



What Educators Can Do to Help Prevent Underage Drinking and Other Drug Use

School staff members can play a powerful role in the prevention of underage drinking and drug use among their students. Together, educators and families can work to send strong and consistent messages to students about the use of alcohol and other drugs.

Teachers and school staff members work hard every day to prepare students for future success. Alcohol and drugs, such as marijuana or opioids, can undermine a child's academic success and other life goals. Additionally, substance misuse and substance use disorders are associated with a variety of negative consequences, including deteriorating relationships, poor school performance, loss of employment, diminished mental health, and increases in sickness and death.¹

Here are steps you can take to help your students avoid underage drinking and substance use.

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General. (November 2016). Facing Addiction in America: The Surgeon General's Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health. Washington, DC.

Recognize the Signs

Educators can identify students who may be at risk for alcohol and drug use, and work with families to prevent these children from going down a harmful path.



The following signs may signal problems with the use of alcohol and other drugs. Experts say that a substance use problem is more likely if you notice several of these signs at the same time, if they occur suddenly, or if some of them are extreme in nature.

- Mood changes (e.g., flare-ups of temper, irritability, defensiveness)
- Poor class attendance, low grades, and/or behavior problems
- Disregard for school rules



- Memory lapses, poor concentration, bloodshot eyes, lack of coordination, or slurred speech
- Switching friends and a reluctance to allow parents to meet new friends

Talk With Students

There are several things a teacher or school staff member can do if they suspect a student is using alcohol or other drugs, but the first step is always to talk to the student. Use the following tips to talk to students about alcohol and other drug use.




- **Be a Good Source of Information**—Provide students with the facts about the harmful effects of underage drinking and drug use. Being open and honest about the dangers of alcohol, marijuana, and opioids can help students make safer decisions.

- **Show Them You Care**—Let students know that you care about their health, wellness, and success and tell them how alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs can impede those things.
- **Use Personal Stories**—Statistics are useful, but they are sometimes hard to understand. Consider telling students relatable stories about making smart decisions when it comes to alcohol and other drugs. These could be stories that show the consequences of engaging in risky behavior.
- **Help Them Build an Exit Plan**—Some students may not have an interest in alcohol or other drugs, but will still feel like they need to partake in order to fit in. Explain that it's okay to say no, and help them think through an exit strategy in case a friend or family member tries to pressure them in the future.

Use the Campaign

In 2017, more than one in four students aged 12 to 17 who were enrolled in school in the past year reported not having seen or heard drug or alcohol use prevention messages at school.² Educators have the power to change this. Make sure your students are getting prevention messages on a consistent basis. Here are some ideas to make that happen.

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- **Pass Out Materials at Parent-Teacher Conferences or Orientation Nights**—Print out materials such as the [5 Conversation Goals](#) *handout*, *Talk. They Hear You.*® Campaign postcards, and marijuana/opioid parent brochures to hand out to parents during conferences or orientation nights. Make sure to also direct parents to the Campaign website at www.underagedrinking.samhsa.gov for more useful resources. If possible, consider working with school administrators to secure a brief time slot during orientation or open house to talk about underage drinking and other drug use prevention with parents and caregivers in a more formal setting.

- **Present at Parent Teacher Association (PTA) Meetings**—Coordinate with your school's PTA to offer prevention resources to parents. For instance, consider sharing products like the *Talk. They Hear You.* mobile application or the [5 Conversation Goals](#) *handout* for parents to practice having conversations on underage drinking and drug use prevention with their kids.
- **Conduct Train-the-Trainer Programs**—Train school counselors, community leaders, and/or parents and caregivers to help educate your community about the risks associated with underage drinking and drug use. Consider distributing a *Talk. They Hear You.* toolkit with materials such as the [Five Conversation Goals](#) *fact sheet*, [infographics](#), and digital resources like the [Discussion Starter Video](#).

When implementing any of the above suggestions, consider using local statistics from local law enforcement or health departments on underage drinking and drug use in your community to show the importance of these topics.

² Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality. (2018). 2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Detailed Tables. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville, MD.

