



## Talking about Drugs with Kids in Elementary School (ages 5-10)

At the lower end of this age range, children are very perceptive and anxious to learn. This is a good time to introduce more detail into your conversations about drugs, especially what they are and the consequences of using them. Explain the concept of addiction – that some people may not understand how harmful drugs are or that some people try drugs and then have a hard time quitting. Introduce them to the idea that drug use can lead to abuse, which can lead to addiction.

### 1. Safe drugs and unsafe drugs.

Kids in this age group may ask why some drugs are good for you and others aren't. With the rise in prescription drug abuse, this is a good time to explain to them that prescription medication should be taken only when a doctor tells you to and only when administered by an adult. Tell your child that bad drugs can make you sick or even kill you and that is why it is wrong to take them – even once. They may even understand the sadness that accompanies death if they've lost a loved one (such as a grandparent).

### 2. Honesty and praise

Explain in more detail how dangerous it is for children to drink alcohol and how harmful it is to their developing brain and body. Tell them the truth: even relatively small amounts of alcohol can make a child sick. If your children aspire to be like someone famous, such as a sports figure, remind them that it's important to take care of their body and not use tobacco, alcohol, or drugs if they want to excel. Children this age crave praise, so give it out freely when deserved. For example, let them know you think they are super smart for disliking the smell of cigarette smoke. This type of interaction also assures children they are capable of making healthy choices—in this case, they dislike cigarettes and don't want to be around them.

### 3. Repeat yourself.

While in elementary school, children need to be warned about not using inhalants. Tell them – repeatedly – that even one instance of inhaling can lead to severe brain damage or even death.

#### **4. When they ask...**

When children in this age group ask questions, it's often because of something they have seen or heard, and it's important to know where they are getting their information. For example, your eight-year-old may ask, "What is pot?" First, clarify that your child means marijuana by asking where your child learned about it and what exactly was heard, read, or seen. Based on that, you might answer,

"It's a very dangerous drug that people smoke—usually like a cigarette but sometimes in a pipe. Marijuana has chemicals in it that can cause cancer and maybe even kill you. People who smoke marijuana can get addicted and can't stop using it, or they might try other very dangerous drugs, too. It's nothing to mess around with, and I hope you don't ever try it. You are a smart girl, and I wouldn't want you to mess up your life."

#### **5. Involve others.**

Children this age still respect adults, particularly law enforcement. As your child enters elementary school, offer to help establish or administer a drug education program that includes outside resources.

#### **6. Encourage healthy choices and smart decision-making.**

Talk to your kids often about making good choices and about healthy living and smart goal setting. Let them make age-appropriate decisions, and reward them when they do well. Doing so empowers them and gives them confidence in their decision-making skills.

#### **Before leaving elementary school, your children should know:**

- The immediate effects of alcohol, tobacco, and drug use on different parts of the body, including risks of coma or fatal overdose
- The long-term consequences – how and why drugs can be addicting and make users lose control of their lives
- The reasons why drugs are especially dangerous for growing bodies
- The problems that alcohol and other illegal drugs cause not only to the user, but the user's family and world

Sources:

- Drug Enforcement Administration and U.S. Department of Education, *Growing Up Drug Free: A Parent's Guide to Prevention*, Washington, D.C. 2012.

- [www.actmissouri.org/facts&resources.asp](http://www.actmissouri.org/facts&resources.asp)