

PARENT TOOLKIT



SECTION 1

LEARN THE FACTS

INTRODUCTION

America is facing an “opioid epidemic” and there has been a growing number of overdoses due to opioids. Parents and care givers are a pivotal influence on youth’s experimentation and use of substances. While the focus of this guide is on supports for parents and caregivers, the resources in this Toolkit can be used by educators, social workers, Throughout the guide, you find resources that help you learn more about the opioid problem, recognize warning signs, and open up lines of communication with your child and those in your community.

The Operation Prevention program has curriculum materials for students in grades 3–12. This Toolkit provides background information, statistics, and helpful tips for talking with your child about the content that might be presented through the curriculum. However, recognize that some content may be too mature for your child, and the conversations you have should be tailored to your child’s age level.

INTRODUCTION TO THE OPERATION PREVENTION PROGRAM

Why is Opioid Prevention Important?

Medications are chemicals or compounds used to cure diseases and save lives. When used responsibly, medications can help manage and prevent disease, ease symptoms, and in some cases, diagnose illnesses. Today’s medications are produced using a variety of sources. Some medications are produced in labs by mixing chemicals or through biological engineering. Others are manufactured by using byproducts or substances from nature. One example is penicillin which is extracted from *Penicillium* mold. Another example is from 1962 when Arthur Barclay, a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) botanist, collected a sample of bark from the Pacific yew tree. Today, the anti-cancer agents from the Pacific yew are used in some of the most effective cancer medications ever developed.

However, the overuse and misuse of prescription and over-the-counter medications, as well as the increasing use of counterfeit drugs and fake pills, is a serious public health threat. Prescription opioid medications, like morphine, hydrocodone, and oxycodone, are prescribed to treat pain, but are increasingly being misused. Additionally, counterfeit drugs and fake pills contaminated with lethal doses of fentanyl, a synthetic opioid, have flooded the market, contributing to the opioid epidemic. Drug overdose deaths from all substances, including opioids, stimulants like methamphetamine, and cocaine rose from 16,849 in 1999 to a peak of nearly 108,000 in 2022. Following a historic 26.2% decline to 79,384 official deaths in 2024, provisional CDC data through December 2025 indicates a further drop to roughly 70,000 annual deaths. While this marks three consecutive years of decline, drug overdose remains a leading cause of preventable death in the United States.

How Will My Child Learn About Opioid Prevention?

In the curriculum sessions, students will investigate what medicine is and when, how, and why people take it. Through a series of activities based on grade level, students will discover how medication enters the body to control illnesses that won’t go away, helps prevent people from getting sick, and makes people feel better when they are sick. They will use this information to help explain the importance of responsibly using medications that are sold over-the-counter (OTC) and those prescribed by a doctor. Additional Operation Prevention sessions continue educating students on the dangers of opioid use and addiction, specifically the use and misuse of opioids such as heroin, morphine, oxycodone, fentanyl, and other prescription painkillers.

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How Do the Sessions Work?

Presentations are in PowerPoint so that the content can be presented in a variety of classroom settings. There are many interactive aspects of the presentations, including graphics, popups, and video clips. Teachers use an Educators Guide to facilitate discussions, lead students through activities, and highlight key talking points.

Session Structure: Each Operation Prevention session provides the following information:

- **Objectives:** Each session includes its overall goals as well as specific behavioral and cognitive objectives for students.
- **Required Materials:** Many sessions include student handouts, articles, and activities.
- **Definitions:** Any words that can be used as vocabulary words will be defined for the teachers and students.
- **Key Points to Make:** To help the teacher guide discussion and reinforce key concepts, key points are provided.



PROGRAM OUTLINE

Here is what you will find in this parent toolkit:

- Section 1: Learn the Facts
- Section 2: How Medication Works
- Section 3: Parenting Styles and Skills
- Section 4: Start the discussion
- Section 5: Skills for your Child
- Resources

SECTION 1

LEARN THE FACTS

Here is an overview of our program sessions based on grade level.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Lesson: Proactive Prevention

Over-the-Counter and Prescription Medications: How do medications work in our bodies, and why is it so important to use them responsibly? Follow medication on a path through the body to investigate how they make us feel better with responsible use.

Interdisciplinary Activity: Malachi's Medication

In this activity, students will identify and explain the dosage instructions included on a prescription label and conduct an experiment to understand the importance of accurately measuring medication dosage.

Interdisciplinary Activity: Sarah's Sister

In this activity, students will meet Sarah and her younger sister, who has obtained medication that was not properly stored, to understand the importance of storing medication safely.

MIDDLE SCHOOL

Lesson: Our Brain and Body on Opioids

How do addiction and withdrawal affect the body's many systems? Students examine how drug use alters the mind and body and reinforce their understanding by creating a peer-to-peer social media campaign.

Lesson: Is Our Community Influenced by the Opioid Epidemic?

Students will examine why people turn to opioids, and then will act as investigative reporters to consider the who, what, when, where, why, and how of opioid use and misuse.

MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL

Self-Paced Module: The Science of Addiction—The Stories of Teens

In this self-paced, standards-aligned e-learning

experience, students meet teens who are struggling with prescription opioid misuse and heroin use and learn the science behind their powerful stories. With strategies and resources for those being faced with a decision about prescription opioid misuse or struggles with addiction, students become better equipped to handle these experiences.

HIGH SCHOOL

Video Topic Series: Counterfeit Drugs

Take students inside the real consequences that counterfeit drugs are having on people and communities with insights from diverse subject-matter experts. Students will see how counterfeit drugs are created and ways communities are fighting back.

Digital Lesson Bundle: Counterfeit Drugs: Community Awareness Campaign

Explore the importance of community connection in counteracting the rising trend of counterfeit drug use. Students will consider how an individual's decisions can impact an entire community as they investigate real-world data and learn how to create an effective community awareness campaign.

Lesson: Opioid Use: The Signs. The Symptoms. The Science.

Separate fact from fiction with this classroom-ready digital lesson. Through investigation and hands-on activities, students learn the science behind prescription opioid and heroin addiction, overdose, and withdrawal.

Lesson: Reporting on a Public Health Crisis: Opioids in the Community

Students will investigate how the opioid epidemic impacts their community by acting as investigative reporters to investigate the who, what, when, where, why, and how of opioid use and misuse.

SECTION 1

LEARN THE FACTS

WHAT IS AN OPIOID?

You may be wondering what an opioid even is. Opioids are drugs that are either derived from the opium poppy plant or are created synthetically. Heroin is an illegal opioid, but many opioids are legal. These include a variety of pain medications routinely prescribed by doctors and include morphine, oxycodone, codeine, and fentanyl. Because they are prescribed, teens do not always need to purchase opioids at school or on the street. In fact, they can often get access to them from their own medicine cabinet or the medicine cabinets of friends. It may seem harmless—even helpful—to give a pill to someone in pain. However, the physiological processes that allow these medications to work are very powerful. They can change the way the brain and the rest of the body react to the presence—as well as the absence—of the drug. The initial decision to take opioids may start off as a choice, but can develop into dependency or addiction. It is important to understand the biological effects opioids can have on the body.

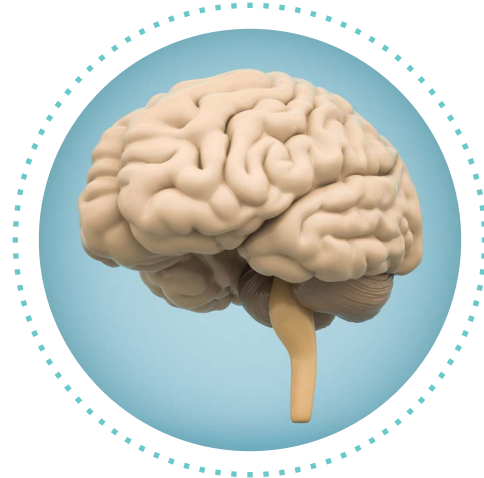
THE SCIENCE

One way to help you understand the impact of opioids is to understand the science behind how they influence your body.

When you are prescribed an opioid for pain relief, you are given a substance that changes the way your body communicates with your brain. It does not remove the problem causing the pain. Instead, it silences the message the body sends to report the pain to the brain.

The body's messaging system consists of thousands of tiny nerve cells, called neurons, spread throughout the body. Neurons send messages to and from the brain, giving instructions to other parts of the body and reporting what is happening there.

Endorphins are naturally manufactured in the brain to help us feel good and regulate pain.



Opioids have a chemical structure similar to endorphins. They can actually lock onto the same receptor sites as endorphins. One reason opioids are much more powerful than our naturally-released endorphins is because we can choose how much of the chemical enters our body.

When opioids such as pain pills are ingested, they act to increase the effects of endorphins. As drug use continues, a person often has to use more of the opioid to receive the same effects. This is called tolerance. Tolerance is a clear signal that the chemical balances in the brain have been changed. It is important to remember that a teenager's brain is changing rapidly throughout adolescence. Frequently-used connections between neurons are strengthened, and unused connections are trimmed away. These changes make possible the intellectual and emotional transitions between childhood and adulthood.

As they are happening, however, they can make teenagers more prone to risky, impulsive behavior such as drug misuse and abuse. The chemical changes to the brain caused by drugs can also interfere with these changes that happen naturally during adolescence. This can sometimes lead to serious social and health risks.

SECTION 1

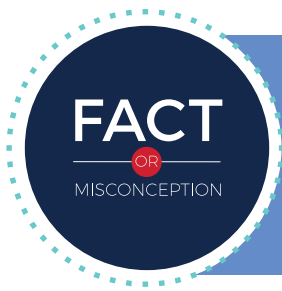
LEARN THE FACTS

Consider these statistics:

- According to the latest [NIDA Monitoring the Future Survey](#), teen illicit substance misuse remains near historic lows. Latest data shows that 3.1% of 8th graders, 4.1% of 10th graders, and roughly 6.5% of 12th graders reported using an illicit drug in the past year. While these overall numbers reflect a steady post-pandemic plateau, health officials note that targeted education remains vital due to recent small upticks in specific high-risk drugs like cocaine.
- According to the Drug Enforcement Administration's [One Pill Can Kill Campaign](#), a potentially lethal dose of fentanyl is defined as just 2 milligrams, an amount small enough to fit on the tip of a pencil. While the DEA's historical testing warned that roughly half of all seized counterfeit pills reached this deadly threshold, official laboratory data from 2025 shows that 29% of analyzed pills contained a lethal dose.
- Fentanyl is up to 50 times more potent than heroin and 100 times more potent than morphine. (CDC Stop Overdose: Fentanyl Facts, 2024; DEA Fentanyl Fact Sheet)
- Fentanyl is the leading cause of death among Americans ages 18 to 44, more than car accidents, gun violence, or suicide. While 2024 saw the largest single-year decline in overdose deaths in over two decades, drug overdose remains the leading cause of preventable death for this age group. (CDC NCHS Data Brief No. 549, 2025; CDC WONDER Database)
- New preliminary data predicts 69,973 drug overdose deaths for the 12 months ending in December 2025. This is a 13.9% decline in U.S. overdose deaths compared to the previous year.
- According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) released by SAMHSA, approximately 8.0 million Americans aged 12 or older misused prescription pain relievers in 2024. This reflects a measurable decrease from the 8.6 million reported in 2023, signaling a gradual downward trend in prescription opioid misuse over recent years as public health awareness and strict prescribing guidelines expand.
- According to the National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics and the federal Monitoring the Future study, the overall lifetime misuse rate of any prescription drug without a doctor's orders among high school seniors dropped to approximately 1 in 14 (roughly 7.1%). Latest data through 2025 indicates that teen misuse of prescription medications has sustained these historic lows, marking a massive decade-long decline in non-medical drug access among American youth.
- While a friend or relative was once the most common source of misused prescription medications among teens, that has shifted significantly. Research using Monitoring the Future data found that teens today are most likely to misuse their own prescription (37%), while the share obtaining drugs from friends fell by more than half between 2009 and 2022. However, nearly 42% of all people who misuse prescription pain relievers still obtain them from a friend or relative in some way. (McCabe et al., JAMA, 2024; 2024 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, SAMHSA)

SECTION 1

LEARN THE FACTS



Increased media coverage has led to many myths and misconceptions about opioid misuse and abuse. It's important to separate myths from truths when talking to teens.

Myth

A person is not really at risk of death because they took a pill that was not prescribed to them.

Truth

One fake pill can be fatal, and you should only take pills or medication prescribed to you by a licensed and registered pharmacist or doctor. Also, you should not take pills prescribed to someone else because you cannot be sure where they came from, and they may contain deadly fentanyl.

Myth

Prescription opioids are safer than “street drugs” because physicians prescribe them all the time.

Truth

“Street drugs” and prescription opioids frequently have the exact same addictive properties and some prescription drugs can even be worse.

Myth

Once a person is addicted to drugs, there is no hope for recovery.

Truth

Addiction is not a hopeless problem. Help is available, and treatment can work.

Myth

Only certain people misuse or abuse drugs.

Truth

Drugs affect people from all races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic classes. Drugs do not discriminate or stereotype.

Myth

The use of pain medication will always lead to addiction.

Truth

In most cases, when taken according to prescription instructions, pain medication is safe. It is important to discuss the prescription thoroughly with a doctor. If a patient needs long-term pain relief, it might be better to look at other options than to risk opioid addiction.

Myth

There is an “addiction” gene that controls who does and does not become addicted.

Truth

Genetic factors might make some people more sensitive to the effects of a drug. However, many factors determine the likelihood that someone may become addicted to a drug. This includes both inherited and environmental factors.

Myth

Heroin is the drug that causes the most overdose deaths.

Truth

The overdose crisis has fundamentally shifted. Illicitly manufactured fentanyl, is now the dominant driver of overdose deaths, involved in nearly 6 out of 10 of all drug overdose deaths in 2024. What makes this especially dangerous is that fentanyl is no longer confined to one drug: it is now found in counterfeit pills, cocaine, methamphetamine, and what is sold on the street as heroin. In fact, 80% of heroin-involved overdose deaths also involved fentanyl. Any illicit drug obtained outside a licensed pharmacy must be considered potentially fentanyl-contaminated.

SECTION 2

HOW MEDICATION WORKS

Being open about medications in your household, and modeling safe storage and use, can guide children to make more informed choices when they are old enough to take medications on their own. Knowing exactly how medications affect the body—and how our body reacts to medications—can help explain how important it is to make responsible decisions when introducing any type of medication into your body.

Medications are made in laboratories and created using substances found in nature. Medications are always evolving to help people feel better more quickly and to reduce side effects. Medications are used to make a person feel better when they are sick, help fight disease and infection, replace or block chemicals in the body to control an illness, relieve pain, and relieve symptoms.

Medications can be swallowed as a pill or liquid, injected and absorbed into the bloodstream, breathed into the lungs, or applied topically. If medications are swallowed—typically the case when taking an opioid pill—it travels to the stomach. Pills are coated differently depending on where in the body they should be dissolved. Medications are then absorbed into the lining of the small intestines, which moves the medicine into the bloodstream. This is how medicine is circulated around the body and delivered to different organs and tissues through the circulatory system. Because medications travel all over the body, they can cause side effects in parts of the body that didn't need the medication.

Our brains are also an organ, and some medications can have access to our brains while others will be blocked from it. Some medications, like opioids, are designed to affect chemicals in our brain called neurotransmitters. This can help with pain management by blocking pain and making us feel good. The effects of the medicine will continue to be active until our bodies begin to break it down and remove it from the body altogether.



SECTION 2

HOW MEDICATION WORKS

KNOW THE DIFFERENCE

In recent years, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has empowered consumers to take a more active role in their health care by offering many over-the-counter options. The FDA determines whether medications are prescription, and require consultation with a doctor, or are nonprescription, and can be readily available at stores.

This helps us know which medications are safe and effective to take with or without a doctor's prescription. You likely have different types of medications and supplements in your household. It is important to understand the differences of each and how to keep them safe from children.

Vitamins/Supplements

Vitamins are found in foods we eat but are sometimes recommended as a mineral supplement. They boost our immune system and support growth and development in young children. Vitamins are made in gummy, chewable, and pill forms and are flavored to be tasty to children so they want to take them.

Safety Tips:

It is important never to leave vitamins out on the counter or easily accessible. This may be difficult because vitamins are typically consumed on a regular basis and it is tempting to keep them in a convenient location. However, vitamins can be toxic when excessive amounts are taken.

Over-The-Counter (OTC) Medication

Over-the-counter medications do not need a doctor's prescription and can be sold directly to a consumer. They prevent diseases, manage recurring conditions, and relieve aches, pains, and itches. The FDA even regulates sunscreen, anti-dandruff shampoos, and anti-fungal products.

Restricted Over-The-Counter Substances

Some medications that were previously sold without limitation have been moved into locations that require a pharmacist to obtain and identify

the purchaser. An example of this are medications containing pseudoephedrine. Although a prescription is not required, some medications can be used to create illegal substances. Only a certain amount of these medications can be purchased at one time and over a regulated duration. Other medications might require identification for proof of age.

Safety Tips:

- Throw away medications that are past the expiration date. Old medications may not work or can make you sick. It is a good idea to set a time once a year to go through all medications in your household.
- Know the difference between a tablespoon (TBSP) and teaspoon (TSP). This can help keep the dosage exactly as recommended.
- Follow the age limits on the packaging and do not base the dosage on the size of a child. Children tend to break down and eliminate medications more quickly. Some medicine has to be given frequently because our bodies will break it down quickly. It shouldn't be given in a large dose at once, like with adults.

Prescription Medication

Prescription medication is prescribed for a specific person. Physical factors such as weight, age, fat mass, and muscle mass are considered when factoring how to prescribe medication. We are all genetically and chemically different, and may tolerate certain types of medicine more than others.

Safety Tips:

- Confirm prescription medication is stored properly in your household somewhere that is too high for young children to see or reach.
- Relock the safety cap of medicine bottles each time they are opened.
- Dispose of unused prescription medication to prevent misuse.

SECTION 2

HOW MEDICATION WORKS

- Follow the instructions, and don't take more than what is prescribed.
- Don't mix medications.
- Don't give prescription medication to someone else, and don't take other people's medications.

Curiosity about pills

Pills look like candy and are flavored to entice children to take them when needed. Never refer to medicine as candy, that may reinforce confusion about medication.

If you are ever unsure about any medications and supplements in your home, reach out to a doctor or pharmacist for clarification.

Check the medicine cabinets in your home and make sure there are no unfinished or outdated prescription medications.

Get rid of any unused prescription medications that are expired or no longer active. Ask your primary care physician for suggestions on how to dispose of these medications. Your local hospital or clinic might also be able to suggest locations for dropping off opioids. Your local police station is another resource. Additional disposal and removal information can be found on the [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#) website. The Drug Enforcement Administration also hosts two [National Prescription Drug Take-Back Days](#) a year that provide safe, convenient, and responsible means of disposing of prescription drugs.

Some facilities and businesses are registered with the DEA to collect your unused or expired medicines. These drug take-back locations safely and securely gather and dispose of your unused or expired medicines, including those that contain controlled substances. In your community, authorized drug take-back locations may be retail, hospital, or clinic pharmacies, and law enforcement facilities. These drug take-back locations may offer on-site medicine kiosks or drop-off boxes; mail



back programs; or other in-home disposal methods to assist you in safely disposing of your unused or expired medicines.

Find an authorized drug take-back location near you:

[Year-Round Drop-Off Locations search](#)

Call the DEA Diversion Control Division Registration Call Center at 1-800-882-9539 for more information about these drug take-back locations.

SECTION 3

PARENTING STYLES & SKILLS

PARENTING STYLES

Parents are an integral part of their children's decision to use substances. But how can you as a parent guide your child in the healthy direction? This section will review different parenting styles and some different skills that have been shown to be pivotal in substance prevention and intervention.

In psychology, four different types of parenting styles have been recognized: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful. While all relationships are different, and different children need various levels of support—below is a guide to identify your parenting style and some suggestions on ways to support your child.

Authoritative Style

The authoritative style has been regarded as the most beneficial for most children. This style is marked with parents having high expectations of their child but tempering it with empathy, understanding, and support for their child.

How to recognize if this is your parenting style—answer the questions below, if the majority of your answers are “yes,” likely this is your parenting style:

- Does your child's day have structure?
- Are there acknowledged and specific rules in your household?
- Are there fair consequences for disrupting the structure or breaking the household rules?
- Do you have reasonable expectations of your child's behavior AND does your child recognize these expectations?
- Does your child feel comfortable discussing things with you? (i.e. do they know they can come to you without fear of judgement or discipline?)

Authoritarian Style

Authoritarian style is most notably marked as being very strict. These parents tend to hold very high expectations of their children but are not responsive to their child's needs. There tends to be very little communication between parent and child, punishment is often used to teach a lesson.

How to recognize if this is your parenting style:

- Do you have rules that are strict and you believe should always be followed?
- Do you believe that you should not explain your rules to your child/ren beyond “because I said so”?
- Do you give your child very few choices?
- Do you often use punishments to get your child to obey?
- Do you withhold affection and warmth from your child?

Permissive Style

The permissive style of parenting is a form of indulgent parenting where parents are highly nurturing and responsive but set few expectations and rules.

How to recognize if this is your parenting style:

- Do you not have set expectations and rules for your child?
- Do you avoid conflicts with your child?
- Do you desire to be your child's best friend?
- To get your child to do something do you bribe them with large rewards?

While permissive parents are highly nurturing, the costs tend to outweigh the benefits. This style of parenting is correlated to substance use and abuse in teens. While being empathetic and nurturing is important, setting rules and expectations is even more critical.

SECTION 3

PARENTING STYLES & SKILLS

Neglectful Style

Neglectful parenting is the most dangerous of all the parenting styles. Here's how to recognize if you are a neglectful parent:

- You don't know the emotional, physical, and mental needs of your child
- You don't know what is going on in your child's life
- Your child spends long periods of time at home alone
- You don't regularly engage with your child
- Your home is not a safe place

There can be many contributing factors as to why a parent is neglectful; if you find yourself or someone you know using this style, getting assistance could be helpful in reengaging and forming a healthy parent/child relationship.

Having a healthy relationship with your child is key in their happiness and development. Healthy parenting is an intricate balance of warmth, open communication, realistic expectations and clear boundaries. Now we will discuss some important parenting skills which have been shown to be effective in substance prevention.

PARENTING SKILLS

Below are parenting skills which have been found to be important in preventing a child's experimentation and progression of substance use.

1. Good communication

Having open and direct communication in a family is the foundation for strong parent and child relationships. Having good communication with your child can help you detect if there is a problem, provide encouragement and support, and know what is happening in the life of your child.

Key communication skills include:

- Showing an interest in their lives and asking questions
- Being understanding and showing empathy
- Encouraging problem solving—instead of saying “you never think” or “you need to make better decisions” ask them “how would you have handled that differently?”
- Listening—your child will be more likely to talk to you if they feel like you listen and that they won't be judged or blamed
- Staying calm

2. Encouragement

Giving your child words of affirmation and encouragement is important in forming a positive and healthy relationship with them. You can provide your child with encouragement by doing the following:

- Remind them of their strengths and the things they are good at
- Remind them of times they have worked hard and been successful in the past
- Listen to what they have to say
- Ask for their input when making plans
- Attend extracurricular and school events
- Display their work and accomplishments
- Make time for them each day
- Praise positive, desirable behaviors

SECTION 3

PARENTING STYLES & SKILLS

3. Negotiating Problems

Negotiating solutions to problems with your child will help them in developing skills in problem solving, healthy relationships, conflict resolution, and communication. Before solving a problem with your child, be sure to pick a neutral time; when both parties are angry very little can get accomplished. It's also important to:

- State the problem neutrally
- Own your part of the conflict
- Restate what the other person said and allow them to correct, if needed

Now that you have identified a problem and stated the problem neutrally it is time to negotiate a potential solution. The model you can use is BAM:

Brainstorm—come up with potential solutions, try to come up with at least three ideas (even if they're out of the box), go back and forth when proposing ideas.

Assess—go through your list of ideas and assess the pros and cons of each one.

Make a choice—everyone should agree on the chosen solution. You can combine ideas/solutions if needed!

After coming to a decision together, be sure to follow-up. Make sure the solution is working for all parties and it is successful. If not, go back to the list of ideas and choose another idea OR start over completely with the BAM model.

4. Setting Limits

Setting limits and boundaries with your child is important. Your ability to set clear limits and boundaries teaches your child how to use self-control, responsibility, and shows that you care. Setting limits is a two-step process: set rules and follow-up.

1. Set rules—make sure your rules are clear and simple, make sure your child understands your rules, and come up with consequences.

2. Follow-up—the most important part of setting limits is following up and through with them. If your child breaks a rule, provide an immediate consequence, and if they are following the rules offer encouragement. It is important to be consistent. Tips for making consequences:

- Small consequences are better
- Do not choose a consequence that punishes you
- Make sure they are not rewarding to your child and are under your control

5. Parental Monitoring

An important predictor of risk is parental supervision and the strength of child-parent bonds. Teens who are supervised by their parents and have strong bonds with their parents are less likely to misuse or abuse drugs.

Teens who have been prescribed opioid medications are at an increased risk of opioid misuse. If your child has a prescription for opioid medications, dispense the medication and check the bottle regularly to ensure that the prescription is being used at the prescribed rate. Pay attention if your child requests an early refill after “losing” the bottle or “dropping” the pills in the sink.

Parental supervision is a strong influence for preventing opioid misuse and abuse.

Teens who are left with long periods of unsupervised time are at greater risk. That can be challenging since teens begin to spend more time with friends and less with family. However, it is important to stay aware of what your child is doing. Ask questions when something does not seem right. Look for the warning signs listed above, and check up on your child to ensure they are where they say they are.

SECTION 4

START THE DISCUSSION

KNOW THE SIGNS



Although each case is different, there are common signs of potential drug misuse and abuse in children and teenagers.

These include:

- **Negative changes in grades**
Are your child's grades suddenly dropping after a long record of academic success?
- **Skiping classes or school**
Do you no longer know what your child is doing during the school day?
- **Dropping longtime friends**
Have your child's friends suddenly changed?
- **Loss of interest in usual activities**
Does your child no longer seem interested in his or her "favorite" activities?
- **Changes in appearance**
Has your child developed an uncharacteristic lack of concern for grooming or hygiene?
- **Changes in general behavior, including sleeping and eating habits**
Has a normally energetic child become listless, or a laid-back child become unusually excitable?

Of course, the explanation for a sudden or unexpected change could have nothing to do with drugs. Each person is different, and the same behavior in different teens may have very different causes. Trust your instincts; after all, you know your child best. If something does not seem right, ask questions, investigate, and—if necessary—seek professional help.

Adolescents who have a good bond with an adult are less likely to engage in risky behaviors.

SECTION 5

SKILLS FOR YOUR CHILD

BEFORE YOU TALK

Starting this discussion might be uncomfortable for you or your child, but here are some tips to help make the conversation a little easier and effective.

- Pick a neutral time when you can both focus on what you're discussing
- Be prepared—make sure you have some background knowledge on the topic. The first two sessions of this toolkit—"Learn the Facts" and "How Medication Works" can help.
- Be open and calm
- Limit distractions
- Go at a pace that is comfortable for both of you. If either of you get overwhelmed, take a break.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

You may want to have a discussion with your child about this important issue but aren't quite sure where to start. Keep the lines of communication open by engaging in regular conversations. One-on-one conversations may not always yield the results you would like. Be patient and keep initiating conversations. Here are some possible conversation starters:

There is a lot of information coming out that teens are using social media to purchase counterfeit drugs. Have you heard about this, or is anyone talking about this at your school?

- Social media can be a challenging but extremely important topic to discuss with your teen. Share with your child information from the [DEA report about fake pills](#) and the extreme dangers in using social media to purchase counterfeit pills.

There's a lot in the news lately about teens who are misusing prescription drugs. How much do you know about this? Do you know if kids at your school are taking prescription drugs like OxyContin® and Percocet® that were not prescribed for them?

- Sometimes teens will try to opt out of this conversation because they don't want to share specific information about friends or peers. In this case, you can be ready with a story about your own teenage years and someone you knew or something that happened pertaining to drug use during that time. Talk about how you felt, and then ask what they would have thought had they experienced something similar. This is also an opportunity to talk about why this behavior is so dangerous.

I just heard a report about drug use by teenagers, and I wanted to talk to you about what it said...

- Briefly summarize the report and talk honestly about how it makes you feel. Your child may be reluctant to talk about specific people they know, so make it clear that you are not fishing for information to get someone in trouble.

There is so much on the news today about people misusing prescription drugs. Are you aware of what can happen when people misuse medicine prescribed by doctors?

- If your child is not presently taking any medication, they may question the need to discuss this issue. Explain that people who misuse prescription drugs often don't have a prescription. Friends and family can supply the drugs intentionally or inadvertently, when people leave old prescriptions in their medicine cabinets.

I see that your school has been taking part in a drug prevention program. There is so much in the news right now, and I am not sure I understand all of it. What have you learned from this program?

- This approach can be useful for children who are reluctant to talk about their personal feelings or relationships. Get the conversation started by asking your child to explain factual or scientific knowledge—for example, how opioids relieve pain and cause addiction—and listen for opportunities to ask follow-up questions.

SECTION 5

SKILLS FOR YOUR CHILD

PRACTICE REFUSAL SKILLS

Once you have opened the lines of communication, you have the opportunity to reinforce good decisions. One strategy is to help arm your child with refusal skills to avoid participating in high-risk behaviors. Practicing effective communication can give your child the confidence to remove themselves from uncomfortable environments.

Here are four sets of refusal skills your child could use:

○ Direct Refusal

Introduce the situation of a friend asking your child to come to a party that they need to bring a pill to for entry. Think of firm and convincing resistance strategies with your child. Keep responses short and simple. For example, your child might say, "No, thanks, I don't want to" or "No, thanks."

○ Exit the Situation

Present the situation of a friend offering your child a pill to help with a headache or muscle ache. Help your child brainstorm strategies for exiting the situation when the friend persists. For example, your child might say, "I have to get back to class" or "I need to make a phone call."

○ Rely on Help

Present the situation that your child's friend suggests trying some pills that will make watching a movie more fun. Strategize with your child how to firmly say no and leave. For example, your child might casually go to the restroom and call or text you. You might even set a code word that your child can text that will communicate they need you to get them quickly.

○ The Question Method

This is a way of responding to someone who doesn't accept your "no" answer. Practice scenarios that ask open-ended questions. Here's one example:

Friend 1: Hey, I finally got some pills. Do you want to try?

Friend 2: No, thanks.

Friend 1: Come on, I bet they would make you feel great.

Friend 2: I said no thanks; it's not for me.

Friend 1: But I saw everyone is doing it.

Friend 2: (decides to use the Question Method) Oh? Who's doing it?

Friend 1: Oh. Um, I saw it on one of my apps.

Friend 2: Why does that seem cool to you?

Friend 1: Well... I like how they make me feel.

Friend 2: Why do you need pills to make you feel that way?

This can go on and on, but eventually Friend 1 will be so surprised and/or flustered that they stop pressuring Friend 2.

Invite your child to list the strategies you practiced and order them based on their comfort level with each strategy.

CHOOSING FRIENDS

Teens who hang around with others who are known to use drugs might also be at increased risk, as might teens from families where drug abuse or misuse is present. It's important to know who your child is friends with. It's important to give your child the tools they need to be aware of who they spend their time with and surround themselves with.

First, help your child identify values/attributes (i.e. honesty, sense of humor, integrity, etc.) they possess and those they appreciate in others. Talk to them about things they like to do and the importance of forming relationships with people who also enjoy those same activities. Here are some questions you can ask to open up the conversation on friendships:

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- What do you think makes someone a good friend? Why?
- Who do you think is a good friend? Why?
- What makes you a good friend?

Here are some questions you can use to help your child identify if their current friendships are healthy or not:

- Why are you friends with him/her?
- Do you feel good when you are around them?
- Do you trust them?
- Do you have things in common? What are they?
- Can you be yourself around them?

While it can be hard for your child to let friends go, it is important for them to learn to identify friendships with those who have the same interests and values as them. If your child indicates their friend group may not be the right one for them, help them to focus on the positives in their life and identify other kids in their class/school they can form new friendships with.

COPING WITH ANGER AND STRESS

Uncomfortable emotions such as stress and anger are two of the leading reasons why people use substances. It's important that you understand that stress and anger are perfectly normal things to feel and we can choose the way we react to those emotions.

First, talk with your child about how anger and stress can feel physically. For example, you can experience increased heart rate, sweating, racing thoughts, teeth grinding, etc.

Next, talk with your child about times they have felt these emotions and different situations that can cause these emotions for them. Remind them that those are perfectly normal things to feel and that it is helpful to identify ways to calm down when we are feeling stress or anger.

Ways to cope with anger and stress:

- **Deep breathing**—Walk your child through a deep breathing exercise—have them breathe in for a count of four, hold for a count of four, and breathe out for a count of four. Repeat as necessary.
- **Meditation**—Meditation is the act of sitting straight up in a comfortable position, repeating a positive mantra, and focusing on breathing. There are a lot of phone apps available which walk you through meditation.
- **Journaling**—Your child can have their own journal to write down their thoughts and feelings or you can have a journal together where you write back and forth to each other.
- **Physical activity**—Physical activity releases endorphins which are the “feel good” chemicals of the brain. Encourage your child to go outside and do a physical activity they enjoy.
- **Be present**—This technique is intended to make you aware of the things around you. Have your child identify three things they can currently see, hear, taste, smell, and feel.
- **Listen to relaxing music**—Help your child to identify music that is relaxing to them that they can play to help them calm down and think more clearly.

These are just some ideas for calming down. Come up with a list with your child of techniques that they've tried and liked to cope with stress and anger.

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VALUE OF GOOD HEALTH

Finally, it's important to discuss with your child the importance and benefits of good health. Talk with them about their physical, mental, and emotional health and how maintaining each of these is important in their well-being.

Understanding their health and how the chemicals we put in our bodies can affect our overall health can help them in their decision-making.

When discussing the decisions they make regarding substances, discuss it on a continuum of healthy versus unhealthy rather than right or wrong.

Finally, have your child set some goals regarding their physical, emotional, or mental health. Having goals to work towards is a protective factor against your child trying or using substances.



REACH OUT

Know the substance abuse facilities and other resources in your community. If you discover a problem, immediately contact professionals in your area. Ask your child's physician and school counselors for referrals. The following resources may also be helpful:

- **One Pill Can Kill:** <https://www.dea.gov/onepill>
This site provides updated information about the dangers of fake pills.
- **DrugFree.org: Parent Toolkit:** <https://drugfree.org/get-support/>
This site provides tips to help raise drug-free kids.
- **Drug Enforcement Administration: Prescription for Disaster: How Teens Abuse Medicine:** <https://www.getsmartaboutdrugs.gov/publications>
These publications outline the risks of prescription drug misuse.
- **Drug Enforcement Administration and U.S. Department of Education: Growing Up Drug Free: A Parent Guide to Substance use Prevention:** <http://www.getsmartaboutdrugs.gov/publication/growing-drug-free-parents-guide-substance-use-prevention>
This publication provides a wealth of information on all aspects of the teen drug risk:
- **National Institute on Drug Abuse: Improving Opioid Prescribing:** <https://nida.nih.gov/publications/improving-opioid-prescribing>
This site provides resources specifically about opioids.
- **National Institute on Drug Abuse: Pain Medicine (Oxy, Vike) Facts:** <https://nida.nih.gov/publications/drugfacts/prescription-opioids>
This site provides a wealth of information on opioid and pain drug misuse.
- **Get Smart About Drugs:** <https://www.getsmartaboutdrugs.com/>
This site is a DEA resource that provides information for parents, educators, and caregivers.
- **Disposal of Unused Medicines, What You Should Know:** <https://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/BuyingUsingMedicineSafely/EnsuringSafeUseofMedicine/SafeDisposalofMedicines/ucm186187.htm>

WORKS CONSULTED

<https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/over-counter-medicines>

Each dollar spent on preventing drug abuse can save communities up to five dollars in drug treatment costs.

