

## Know! Your Parental Role: First Line of Defense

In the previous tip, [Know! Underage Drinking is a Big Deal](#), we talked about the widespread prevalence of underage drinking and the destructive consequences it continues to create. We discussed the fact that alcohol is a powerful, mood-altering drug and that alcoholism is a chronic disease. In this tip, we focus on the role parents play when it comes to alcohol and other drugs.

According to Dr. Joseph Lee, addiction specialist and medical director of the Hazelden Center for Youth and Family, parents are the first line of defense in the prevention and intervention of underage drinking and other substance misuse.

Dr. Lee shares the following parental tips to help protect our children from the dangers of alcohol and other drugs:

**Set Expectations:** Make it clear to your child you are against underage drinking and drug use of any kind. Let the consequences be known should the family rules be broken.

**Address mental health issues:** There is a link between mental health and substance misuse in youth. More than two-thirds of youth who struggle with substance misuse also struggle with mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, ADHD, and eating disorders.

**Know that experimenting with substances is dangerous:** Far too many parents believe that experimenting with alcohol is a “rite of passage.” While experimentation doesn’t necessarily lead to addiction, it can cause big problems, including car crashes, injuries, sexual assault, and alcohol poisoning.

**Set a good example:** Research shows that youth are watching and taking cues from their parents. We must model the behavior we want our children to follow. That doesn’t mean we, as adults, have to abstain from drinking alcohol to be good role models, but we must be appropriate and responsible if and when we partake.

**Remain open-minded:** Being judgmental and close-minded is a surefire way to shut down communication between you and your child. Remain calm when talking through potential issues. You want them to feel comfortable talking to you so that they will continue to come to you for help.

**Consider family history:** Just like cancer and heart disease, alcohol and drug misuse problems can run in families. If it runs in your family, be sure to talk to your child about it and let them know their risk for addiction is increased. On the other hand, a child can develop substance misuse problems without any prior family history.

**Consider other risk factors:** Just as obesity is a risk factor for diabetes, substance misuse has its risk factors, including early aggressive or disruptive behaviors, depression, ADHD, and anxiety.

**Know that intelligence doesn’t necessarily equal maturity:** Just because a child is smart doesn’t mean he or she is mature enough to have good judgment about alcohol and substance use. The teen brain is impulsive and primed to take risks, and it doesn’t fully mature until a person is in their mid-20s.

**Lock the liquor and medicine cabinets:** Easy access and availability are major risk factors for young people using substances. If you have alcohol and/or medications in your home, keep both

locked up and monitor the quantities. For over-the-counter and prescription medications, rid your cabinets of leftovers once they are expired or you no longer have a need for them.

**Be aware of changes in your child:** Changes in sleep, mood, friends, activity level, academic performance, weight, and personal hygiene can all signal alcohol or other substance misuse problems. Pay attention to your child, ask about their day, and know that times of transition (puberty, new school, relationship breakups, etc.) increase risk.

**Seek help when needed:** While two million children ages 12–17 experience substance misuse problems, only about 13 percent ever receive the treatment they need. If you think your teen may have a problem, seek help immediately. Reach out to your family physician, pediatrician, a child psychiatrist or other expert.

Dr. Lee also says parents can do all the right things and a child may still end up with an alcohol or drug problem. He says to skip the guilt and blame game, as it can divide a family at a crucial time when the family needs to pull together as a team. Dr. Lee says not to ignore the past, but to keep your eyes on the present; and that if you get your child in therapy, there will be ample time to make things right.