

The Addiction Inoculation

What's in it for me? Fortify your kids against substance use and addiction.

Whether we like it or not, these days we have to raise our children surrounded by temptations. Beer manufacturers sponsor sporting events. Movies and music glorify drug use. And that's not to mention the worrying messages kids get from their peers. But we can't bring our kids up in isolation. We can't shelter them from a wider culture steeped in substance use. What we can do is inoculate them against it. These blinks lay out some essential and simple parenting strategies – strategies that form a blueprint for raising healthy kids capable of steering clear of substance use in all its forms. In these blinks, you'll learn

why it's a bad idea to let kids sip alcohol at home; how a strong sense of self-efficacy can stave off substance use; and how to help kids overcome peer pressure.

Substance use is both more attractive and more damaging to teenagers.

Being a teenager is both intense and confusing. On the one hand, your teenage years are profoundly exciting and memorable. On the other, many teens find themselves dealing with troubling new experiences and unfamiliar emotions. All the while, you're doing your best to fit into a shifting social landscape – learning that what was cool last year might be cringeworthy the next. What many people don't realize is that the uniqueness of your teenage years isn't just down to novel experiences, like first love, going to prom, or learning to drive. There are brass-tack issues of cognitive development at play – factors that also make the teenage brain far more vulnerable to substance abuse. This is the key message: Substance use is both more attractive and more damaging to teenagers. The structures in the brain known as the frontal and prefrontal cortexes can explain some of the key differences between teenagers and fully-grown adults. You see, these regions play a key role in setting goals, planning, and strategizing. By your mid-twenties, they should be fully functioning – but in adolescence, they're still largely undeveloped. So, if you have teenagers whose behavior makes you want to pull your hair out, this is likely why. Their decisions are less likely to involve more logical and strategic parts of the brain, parts that we adults often rely on. Instead, they're driven by the limbic system, a collection of structures that process emotions, instincts, memories, and desires. In unscientific terms, this can make teenagers do incredibly stupid shit. Their impulsivity and risky behavior make substance use more likely – and the immaturity of the teenage brain also means that substance use does far greater harm. Abusing substances in your mid-twenties is still a really bad idea, sure – but people who use alcohol and drugs when their brains are fully formed are much less likely to experience the poor mental health and cognitive issues that plague teenage users. So, how can you keep risk-taking teens away from drinking and drugs altogether? The first step is to understand the risk factors that make substance use more likely.

Understanding why children abuse

substances can help you to protect your own kids.

As a parent, it can be comforting to imagine that substance abuse is something that only affects other people's children. Ours are too trustworthy, too well-informed, and too sensible to act so irresponsibly. Right? Wrong. The fact of the matter is that nobody's kids are immune. Don't believe it? Consider these statistics: teenagers are the demographic most likely to abuse stimulants, anti-anxiety drugs, and prescription pain medication – and in any given month, almost one-fifth have engaged in binge drinking. So, it's time to face the facts: acting like your own children are somehow magically immune to addiction isn't helping anyone. The key message here is this: Understanding why children abuse substances can help you to protect your own kids. Although some kids use drugs because they like experimenting, or because they simply enjoy being high, such underage users are actually in the minority. Most minors who drink or use drugs say they do it in order to feel better: to relax, to sleep, to decrease their anxiety and cope with life's problems. In short, most underage substance users are trying to self-medicate. It's an upsetting thought, but it's one we can use to our advantage. If kids generally use substances to cope with stress and trauma, then we can reduce the risk that they'll use by ensuring their psychological well-being. That's more easily said than done, of course – but the main point to bear in mind here is that substance use is linked to ACEs, or Adverse Childhood Events. These events run the gamut from severe abuse and neglect to more common experiences like separation or divorce. If you can protect your children from experiences like these while they're young, then you lower the risk they'll develop substance use issues down the line. But if you can't protect your child from every risk – say, from witnessing substance abuse in the home – then consider calling in reinforcements: professional help in the form of counseling. By minimizing the psychological harm your children experience, you make forms of mental escape, like drink and drugs, seem far less appealing.

Ban sipping - and capitalize on natural consequences.

Jessica Lahey, the author and a recovered alcoholic herself, spends each Sunday night at a twelve-step meeting in the basement of a church in Vermont. What fascinates her most at these gatherings are the other participants' stories – especially the recovering addicts' accounts of their very first experiences with drugs or alcohol. What led up to that first drink or puff? And what could have averted it? As a mother who wants to protect her own kids, these are the questions that resonate for Lahey as she listens. By listening, the author has come to realize that the household isn't just a place where risks arise. With the right rules, it can also be a place that fosters resilience and strength. But what rules should families enforce? Here's the key message: Ban sipping – and capitalize on consequences. Between one-fifth and one-half of all parents think that allowing kids to sip on alcohol at home will prevent reckless drinking down the line. As a result, many families adopt a somewhat lax and confusing attitude toward drinking – permitting certain amounts in certain situations, and forbidding it in others. Are they right? Unfortunately, no. One study found that sipping at home makes teenage drinking no less likely – in fact, it increases the odds that kids will turn into regular drinkers. So, how can families discourage drinking among their underage children? Well, one way is

to make sure children experience the natural consequences of their actions. Obviously, that doesn't mean that you should let your child develop a drug habit so that she learns just how debilitating addiction is. But if your teenager's drinking results in nausea, a hangover, or some other minor trouble, help her to draw the dots between her behavior and its ramifications. Sometimes punishments are necessary, but when it comes to changing behaviors, the best teacher is life itself. Natural consequences like these teach kids that rules aren't arbitrary: they're designed to prevent the bad decisions that lead to harmful outcomes.

A strong sense of self-efficacy can help kids avoid addiction.

Do you remember what it felt like to master a new skill as a kid – the thrill of riding a bike for the first time, or reading without anyone else's help? Well, that unmistakable sense of elation, satisfaction, and competence is at the heart of what psychologists call self-efficacy – the belief that one has the ability to succeed in life, by adapting to new circumstances and overcoming obstacles. People with a weak sense of self-efficacy are pessimistic and prone to feelings of helplessness, while those with a strong sense of self-efficacy are resilient, confident, and driven – and most importantly for us, they're also less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol. The key message here is: A strong sense of self-efficacy can help kids avoid addiction. In schools, the best substance abuse prevention programs focus on developing a sense of self-efficacy in students – but there's no reason this shouldn't be part of home life, too. So where to start? To put it simply, start with yourself. One of the best ways to develop a sense of self-efficacy in your children is by modeling it for them. For example, instead of saying, "I can't" about something, start saying, "I can't yet." It's a small difference, but it tells your kids that the skills we lack right now can still be developed over time – ability isn't something we're just born with. To drive that point home, teach your children skills. It's not enough to tell your kids that they can develop their abilities, you need to help them do it for real. Set your kids age-appropriate tasks that are hard enough to challenge them but not so hard that they become completely discouraged. Finally, praise your kids carefully. To develop a sense of self-efficacy, the praise kids hear needs to be specific – simply saying "Well done!" is useless. Instead, make it very clear what exactly it is that your child has done well, saying something like, "I was very proud of your inventiveness when you managed to solve that math problem."

Start talking early, stay connected, and don't forget to listen to your kids.

Family dinners aren't always a walk in the park. There are schedules to juggle, timers to set, phones to answer, and homework to be done: it's no wonder that the urge to eat in front of the TV can sometimes prove irresistible. But you should resist anyway. Fostering trust through communication with your kids is vital in helping them steer clear of substance abuse – and the dinner table is the ideal place for these discussions. In fact, Joseph Califano, founder of the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, says that having dinner together is one of the most important things families can do to avert all sorts of risky behaviors, including drug and alcohol use. This is the key message: Start talking early, stay connected, and don't forget to listen to your kids.

When it comes to discussing alcohol and drug use with your kids, the most important thing is to start, and start early. You shouldn't wait until a crisis makes a discussion inevitable: instead, aim to be talking about substance use, in an age-appropriate manner, from elementary school onward. Now, trying to foster a dialogue that can span years isn't easy. One key thing to remember is that these conversations aren't about proving yourself right. After all, you're trying to help your kids, not debate them. So from time to time, you might need to ask yourself which is more important – being right, or maintaining a trusting dialogue with your child? Finally, there's no point staying connected to your kids if you're not actually going to listen to them. When it comes to substance abuse prevention, lectures don't work – communication goes both ways. What's more, listening to your kids will help you to identify warning signs. Do they seem relaxed about drug and alcohol use? Do they mention friends who drink, or whose parents treat alcohol use too casually? If so, don't overlook it. These offhand comments can help you get a better picture of your child's attitudes regarding substance use, and the likelihood they might drink or do drugs down the line.

If you want your kids to resist peer pressure, equip them with both perspective and scripts.

Peer pressure is the nemesis of parents the world over, and the complaint is always the same: if only kids listened to you instead of their friends, if only they cared less about being cool and fitting in – then you could rest easy. But instead, you're afraid. You're afraid that every ounce of wisdom you impart is being undermined by some bad influence during lunch break. Afraid that if your son is offered a bottle of beer, he'll be too timid to refuse it. Afraid that your daughter might smoke weed again if that troublesome friend of hers insists. If these worries sound familiar, you're not alone, and you're not being irrational – friends do exert a powerful influence on teenagers' attitudes and actions. But thankfully, peer pressure can be overcome. The key message here is: If you want your kids to resist peer pressure, equip them with both perspective and scripts. For all of the hand-wringing parents do about peer pressure, too few actually prepare children to resist it. If you want your kid to show some backbone and refuse whatever substances they're offered, then you need to make things easy for them. In other words, you need to equip them with some tools. One of the most important tools for kids is a sense of perspective. Too often, they buy into the false belief that everyone's doing it – whether it refers to smoking, drinking, or taking drugs. If your child ever parrots this argument, take the opportunity to make it clear that most kids don't smoke, drink, or use drugs – the impression that everyone else doing it is a total illusion. Secondly, take the time to equip your kids with ready-made scripts they can rely on in intimidating situations. In other words, help them come up with convincing responses when they're refusing to partake. If a simple no won't do, they can offer to be the designated driver. If they don't drive, they can say their parents test them for alcohol and drugs. Equipping your child to resist peer pressure means you can rest a bit more easily knowing that you've bolstered your child against a powerful and often destructive force.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: Because of the way the human brain develops, substance use is particularly attractive to adolescents – but at their age, it’s also uniquely damaging. Protecting your kids from adverse childhood experiences will reduce the likelihood they’ll use alcohol or drugs down the line, as will maintaining a candid and trusting dialogue with them. Beyond that, do your best to give them a strong sense of self-efficacy – and equip them to deal with peer pressure before they encounter it. And here’s some more actionable advice: Have a code word your kids can use when they need a ride. If your child finds herself in a threatening situation, she might not always feel able to let you know. She might be concerned that peers will overhear a phone call, for example, and tease her for wanting to leave – or she might not want a friend to spot her text message and take offense. Either way, agreeing on a code word, or code emoji, can solve the problem. Simply dropping it into conversation is your kid’s way of saying, “I’d like to leave – please, come and get me.”