# Keeping Kids Safe

## A GUIDE TO DRUG AND ALCOHOL PREVENTION

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# Why Most Teens Don't Use Drugs

## Positive choices are more common than many people realize.

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Conversations about substance abuse often focus on worst-case scenarios. While it's important to understand the risks of drugs and alcohol, there's another story worth telling: most young people are making healthy choices every day.

Research consistently shows that most teenagers do not use illicit drugs, and many types of youth substance use have declined over time. Knowing that can make a difference. Young people are more likely to make positive choices when they understand that those choices are the norm, not the exception.

### HEALTHY CHOICES ARE MORE COMMON THAN YOU THINK

It's easy to assume "everyone is doing it," especially when social media, movies and news stories often highlight risky behaviors. In reality, most teens are choosing not to use drugs, and many are delaying or avoiding alcohol and nicotine as well.

Experts call this correcting "misperceptions of social norms." When young people realize that most of their peers are making healthy decisions, they often feel less pressure to experiment simply to fit in.

Parents, teachers and community leaders can reinforce this message by celebrating positive choices instead of focusing only on negative consequences.

### PREVENTION IS ABOUT BUILDING STRENGTH

Today's prevention efforts focus on more than simply telling young people to avoid drugs. Researchers have identified several "protective factors" that reduce the likelihood of substance use.

Strong family relationships, supportive adults, involvement in school or community activities, healthy friendships and opportunities to develop confidence all help build resilience. These protective factors don't guarantee that someone will never struggle, but they provide important tools for navigating stress and peer pressure.

Teaching healthy coping skills, encouraging open conversations and helping young people find activities they enjoy can all support lifelong well-being.

### EVERY POSITIVE CHOICE MATTERS

Substance use prevention isn't about perfection. It's about creating environments where young people feel connected, supported and capable of making healthy decisions.

Every encouraging conversation, trusted mentor, family meal, team practice, music lesson or volunteer opportunity helps strengthen the foundation for good choices.

Red Ribbon Week reminds us that prevention isn't built on fear. It's built on hope. By recognizing the healthy decisions most young people are already making and continuing to invest in supportive families, schools and communities, we can help even more youth grow into healthy, resilient adults.

# Connections Aid Healthy Choices

Substance use prevention isn't just about teaching young people what to avoid. Research shows it's equally important to help them build the relationships, skills and experiences that support healthy decision-making.

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Experts call these influences protective factors. They are the people, places and opportunities that help children and teens develop confidence, resilience and a sense of belonging. While no single factor guarantees someone will never struggle, the more protective factors a young person has, the better equipped they are to navigate life's challenges.

## RELATIONSHIPS BUILD RESILIENCE

One of the strongest protective factors is having caring, supportive adults in a child's life. Parents and caregivers play an important role, but trusted teachers, coaches, grandparents, mentors and family friends can also make a lasting difference.

Young people who know they have someone to turn to are often more willing to ask for help when they're facing stress, peer pressure or difficult decisions.

Open communication is just as important. Regular conversations about school, friendships and everyday life build trust long before serious issues arise. When children know they'll be heard without immediate judgment, they're more likely to seek guidance when they need it.

## FINDING A PLACE TO BELONG

Feeling connected to school and the community protects against substance use. Students who feel valued by teachers, participate in extracurricular activities or volunteer in their communities often develop stronger social connections and a greater sense of purpose.

Sports, music, theater, clubs, faith communities and volunteer organizations all provide opportunities to develop friendships, build confidence and discover new interests. These activities give young people healthy ways to manage stress and celebrate achievements.

Protective factors don't require expensive programs or packed schedules. Even simple family routines, shared meals or regular time together can strengthen relationships and provide stability.

## SMALL MOMENTS MATTER

Building protective factors isn't about creating a perfect childhood. It's about consistently providing encouragement, connection and opportunities to grow.

Every supportive conversation, every trusted mentor and every chance for a young person to develop new skills adds another layer of resilience.

During Red Ribbon Week, it's worth remembering that prevention is about more than saying "no" to drugs. It's about saying "yes" to healthy relationships, meaningful activities and caring communities that help young people thrive.

By investing in these everyday connections, families, schools and neighborhoods can help children build the confidence and resilience they'll carry with them for years to come.

# Shaping Healthy Behaviors

Have you ever brushed your teeth without really thinking about it? Or automatically buckled your seat belt as soon as you got into a car?

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Those everyday actions are examples of habits, behaviors that become more automatic through repetition.

Our brains are built to create habits because they help us navigate daily life more efficiently. The same process that helps us remember healthy routines can make unhealthy behaviors harder to change. Understanding how habits form can help young people build routines that support their health and well-being.

## HABITS START SMALL

Many people imagine habits appear overnight, but they usually develop one small step at a time.

Researchers have found that habits often follow a simple pattern: a cue, a routine and a reward. For example, a student may come home from school (the cue), go for a walk or practice an instrument (the routine), and feel more relaxed afterward (the reward). Over time, the brain begins to associate the cue with the positive outcome, making the behavior easier to repeat.

This is why healthy routines don't require perfect motivation every day. The more often we practice them, the more automatic they become.

## HEALTHY HABITS BUILD RESILIENCE

Good habits do more than save time. They strengthen the skills needed to make healthy decisions.

Regular sleep, physical activity, nutritious meals, spending time with supportive friends and managing stress in healthy ways all create routines that support both physical and mental health. These habits can improve mood, reduce stress and make it easier to respond thoughtfully instead of impulsively when challenges arise.

Building healthy habits creates confidence. Every positive choice reinforces the belief that future healthy choices are possible.

## PROGRESS MATTERS MORE THAN PERFECTION

One of the biggest misconceptions about habits is that missing one day means you've failed.

In reality, everyone has days when routines are interrupted. The key is to begin again.

Instead of focusing on dramatic changes, experts encourage starting with small, realistic goals.

Reading for 10 minutes, taking a short walk, putting away screens before bedtime or practicing a hobby for a few minutes each day can all become meaningful habits over time.

Substance abuse prevention isn't built on one big decision. It's built through hundreds of small choices that gradually become part of everyday life.

By helping young people understand how habits work, families, schools and communities can empower them to create routines that support healthy minds, healthy bodies and a healthy future.

# Rest Helps Make Better Decisions

When life gets busy, sleep is often one of the first things to go.

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Homework, sports, jobs, activities and screen time all compete with a good night's rest. But getting enough sleep is about much more than feeling alert the next day. It plays an important role in supporting mental health, emotional well-being and healthy decision-making.

Research shows that sleep helps the brain regulate emotions, solve problems and control impulses. For children and teens, whose brains are still developing, healthy sleep habits are an important part of overall wellness.

The National Institutes of Health report that a lack of sleep is linked to a smaller volume of gray matter in the parts of the brain that are responsible for memory, attention and inhibition control. It also reports that sleep-deprived youth display higher rates of impulsivity, stress, anxiety, depression and aggressive behavior.

## SLEEP SUPPORTS A HEALTHY BRAIN

During sleep, the brain processes memories, strengthens learning and prepares for the next day's challenges. When young people don't get enough sleep, they may have a harder time concentrating, managing stress or thinking through decisions.

Sleep deprivation can affect mood. Teens who are consistently sleep-deprived may become more irritable, anxious or emotionally overwhelmed. While poor sleep doesn't cause substance use, it can make it more difficult to cope with stress and resist impulsive choices.

Getting enough rest helps the brain work the way it's designed to, making it easier to handle everyday challenges.

## HEALTHY HABITS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

The American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommends that school-age children and teenagers get the amount of sleep appropriate for their age, with teens typically needing 8 to 10 hours each night.

Families can encourage healthy sleep habits by establishing regular bedtimes and wake-up times, even on weekends. Creating a relaxing bedtime routine and limiting screens before bed can make it easier to fall asleep.

Physical activity during the day, exposure to natural daylight and avoiding caffeine late in the day can further support healthy sleep.

## REST IS PART OF PREVENTION

Substance use prevention isn't built around a single conversation or one school program. It's supported by everyday habits that strengthen physical and emotional health.

Sleep is one of those habits. Along with healthy relationships, regular exercise, balanced nutrition and positive activities, adequate sleep helps young people build resilience and navigate life's ups and downs.

During Red Ribbon Week, remember that prevention isn't only about avoiding harmful substances. It's also about giving children and teens the tools they need to thrive.

A good night's sleep may not seem like a prevention strategy, but it's one of the simplest ways to support a healthy brain, sound decision-making and long-term well-being.

# Beyond ‘Just Say No’

Most young people will face peer pressure at some point, whether it’s an offer to vape, drink alcohol or try another substance.

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While “Just say no” has been a familiar message for decades, today’s prevention experts recognize that refusing can be more complicated than simply saying one word.

The good news is that refusal is a skill, and like any skill, it becomes easier with practice.

Having a plan can help young people respond with confidence while protecting friendships and avoiding uncomfortable situations.

## KEEP IT SIMPLE

One of the most effective responses is also one of the shortest.

A simple “No thanks,” “I’m good,” or “That’s not my thing” is often enough. Most people won’t push the issue, especially when the response is calm and confident.

If someone continues to pressure them, young people don’t owe a lengthy explanation. Repeating their answer or changing the subject can help end the conversation without creating conflict.

Another helpful strategy is to have a reason ready, such as an early practice, a game the next day or family plans. Whether the reason is sports, work, a hobby or simply wanting to feel their best, having an answer prepared can make saying no feel more natural.

## CHOOSE FRIENDS WHO RESPECT YOUR CHOICES

Healthy friendships are built on respect.

True friends won’t pressure someone to do something that makes them uncomfortable. If someone repeatedly ignores boundaries or makes fun of another person’s decision to stay drug-free, it may be time to reconsider whether that friendship is supportive.

It’s OK to leave a situation that doesn’t feel safe. Having an exit plan, arranging a ride with a trusted adult or agreeing on a code word with a parent or caregiver can help young people remove themselves from uncomfortable situations without embarrassment.

## CONFIDENCE GROWS WITH PRACTICE

Role-playing conversations at home or in school may feel awkward at first, but practicing common situations can make real-life decisions much easier. Just as athletes practice before a game, young people can prepare for challenging conversations before they happen.

Most importantly, remind children and teens that they are not alone. Parents, teachers, coaches and other trusted adults are there to help them navigate difficult situations and make healthy choices.

Prevention is about building confidence, not fear. By helping young people develop practical refusal skills and surrounding them with supportive friends and caring adults, communities can empower them to make decisions they’ll feel good about today and in the future.

# What Makes a Trusted Adult?

Every child and teenager needs at least one trusted adult they can turn to when life becomes confusing, stressful or overwhelming.

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While parents and caregivers often fill that role, trusted adults can also be grandparents, teachers, coaches, school counselors, neighbors, faith leaders or family friends.

Research has found that having supportive relationships with caring adults is one of the strongest protective factors against risky behaviors, including substance use. Knowing someone is ready to listen can help young people feel less alone and more confident asking for help.

## WHAT DOES A TRUSTED ADULT LOOK LIKE?

A trusted adult isn't someone who has all the answers. Instead, they're someone who makes a young person feel heard, respected and safe.

Trusted adults listen without immediately judging or criticizing. They keep conversations calm, ask thoughtful questions and let children know it's okay to talk about mistakes, worries or difficult feelings.

Just as importantly, trusted adults are dependable. They follow through on promises, make time to connect and show up consistently over time. Trust is built through everyday interactions, not just during major life events.

Young people should understand that trusted adults help keep them safe. Sometimes that means involving another responsible adult if someone is at risk of being harmed. Seeking additional help isn't a betrayal of trust. It's an important part of caring for someone.

## BECOMING SOMEONE KIDS CAN CONFIDE IN

Adults don't have to be perfect to become trusted mentors. Small actions often make the biggest difference.

Take time to ask about a child's interests. Attend games, concerts or school events when possible. Listen more than you speak. Avoid rushing to solve every problem before hearing the whole story.

According to a 2025 study in Children and Youth Services Review, the qualities teens look for in adults when deciding to trust them are reliability and traits that encourage seeking advice and guidance.

When children share something difficult, thank them for trusting you. Even if a conversation is uncomfortable, responding with patience and compassion helps build confidence that they can come to you again.

Talk about difficult topics before there's a crisis. Regular conversations about friendships, stress, mental health and substance use create a foundation of trust that makes future discussions easier.

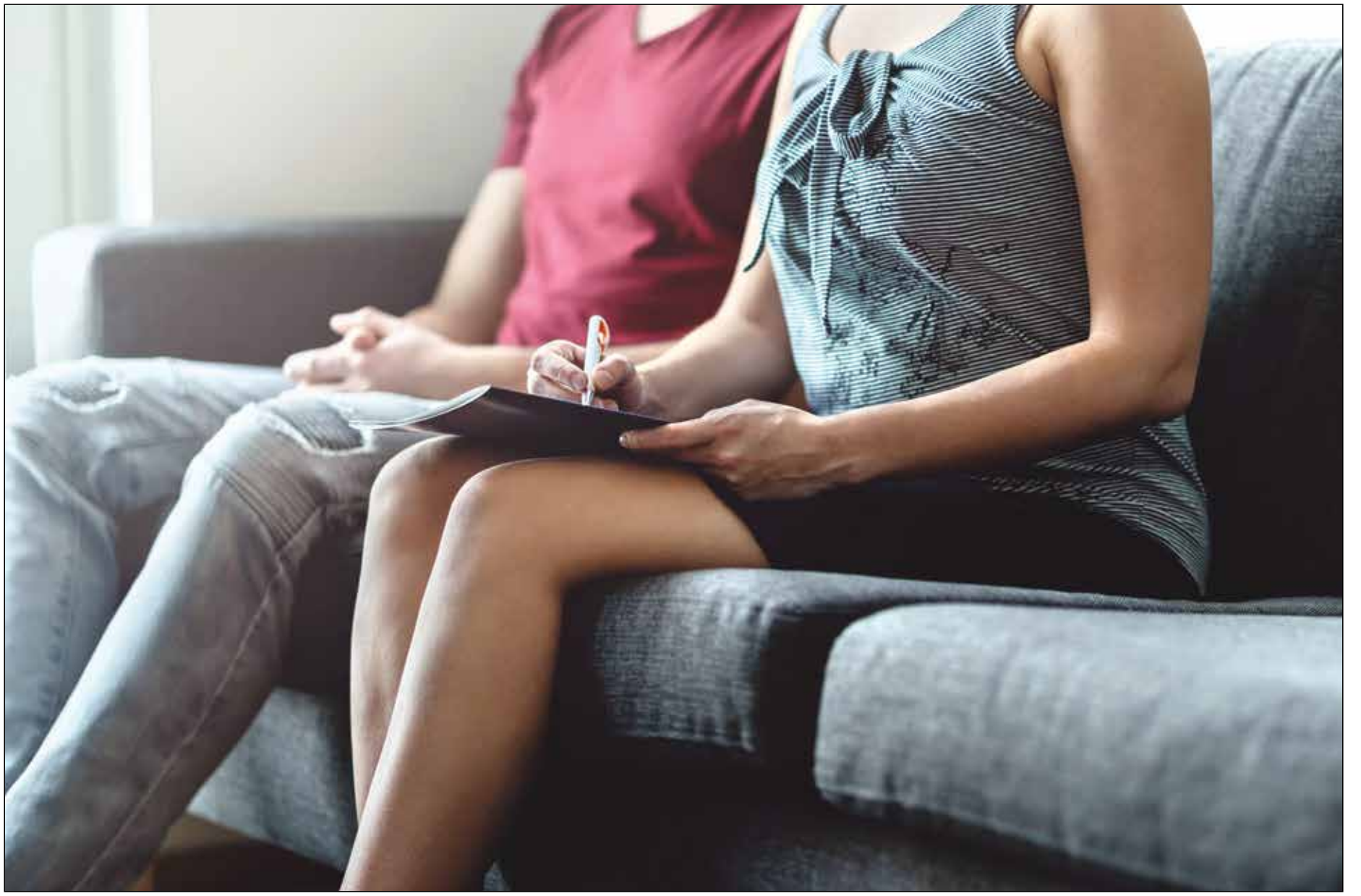
## A CHILD NEEDS A TEAM

No single adult can meet every need, and that's okay. Many young people benefit from having several trusted adults in their lives, each offering encouragement, guidance and support in different ways.

Prevention begins with connection. Helping children identify trusted adults and encouraging adults to become reliable, caring mentors, families and communities can create a network of support that helps young people make healthy choices for a lifetime.

# Seeking Substance Abuse Help

Reaching out for help with a substance use disorder can feel overwhelming, but no one has to face the journey alone.



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Whether someone is concerned about their own substance use or is worried about a friend or family member, taking that first step can open the door to support, treatment and hope.

Substance use disorders are medical conditions that can affect people of all ages and backgrounds. Like other health conditions, they can be treated, and many people go on to live healthy, fulfilling lives in recovery.

## ASKING FOR HELP IS THE BEGINNING

Treatment doesn't look the same for everyone. The first step is often talking with a trusted adult, primary care provider, school counselor or mental health professional. They can help assess the situation and recommend the most appropriate resources.

Some people benefit from outpatient counseling, where they continue living at home while attending regular therapy sessions. Others may need more intensive treatment through day programs or residential care, especially if they have developed a physical dependence on alcohol or certain drugs.

Treatment plans may include counseling, family support, peer support groups and, in some cases, medications that help reduce cravings or manage withdrawal symptoms. Mental health conditions such as anxiety or depression may be treated at the same time, since they often occur alongside substance use disorders.

## RECOVERY IS A PROCESS

Recovery isn't a single event. It's a journey that takes time, support and patience.

Along the way, people learn healthy coping skills, identify triggers, rebuild relationships and develop routines that support long-term wellness. Families often play an important role in recovery by offering encouragement, understanding and stability.

Like many chronic health conditions, recovery may include setbacks. A return to substance use does not mean treatment has failed. Instead, it may be a signal that additional support or a different approach is needed. The important thing is to keep moving forward and continue seeking help.

## HOPE IS ALWAYS POSSIBLE

One of the biggest barriers to treatment is stigma. Some people worry they will be judged or believe they should be able to overcome substance use on their own. In reality, seeking help is an act of courage.

Communities can help by encouraging healthy choices, supporting those in recovery and treating substance use disorders with the same compassion shown to anyone facing a medical challenge.

No matter where someone is on their journey, hope is never out of reach, and help is available.