

# Guide to talking about Alcohol or Other Drugs

Having honest, open conversations about alcohol or other drugs is a key way to protect our children from harm related to substance use. Offering a balanced and realistic perspective helps young people choose what kind of relationship they want to have with alcohol and drugs.

As parents, when we are honest about how we think or feel about alcohol or drug use and why we feel that way, we are better able to have meaningful discussions with our children. And young people are more likely to explore ideas and disclose what they are thinking when offered a realistic way of looking at things.

The goal is to get our children—no matter what their age—talking and sharing their thoughts and feelings. With this in mind, here are some basic things to think about when talking about alcohol or other drugs.

## Talk when it makes sense

Every child is different, so there is no “right time” to start the conversation. But engaging children early in open exchange about the things that touch their lives is a helpful way to help them address those things.

There is no rule about how or where a conversation about alcohol or other drugs should start. Even young children know alcohol is a part of our culture. They see people drinking around them and are exposed to alcohol on TV and in advertising. This makes it a subject that can be brought up naturally while getting ready for a family celebration where alcohol will be present, or while watching a movie together, or while swapping stories at the dinner table about what happened at work and school that day.

Talking with teens and young adults about alcohol or other drugs as they make choices on the path into adulthood helps them to develop personal standards, minimize risks and critically assess popular assumptions about substance use. This can be particularly important as they transition to the legal drinking age and move out of the family home. While young adults have more independence and more legal rights, parents can continue to be an important sounding board on which to try their thoughts and ideas.

## Think before reacting

If we discover our teen has been using alcohol or other drugs, the most helpful response is still calm and open conversation. It is important not to let our concerns and fears destroy our relationship with our child.

- Stay calm. Yelling and making threats will not help the situation. If anything, it may give a young person a reason to hide things.
- Wait for the right time. A thoughtful conversation is likely not possible while a teen is intoxicated or high. So address immediate safety needs and wait until later to have a talk.
- Listen more than talk. We can start by owning our own concern and saying, “I’m worried because...” or “I’m afraid because...” We then need to give them an opportunity to express their own feelings, making sure they know they are being listened to.

## Things to talk about

When we talk with our children about their use of alcohol or other drugs, it makes sense to explore their behaviour, the reasons for it, ways to manage risk and safer alternatives.

### Reasons

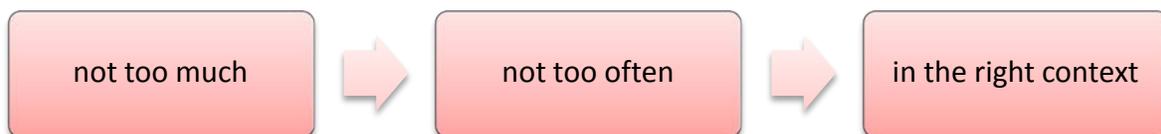
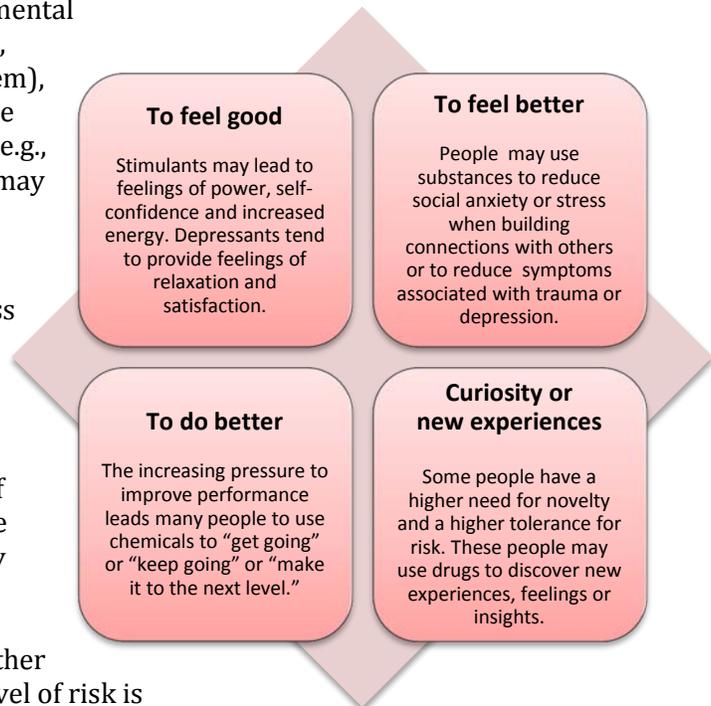
The reasons we use alcohol or other drugs influence our pattern of use and risk of harmful consequences. If it is out of curiosity, only occasional or experimental use may follow. If the motivation is ongoing (e.g., relieving a chronic sleep or mental health problem), then more long-lasting and intense substance use may follow. Motives for intense short-term use (e.g., to fit in, have fun or alleviate temporary stress) may result in risky behaviour with high potential for acute harm.

Exploring the reasons together can help us assess the situation and may help the child better understand their own behaviour.

### Risks

All alcohol or other drug use carries some risk of harm. But sometimes the risk is very low and the benefits may outweigh the risks (e.g., a little may help a lot in an awkward social situation). Other times, the risk may be moderate, high or clearly harmful (e.g., drinking before driving or doing other things that put people's lives on the line). The level of risk is influenced by the amount used, frequency of use, age of the individual, the context in which use takes place, the reasons for use and personal factors including physical and mental health.

Substance use at an early age can affect the physical and mental development of young people, which is why it is best to delay the start of alcohol or other drug use as long as possible. The safest option for young people is to delay use until at least their late teens. If they do use substances, they should at least know basic things about managing risk.



### Safer alternatives

If a young person is using alcohol or other drugs because they like the buzz, it may help to suggest activities that will naturally boost their adrenaline levels, such as rock climbing or mountain biking. If they are using substances to calm themselves or to relieve feelings of anxiety, help them explore calming or meditative activities such as yoga, running and swimming.

### For Further Information and Help

[www.alcoholreality.ca](http://www.alcoholreality.ca)  
[www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca)

[www.carbc.ca](http://www.carbc.ca)  
1-800-663-1441