

Parenting the Preschooler

 **Working for Wisconsin Families**

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Preventing Alcohol Abuse Starts Early

Any child can be at risk for alcohol or other drug problems. Prevention starts now with your preschooler.

Alcohol and drug use are beginning at increasingly earlier ages. Children as young as 4th grade report peer pressure to try alcohol. The proportion of students who believe that other kids their age have already tried alcohol or other drugs increases with each grade level. It is this "everyone else is trying it" perception that sometimes leads kids to early use.

Scary? That's one word for it, but another word is "preventable." Peer pressure is a risk factor especially for pre-adolescent children, but parents are still considered to be the **greatest influence** in their children's lives.

There are "strategies" which parents can use when children are very young, before peer influence sets in, which seem to act as "protective factors."

1. Be a good role model. Young children are great imitators - it's part of their job! Consider how your attitudes about alcohol, tobacco, caffeine, prescription medicines and over-the-counter drugs influence your child. Also, be aware of the attitudes your child may be picking up from others - baby sitters, adult family, friends and relatives.

2. Take advantage of teachable moments. Use everyday opportunities to teach about appropriate/proper drug use. When your child gets sick and has to take prescription medicine, saying the following may be helpful: "The doctor told me to give you this medicine to help you get better. Following doctor's orders and the drug store rules are the only

way to use medicine to get better. Otherwise, it's dangerous and could make you sicker."

In our pill - popping society, children also sometimes get the message that there's a pill for everything and that it's not okay to feel even a little discomfort. Consider this when you use over-the-counter medications. If a child sees mom or dad go for a walk to get rid of a headache as opposed to taking a pill, a child will register that medicine is important but there may be other things you can do to feel better.

3. Build your child's self-esteem. Help children feel good about themselves by emphasizing what they do right! Be supportive of your children when they make mistakes. Help them recognize we all make mistakes, but what is important is to think about the mistake, and try to do better next time.

4. Listen to and help them "name" their feelings. If children feel free to express their true feelings, they are more likely to feel accepted. Children who value themselves are able to get along with others and withstand disappointments. Encourage your child to take responsibility for their feelings and discuss positive ways to cope with them. A child who can express feelings and find ways to manage them is less likely to seek emotional relief through unhealthy ways later on.

5. Set firm and clear limits. Children need to be clear about what behaviors are acceptable. Firm, reasonable limits help them know their environment is dependable and secure. Just as you would tell your child not to accept a ride from strangers or never play with matches, you can tell them that

smoking or drinking are not acceptable behaviors for them. Let your child know clearly what your standards are and the reasons for those standards to the extent they are old enough to understand.

6. Teach your child values such as honesty, self-reliance, responsibility and cooperation. Give your child meaningful tasks for which they are responsible to build a strong self-image. Make sure young children are capable of doing the tasks. Help and encourage them along, praising their efforts. Instill a value of cooperation and "putting themselves in the other person's shoes" to help them learn to be considerate of other people.

7. Help them learn to make choices. Your child can learn important decision-making skills if you let them make choices whenever possible. Their "choice" can be between two alternatives that are acceptable to you. What shirt to wear: the red one or the blue one. Which box to put their toys in? etc. Making choices helps them to feel useful and important and sets the stage for important decisions they will be making later on such as whether or not to give in to peer pressure. Let your child practice making decisions often. Help them think about choices and consequences.

8. Teach your child their bodies are "one-of-a-kind!" The suggested approach here is to set an example they will try to imitate. Get regular exercise you enjoy and will continue. Try to eat balanced meals and keep junk food to a minimum. Engage your child's help in preparing healthy snacks. Learn to recognize stress and handle it in constructive ways. Avoid using alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs to relieve tension, stress, unhappiness or boredom. Children learn more from what they see us do than from what we say.

9. Teach your child to play and have fun. Teach them to enjoy creative and healthy activities and help them learn to do something well. Children who are confident and know how to have fun in healthy ways, may be less likely to experiment with alcohol or other drugs later in order to have fun or reduce boredom.

10. Love your child unconditionally and tell them often! Provide lots of support and encouragement. Do things together individually and as a family. Family traditions, meals, and other activities help a child feel secure and valued. Children who grow up in nurturing family relationships are less likely to become involved in alcohol or drug use.

All of these strategies can act as "protective factors." Be encouraged that beginning these activities now and doing them consistently can help your children avoid becoming involved with alcohol or other drug use later on. For further information regarding other prevention activities, "Growing up Drug Free - A Parent's Guide to Prevention" is available free by calling 1-800-624-0100.

Alcohol and other drug use can affect Mom or Dad's ability to be the kind of parent they want to be. When alcohol or drug abuse is present in a family, parenting is often inconsistent and can sometimes feel like a burden. A child who grows up in a family where alcoholism or other drug abuse is present, can feel confused, isolated and insecure. Even very young children are affected. If you are concerned that someone in the life of your child has a drinking or drug problem, know that you are not alone and that help is available. It's often hard to recognize when "use" has become "abuse" or "dependency." Information from a professional may be helpful: Koller Behavioral Health Services, Crandon (715-478-3524), Eagle River (715-479-4585), Minocqua (715-356-2131), or Dickinson/Iron Substance Abuse Services, Inc., Iron Mountain (906-774-2561), Iron River (906-265-9911). Or you might want to attend a meeting of a support group such as AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) or AL/ANON. It will make a big difference in your life and in the life of your child.

Sources:

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