



Making the Best of the School Year

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What are the characteristics of youth who are most and least at-risk of becoming involved with drugs and other risky activities? What can parents do to help their kids stay on a good path?

Characteristics of youth most at risk for drug abuse

They begin drinking before the age of 15. In the past, researchers believed that if children learned to drink with their families at home, they would be less at risk. This is no longer true. Early drinking — in or out of the home — may lead to later drug use.

- “Be Smart, Don’t Start” — is good advice for children and youth.

They lack social skills.

- The easiest group to belong to is the one which uses drugs. Help your child develop the social skills that will promote feeling comfortable with peers.
- “Fitting in with other kids” is one of the main reasons 4-6th graders give for starting to use drugs. They believe that “everyone is doing it” — even though that’s not true.

They are unsupervised for large amounts of time.

- Unmonitored, unsupervised time is one of the highest risk factors for children and youth. The period when kids get home from school and before their parents get home from work can be especially risky.

They do poorly and have little interest in school.

- When your child has trouble in school, talk with teachers to let them know how important to you it is that your child do well. Ask the teachers to help you and your child develop a plan so your child can succeed in school.

They don’t participate in after-school activities.

- Special activities sponsored by the school and other community organizations give children an opportunity to work and develop friendships with others their age. Encourage your child to sign up for clubs and groups that are interesting to him/her.
- If your school and/or community doesn’t offer after-school activities such as drama, music, sports, and peer counseling, ask other parents to go with you to the principal or community center director to see if such activities can be offered.

They spend most of their free time with peers.

- Youth with strong bonds to their family and school are less likely to become involved with drug-using friends. Part of growing up is to spend more time with friends and less time with family. Yet, too much time with friends — especially unsupervised time — can lead to problems.

They experience mental health issues

- Young people struggling with mental health challenges like depression or anxiety may use drugs as a way to cope with difficult emotions.

They have a family history of drug misuse.

- Individuals with a family history of drug misuse are at a higher risk of developing similar issues themselves due to genetic factors, exposure to substance use, and potential issues with parenting caused by a caregiver's drug use.

Are kids who have these characteristics doomed to abuse drugs?

- No! When researchers study large groups of kids, the above risk factors emerge. Having one, two or all the characteristics doesn't mean a child will end up abusing drugs. However, when children do have some of these characteristics, it is especially important to encourage them toward the behaviors that will help them stay away from drugs.

Characteristics of youth least at risk of drug abuse

They have conversations with their family about drug and alcohol misuse

- Talking openly and honestly with your child about drugs and alcohol early on can help prevent future use. Starting these conversations sooner rather than later is important, as the risk of substance use increases with age. Avoiding the topic may unintentionally signal that experimenting with drugs or alcohol is acceptable.

They have strong bonds to their family and school.

Their parents spend time with their children each day, if possible.

- These parents let their children know they are important to them. They spend time listening to what their children have to say. When their children seem worried, these parents let them know they are willing to listen and help them talk about and solve their problems.

Their parents let their love shine through. It's not always easy to love children and teens — they regularly fall short of what we expect and would hope for them.

- But every day children need to know that no matter how awful they have been, their parents love them. Hugs and kisses and “I love you!” are important to everyone — no matter what their age.

Their parents know what their children are doing and who they are with.

- As they grow older, children are easily offended when parents “pry” into their

business. It takes all of the diplomacy parents can muster to help children know that they are interested and concerned about them and want to know what they are doing, who they will be with, and when they will return home.

Their parents set clear limits for behavior.

- Parents of youth who are least at risk usually have rules about homework, television use, curfew, drugs and alcohol. While these parents may appear to be more strict than others, they are not harsh.
- Teens were asked, “If you came home from a party and your parents found out that you had been drinking, how upset would they be?” The more teens believed that their parents would be very upset, the less likely they were to use alcohol or drugs.
- Parents of youth who are most at risk sometimes do not discipline their children at all, or they punish a behavior today and ignore it tomorrow. That makes it hard for children to learn how to act.

Their parents use praise and encouragement to reinforce good behavior.

- “You were in a tough spot, and you really handled it well. I am so proud of the way you are growing up.”
- “Do you ever look great today! Nice colors.”
- “One of the things I like most about you...”
- Parents of youth who are least at risk use very little punishment. In contrast, parents of youth most at risk use punishment constantly and rarely praise their child. Unfortunately, these parents ignore good behavior and spend most of their time punishing bad behavior.

Their parents model good problem-solving skills.

- Parents help children see that using drugs and alcohol doesn't get the problem solved. When problems come up, teach problem-solving skills. Help children learn to (1) identify problems, (2) think of all the possible solutions, and then (3) set to work to fix the problem.

They have realistic expectations for their child.

- One of the toughest things for children is being pressured to work at a higher level than they are capable, especially in school. It's also tough to be expected to act like a 25-year-old when you're only 13.
- Teens can be very obnoxious, but they are usually trying their best to grow up and become adults.

They help their children develop strong self-concepts and strong social skills.

- Parents can encourage their children to develop interests and skills that help youngsters feel good about themselves. It's important that children learn how to get along with others and how to cope with the anxiety and tension that everyone experiences from time to time.

Can you drug-proof your child?

- If you do everything “right,” does that mean your children won't use drugs? No. Parents who try their very best have children who get involved with drugs.

Parents can't fight drugs alone.

- Parents need help from the schools and others in the community to help kids learn that they are expected to grow up healthy and drug-free.

Parents are powerful.

- Parents can't do it alone, but they are one of the most important parts in the fight against drugs. Parents are the most powerful force in helping their children avoid the drug scene. Helping your children learn how to make healthy decisions will pay off well in the future.

References

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