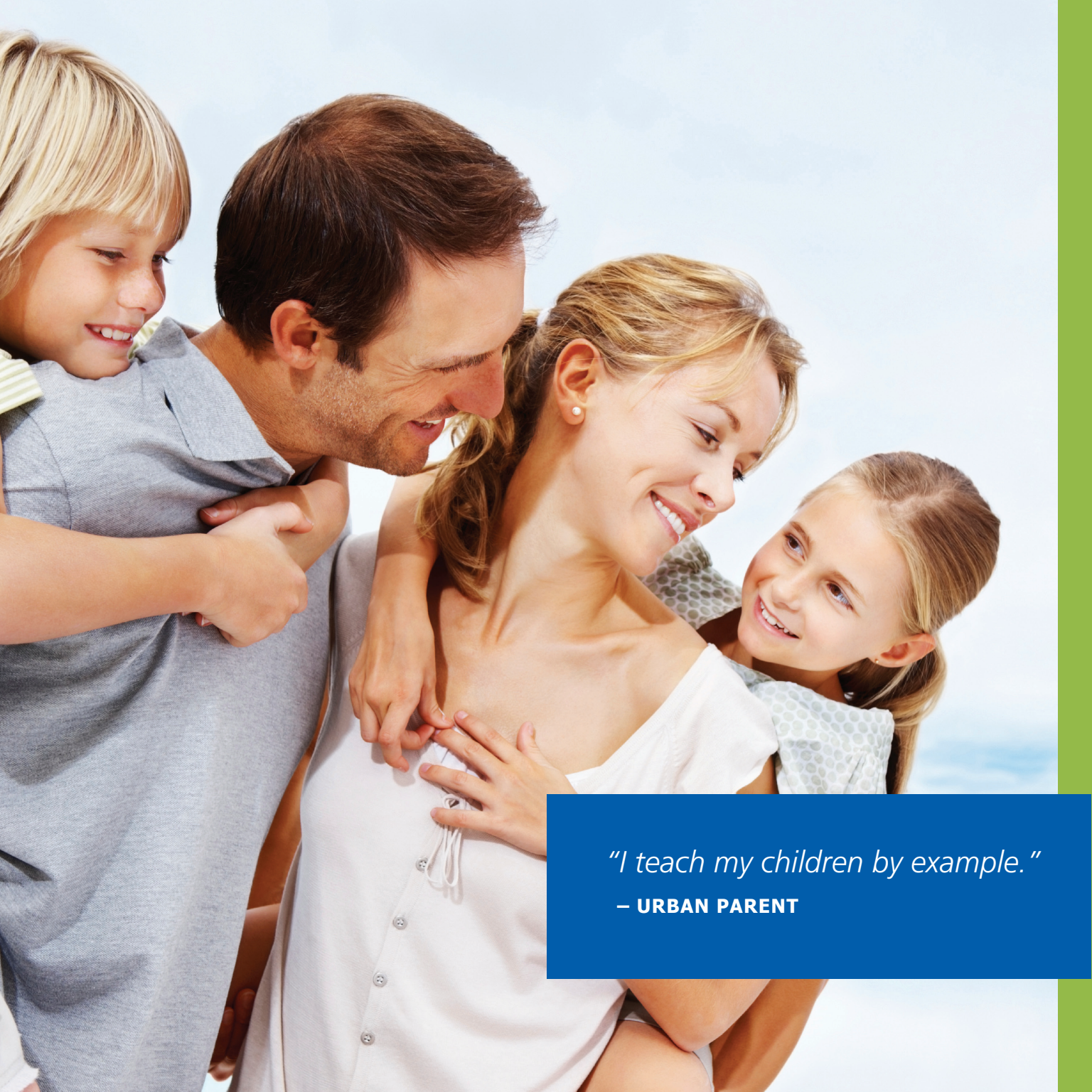
- "I want to talk about you and make sure you're safe. Let's talk about what may come up when you're in school — I'd like to hear what you think."

If your child insists on an answer, you may not be comfortable answering the question until they're older. In that case, you should let your child know that you choose not to share your experiences. If you do admit to using substances, you don't need to provide details, but can instead talk about the negative consequences.

You can answer by saying something like:

- "I smoked cigarettes when I was young, but we didn't know just how dangerous smoking was back then. If I had known, I never would have started, because it's addictive and very hard to quit."

If you've never used substances, share this with your children. Tell them how you resisted peer pressure when you were younger, and why you made the decisions you did. Let them know how those decisions have made you a happier and healthier person.



*"I teach my children by example."*

– URBAN PARENT



## Building caring relationships with your children

Now is a great time to build strong parent-child relationships that can help protect your children from substance use later. Teens who say they have an “excellent relationship” with either of their parents are less likely to use substances. Even if substance abuse runs in your family, strong parenting can help reduce the risk. This includes:

- Providing a caring and supportive family environment
- Parents having high expectations of their children
- Having clear family rules and expectations about not using substances
- Parents offering praise, affection, and acceptance
- Offering help and support for emotional and day-to-day needs



## Take Action

Here are some ideas for getting closer to your children:

- Spend at least 15 minutes each day doing something your child wants to do, like talking, cooking a meal together, playing a game, or doing a craft project that your child chooses.
- Get children involved with their unique cultural heritage. Studies have shown Latino children who felt a connection with their culture were happier and made healthier choices, for example.
- If possible, try to do something special together at least once a week. Suggest things like a family movie night at home, going to the park or museum, skating, or a day trip to a nature area or another town.
- Take opportunities to note your children's strengths, such as in schoolwork, sports, crafts, or other activities. Point out moments when they do something special or make extra effort, like treating someone well or volunteering to help.
- Support your children's efforts in sports, school activities, or hobbies. Attend as many of their games or other events as you can.
- Show them how you can have fun in healthy ways.

## Setting clear rules and expectations about substance use

The best parenting style to prevent underage drinking combines high levels of encouragement and affection with consistent discipline and rules. Setting clear “no-use” rules about alcohol, inhalants, and other substances will help protect your children. In fact, parents’ expectations can play a bigger role in youth substance use than peer pressure. Starting before young children have tried alcohol, sending and repeating the message that you disapprove of substance use can help to reduce your children’s risk.

Some family rules to consider setting include:

- No one under 21 will drink alcohol (religious services may be an exception).
- Inhalants and drugs are not allowed.
- Kids will not stay at parties where there is alcohol or drugs, and they won’t get in a car with a driver who’s been drinking or using drugs.
- Older siblings will not encourage younger brothers or sisters to drink and will not give them alcohol.

Here are some ways you and the rest of your family can communicate rules and expectations:

- “I’ve been thinking lately that I’ve never actually told you this: I don’t want you using alcohol, inhalants, tobacco, or other drugs.”
- “The rule in our house is that nobody uses drugs.”
- “I love you and want the best for you, so I don’t want you using alcohol or any drug.”
- “It’s my job as a parent to keep you safe, so I’m going to ask you questions about who you’re with and what you are doing.”

Be sure to be consistent, firm, and clear in your rules and decisions. Enforce consequences when necessary. Consequences can be positive, like recognizing when your child has followed the rules. Consequences can also be negative, such as limiting TV or Internet use for a period of time when rules are broken. Setting such rules and expectations now can have an impact later. Many teens report one of the greatest risks of using drugs is disappointing their parents. Remember that moderate rules are most effective; being overly controlling or strict can put children at risk for substance use, too.



## Monitoring your children's activities

In addition to having clear rules about alcohol and other drugs, supervising and monitoring your children can reduce their risk of using substances. This includes knowing where your children are and what kinds of activities they are involved in, and knowing their friends.



### Take Action

Here are some tips for keeping track of your kids:

- Have your children check in with you regularly. If possible, provide them with a list of your phone numbers and a simple cell phone with clear rules for using it. Make sure your children always know how to reach you.
- Help your children have positive friends, and get to know them. This can help you prevent potential problems. Children are more likely to try substances if their friends are using them.
- Get to know the parents of your children's friends — look for them at meetings or activities or give them a call. Ask them about their rules, and let them know about yours.
- Work with other parents to create a list of phone numbers, addresses, and email addresses — including the places where your children like to spend time.
- Pick up your child a little early from an activity so you can observe how she or he behaves.

*"I must meet the family before my child can go to a friend's house."*

**– COASTAL COMMUNITY PARENT**

### **Getting involved**

Volunteering and getting involved in the community can promote positive feelings and help children avoid risky behavior. After-school programs, sports leagues, and programs offered by community agencies may be good options for your children to be active and form relationships with peers and other adults.

You can help protect your children and others from substance use by getting involved in community efforts, such as a local parent-teacher organization, neighborhood association, or anti-drug coalition.



#### **MORE RESOURCES:**

**Mass 211:** Information and referrals for youth (including recreational programs) and family services. 2-1-1 or 1-877-211-6277 (toll-free; multilingual); TTY: 1-508-370-4890; [www.mass211help.org](http://www.mass211help.org)





## Preparing your children to deal with peer pressure

Dealing with peer pressure related to substance use is subtle — it's more than "just saying no." The peer pressure young people feel is more related to their wanting to be accepted, to belong, and to be noticed.

Moving from elementary school to middle school can be a risky and stressful time for children. In elementary school, very few children are using substances. But as children get older, they become more exposed to substance use, and most importantly, a few of their peers may start trying them. Because kids want to be accepted and liked, they may decide to join in using substances, or they may seek out new friends. The elementary years are an ideal time for prevention because it can provide children with the confidence to resist peer pressure. Kids can even turn peer pressure around and use it in a positive way to encourage their friends to stay away from alcohol.

*"I've told my children, 'Come ask me — I'll explain. I want you to know I'm here and we can talk about it.'"*

**– URBAN PARENT**

### **MORE RESOURCES:**

**The Cool Spot:** Interactive website for young teens, including information on the risks of underage drinking and resisting peer pressure. [www.thecoolspot.gov](http://www.thecoolspot.gov).



## Take Action

You can help build your children's skills to resist this pressure — and maybe even turn it around.

- Prepare your children for these changes. Remind them that most youth don't use alcohol or other drugs.
- Help your children feel comfortable in social situations. Remember, peer pressure is often about acceptance. Help your children "break the ice" with others and teach them how to ask questions of other people and to listen. Talk about awkward moments you've had — and that it's OK to feel uncomfortable sometimes. Help your children work through misunderstandings.
- Help your children practice "turn down" comments if offered alcohol or other substances. These responses can include "No thanks" or "I have to go." Some children may want to express their position and say "I don't drink alcohol/do drugs," or "It's not for me." Others may say it would get them in trouble with their parents, coach, etc. Practicing these skills at different ages can help them feel confident.
- Teach your children to think critically about media messages. Many media messages about substances play upon people's desire to be popular and attractive — exactly the issues children this age are starting to face. Help them see the harms that substances can create. Try to protect them from over-exposure to TV or movies that portray substance use.

### **“Reversing” peer pressure**

You can encourage your children not only to resist pressure to use substances, but to help their friends as well. This is an ideal opportunity to “turn the tables” on peer pressure and discourage their friends’ interest in substance use.

- Help your children understand when it is best to turn to you, or another trusted adult, for help.
- Help your children practice what to say and how to handle such situations.
- Your child can say, “You’re my friend. I’m worried about you trying substances and how it’s caused a problem. I’d like to help you. It’s important to me that my friends don’t use substances.”
- Let your children know you can be trusted and would like to hear about their efforts.
- If needed, you can turn to a guidance counselor, the child’s doctor, or the resources on page 30 for advice.

### **Other adults can help**

Other family members, family friends, neighbors, youth program leaders, coaches, and religious leaders can help protect your children from substance use. They can help reinforce rules and offer positive expectations. Here are a couple of ideas for talking with adults who interact with your children:

- “My child looks up to you as his/her (program leader, teacher, coach, mentor, etc.). We don’t allow our child to use alcohol or other drugs. If you teach the same ideas it will help reinforce what he/she is learning at home.”
- “Do you ever do programs or talk with the children about substance use? If not, would you be willing to talk with them and help to support what I’m trying to teach my children at home? I’d like to see all of our kids stay healthy.”

### **When a family member or friend abuses substances**

Some children have family members or family friends who abuse alcohol, tobacco, or other substances, and it's likely that your children will see this sooner or later.

Many parents say they use this as an opportunity to talk with their children about substance use and abuse. Here are some suggestions for how you can handle it:

- Explain what is happening and why.
- Explain how this is harmful to the family member or friend you care about.
- Explain how help is available to cope with this disease.

Current parental substance abuse puts children at higher risk of abusing substances than past substance abuse. Getting help is not only healthy for the caregiver, but healthy for your children too. New kinds of treatment are available, and some treatment goes beyond that offered by health insurance. The most important thing for parents to know is that finding out if they need help is one of the healthiest choices they can make, for themselves and for their children.

### **GETTING HELP:**

**Massachusetts Substance Abuse Information and Education Helpline:** Information and treatment referrals for people of all ages. 1-800-327-5050; TTY: Use MassRelay at 711 or 1-800-720-3480 (toll-free; 7 days a week; multi-lingual) or **[www.helpline-online.com](http://www.helpline-online.com)**

**Al-Anon:** Groups to help friends and families of alcoholics. 1-888-425-2666 (toll-free) or **[www.al-anon.org](http://www.al-anon.org)**

**Massachusetts Smokers' Helpline:** Advice and resources for trying to stop smoking. English: 1-800-QUITNOW (1-800-784-8669); Spanish: 1-800-8-Déjalo (1-800-833-5256); other languages: 1-800-784-8669; TTY: 1-800-833-1477; **[www.makesmokinghistory.org](http://www.makesmokinghistory.org)**

## Positive Schooling

Positive experiences and connections with school are linked to a decreased risk of substance use. Encouraging kids throughout their schooling will help them have a good experience and keep them motivated.

- Come up with a regular time and place for your children to do their homework.
- Give support and praise to your children for good work habits.
- Praise them for what they've done correctly and for putting in the effort.
- If your children are having trouble in school or with homework it may be useful to use a homework chart. With this system your children can track their efforts. You can consider letting them earn points and rewards for good behavior.
- Attend open houses or meetings to stay connected to teachers and principals.
- Talk with your children's teachers if problems come up. With positive support, school can be a rewarding experience for you and your child.

### MORE RESOURCES:

**Triple P Positive Parenting Program:** Self-guided program for parents that addresses challenging situations and helps foster relationships that help both parents and children thrive. [www.triplep-staypositive.net](http://www.triplep-staypositive.net)

## In Summary

Giving rules and encouragement to your child can help protect them from substance use. Your work as a parent can be rewarded by seeing your children thrive, now and in the years to come.

## TO LEARN MORE ABOUT PREVENTION FOR ALL AGE LEVELS:

### Massachusetts

#### Massachusetts Health Promotion

**Clearinghouse:** Free publications and DVDs on many health topics. 1-800-952-6637 (toll-free); TTY: Use MassRelay at 711 or 1-800-720-3480; [www.mass.gov/maclearinghouse](http://www.mass.gov/maclearinghouse)

The materials based on the science of preventing alcohol and other drug abuse include:

- *The Strengthening Families Program Home Use DVD* — series for families of 10- to 17-year-olds containing actions that parents can take.
- *Talking to Your Middle School-Aged Child About Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drugs: A 10-Step Guide for Parents* — booklet for parents of 11- to 13-year-olds (English and Spanish)
- *7 Ways to Protect Your Teen from Alcohol and Other Drugs* — booklet for parents of teens (English and Spanish)

- *Preventing Underage Drinking... Priceless* — fact sheet for parents of older children
- *Preventing Substance Abuse Starts at Home: Safeguarding Your Children* — brochure for parents of elementary- through high school-aged children (English and Spanish)
- *Choose to Keep Your Freedom* — brochure for 10- to 18-year-olds (English and Spanish)

#### Massachusetts and Rhode Island Poison

**Control Center:** Information and hotline about overdoses, inhalants, and other poisons. 1-800-222-1222 (toll-free; 24 hours); TTY: 1-888-244-5313; [www.maripoisoncenter.com](http://www.maripoisoncenter.com). In immediate danger, call 911 or your local emergency number.

#### Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Bureau of Substance Abuse Services:

Information, statistics, and publications.  
[www.mass.gov/dph/bsas](http://www.mass.gov/dph/bsas)  
(See Prevention Information)



## National

**Join Together:** Information, publications, and advocacy. [www.drugfree.org/join-together](http://www.drugfree.org/join-together)

### **SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)**

**Publications Ordering:** Information and publications for the public and professionals. 1-800-729-6686 (toll-free; English and Spanish); TTY: 1-800-487-4889; <http://store.samhsa.gov>

### **SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) Home Page:**

Information, referrals, and helpline. 1-800-662-HELP (1-800-662-4357) (toll-free; 24 hours and 7 days a week; English and Spanish); [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

### **Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids:**

Information and advocacy. 1-202-296-5469; [www.tobaccofreekids.org](http://www.tobaccofreekids.org)

## Selected information sources for this booklet include:

Join Together, [www.drugfree.org/join-together](http://www.drugfree.org/join-together)

National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA), Columbia University, [www.casacolumbia.org](http://www.casacolumbia.org)

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, [www.niaaa.nih.gov](http://www.niaaa.nih.gov)

Partnership for Drug-Free Kids, [www.drugfree.org/resources/](http://www.drugfree.org/resources/)

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)



MA Department of Public Health  
**BSAS**  
BUREAU OF SUBSTANCE  
ABUSE SERVICES  
Prevent • Treat • Recover • For Life