

How to Talk to Children about Substance Use Disorders & Recovery



Starting the Conversation

1. Stick to the facts!

- **Substance Use Disorder is an illness. Substance Use Disorders can impact loved ones.** Substance use disorders (SUD) are complex illnesses that affect someone's physical and emotional health. SUD is a chronic, treatable condition. Like many chronic illnesses, after treatment there may be a return of symptoms (also known as relapse). There is no cure, but individuals can manage their illness successfully.

SUD can affect how an individual interacts with their loved ones. The use of substances leads to changes in the brain that affect behavior. These changes result in being unable to control the use of substances no matter how much they want to. The brain is sending messages to continue the use substances in order to survive – meaning their ONLY focus is on the use of substances. This leads to changes in family function and feelings of fear, shame, and guilt for the individual using substances and their loved ones.

- **Recovery is a process. Each family member will experience their own recovery process.** During the recovery process, the body and brain heal. There may be ups and downs throughout the recovery process. Sometimes individuals feel worse before they start to feel better.

As a parent, if you have spent time away from your child they will be eager to spend time with you. Communicate about your need to have time to yourself to work on your recovery - help your child to find something that they like to do to take care of themselves, too! Such as: reading, coloring/drawing, listening to music, exercise, etc.

Be sure to find opportunities to do things together to help your relationship heal.

All family members are learning and trying out a new lifestyle. Be patient – it takes time and effort. It can be helpful for the entire family to work with a counselor or participate in treatment.

There is no one way to begin your recovery. Some individuals use medication (short-term or long-term). Some individuals participate in support group meetings. Others work with a recovery support specialist – another individual who is further along in their recovery process and can support someone throughout their journey. Some people use a variety of methods at the same or different times.

Substance use disorder is a serious medical condition and it can be fatal. The loss of a loved one is incredibly painful. Children will have a difficult time understanding this kind of loss and talking about how they feel. Many children and adults find it helpful to work with a counselor and/or attend support groups. As you all move through your grief, sharing stories and fond memories of your loved one can be helpful.

As the child gets older, they may start asking more questions about their parent. Do your best to answer children's questions honestly and openly.



2. Use age appropriate vocabulary, but stick to medically accurate terms.

Some commonly used terms and concepts and how you can talk to children of various ages about them

Children Ages 2-5

SUD – when a person cannot stop drinking or doing drugs.

Treatment – when a person gets help for a sickness. Sometimes they have to stay away from home.

Recovery – when a person is better, but still needs to take extra care of themselves.

Other things to share with your 2-5 year old:

- It's normal for people to need to get help more than one time.
- It's not their fault.

Children Ages 6-8

SUD – a sickness when a person drinks alcohol or uses drugs and cannot stop even if they want to.

Treatment – getting help for a sickness. There are different kinds of help a person may need. Sometimes people have to stay away from home while they get help.

Recovery – when a person is better, but still needs to practice being healthy.

Other things to share with your 6-8 year old:

- It's normal for people to need to get help more than one time.
- Sometimes people feel worse after getting help, but they can still get better.
- They didn't cause it, they can't control it, and they cannot cure it.
- It's okay to ask questions and share how you feel with someone safe.

Children Ages 9-11

SUD – an illness when someone drinks alcohol or uses drugs and cannot stop even if they want to.

Treatment – care for an illness. There are different kinds of care a person may need. Sometimes getting care means being away from home.

Recovery – when a person is healing, but still needs to practice being healthy.

Other things to share with your 9-11 year old:

- It's normal for people to need to get care more than one time.
- Sometimes people feel worse before they feel better.
- They didn't cause it, they can't control it, and they cannot cure it.
- It's okay to ask questions and share how you feel with someone safe.

Children Ages 12 & up

Substance Use Disorder (SUD) – an illness identified by a doctor when a person experiences changes in their brain and is not able to stop using substances on their own (even if they want to).

Treatment – medical care for an illness. Sometimes a person needs to get care more than once. It is okay if they need to repeat treatment multiple times. There are different kinds of medical care an individual may choose – getting care may mean that they need to stay away from home for a period of time.

Recovery – a process of healing that is different for each person. It is during this process that the brain heals, and the individual begins a healthier lifestyle. Family members have a process of healing too!

3. Speak honestly, but spare children the gory details.

As a person in recovery, you may have experienced things like homelessness or incarceration. There is no benefit to discussing those experiences in detail with children. Acknowledge that those things happened, but bring the focus back to your lives together in recovery. For example, steering conversations away from your experiences on the street or in prison and focus on the steps you're taking together to practice a healthier lifestyle (which may include things like exercise, eating well, fellowship meetings, therapy, and better communication as a family).

If a child's parent is absent, speaking negatively about the parent will likely have a negative impact on your relationship with the child. Children love their parents. It's important to separate the illness from the individual.

Try something like, "I don't always like the way your mom acts, but I love her and I love you." Not only will this help you maintain a healthy relationship with the child, it is also a great way to model how to communicate feelings.

4. Don't shy away from conversations, but don't force them either.

- You're all in a healing process. Go at your own pace. Let each other know if the timing isn't quite right and agree to a timeframe to check-in again.
- Conversations should include facts about risk factors. Genetics are the biggest risk factor for addiction. Risk factors are NOT destiny. Not everyone who has a family history of addiction will develop their own substance use disorder. You can build protective factors (to prevent risk of developing an addiction disorder) in your child(ren). Find more about protective factors on the next page

Tips:

It is also important to use something called **person-first language**. Avoid using words like addict and junkie. For example, "I am a person with a substance use disorder. We are a family in recovery." You are a person. You are not an illness. It's important to separate the two. Your children love YOU – but they don't have to like your illness.

Addiction is chronic medical condition. If you get stuck, think about how you'd talk about other chronic illnesses (heart disease, diabetes, etc.) – chances are that will help you find the right words!

It is important that children know that they didn't CAUSE the illness, they cannot CONTROL the illness and they cannot CURE the illness.¹

It's okay if you don't know how to answer a child's question. Let them know that you don't know – but that you can find out the answer together. National Association for Children of Addiction and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration are two great resources!

¹ Seven C's available on the final page of this toolkit.

How to Build Protective Factors

What is a protective factor?

Protective factors are individual or environmental qualities that reduce negative impacts of stressful events. Protective factors, or strengths, also reduce the chance that an individual will take part in risky behaviors such as using substances. Very simply - protective factors protect us!



There are different kinds of strengths that act as protection. Protective factors are found in different places. You find strengths in:

- you
- your family
- your friends
- your school/work
- your community

Protective factors can be things like feeling that you belong, having a support system, being able to make friends, healthy coping skills, and many more! Everyone is born with some protective factors and those stay with you throughout your life. The neat thing about protective factors is that you can always build more!

Why are they important?

Protective factors help reduce risk for substance use (and other risky behaviors). Everyone's level of risk is different. Our genetics and our environments affect our risk. If you have a family history of substance use disorder, it does not mean that everyone in your family will develop an addiction disorder. Increasing your strengths will help prevent substance use disorders and help you live a healthier lifestyle.



Who builds protective factors?

Everyone!

How do I build protective factors?

There are lots of ways to help build protective factors – you're never too young or too old for protective factors! Here are a few ideas:

- Participate in a group activity where you can contribute to the team's success! This could be participating in sports, band, orchestra, theatre, bible study, a job, etc.
- Find something you enjoy! This could be things like running, reading, drawing, painting, making music, making movies, making friends, etc.
- Identify someone or a group of people that you can count on. Think about friends, family (even those family member who you don't live with), adults at school, adults at church/temple, etc. Your list can be as short or as long as you like!
- Learn how to recognize and communicate your feelings
- Learn new skills and practice them!
- Get involved in your community by volunteering or participating on a committee



Where can I learn more?

Over the years, scientists have studied protective factors and have created charts to help us find the protective factors that we have and the ones that we can build! Some of the charts also share strengths by age group. Below are a few examples

- [The Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets](#)
- [Communities that Care](#)
- [Youth.gov](#)



The Seven C's

Seven things all children of addiction need to know

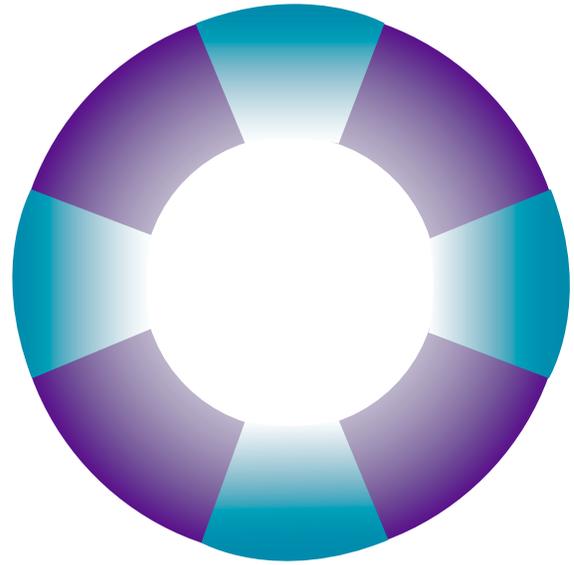
I didn't **cause** it.

I can't **control** it.

I can't **cure** it,

but I can help take **care** of myself
by **communicating** my feelings,

making healthy **choices**, and
celebrating me.





JOINING FORCES FOR CHILDREN

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