**[](https://drugfree.org/)**

**In a Time of Disruption, Protecting Your Child from the Risks of Substance Use**

March 27, 2020 by Linda Richter, PH.D, Director of Prevention Research and Analysis

One of the most pressing concerns for many of us is managing daily life with our families under these unusual and trying circumstances around COVID-19. For those of us with preteens, teens or young adults in the home, our best-laid plans for supporting their healthy development can be thrown off course or strengthened during this time.

What can parents and other caregivers do to reduce the potential that children – who are understandably feeling frustrated, anxious, bored, depressed or isolated – might engage in substance use as a distraction or to self-medicate?

**Recognize That This is Difficult for Them, Too**

It’s important to recognize and empathize with what many young people are going through. Socializing is critical to their health and well-being. Students who get meaning and fulfillment from their usual school and extracurricular activities no longer have those outlets. Young people’s natural need to separate from parents is thwarted and, for many students, their academic and career aspirations are on hold and clouded with uncertainty.

Allow them to feel and express their full range of thoughts and emotions right now. Try to resist any impulse to stifle their feelings through guilt (*e.g., “people have it much worse than you”*), avoidance (*e.g., “I don’t want to hear you complaining”*), anger (*e.g., “can’t you do something productive right now?!”*) or indifference (*e.g., “do whatever you want; I don’t have patience for this”*).

Your child is justified in their feelings of loss and worry. These difficult circumstances are an opportunity to develop new coping skills and to learn to adapt to stressful situations.

**Parents and Caregivers Are Feeling Different Pressures**

Parents and other caregivers are feeling pressure to satisfy work obligations while supervising and caring for children at home. If you’re continuing to work outside the home, you have the added burden of worrying about what your kids may be getting up to in the case they’re unsupervised.

Be kind to yourself. Give yourself a break. While effective parenting should not be put on hold, neither does it need to be put in overdrive. We do not need to feel obliged to create the perfect homeschooling environment for our children, schedule their every waking moment and make the most of their wide-open time.

Creating space for some calm within the home outweighs the need to check the box on every item on our to-do list. It’s more important now than ever to simply be involved and engaged with your child:

* Acknowledge and have compassion for children’s frustrations, disappointments, boredom, anxiety, loneliness and stress during this time.
* Keep the lines of communication open, but respect their need for alone time and privacy.
* Maintain some sort of structure and daily schedule.
* Eat meals with your children as frequently as possible – this allows you to monitor your child’s mental and physical state, but also share experiences, stories, concerns and laughs.
* Keep meals and other family activities as phone and distraction-free as possible.
* Take an interest in your children’s interests and take their concerns seriously.

**Remember Your Role in Preventing Substance Use**

And while we’re all adjusting to these unusual and challenging times, it’s useful to remember the role you can play in protecting your child from substance use and addiction. An abundance of research proves that parents are the most important influence over their children’s decisions, attitudes and behaviors related to substance use.

We offer a wealth of resources to help parents [**navigate the teen years**](https://drugfree.org/landing-page/learn/all-about-the-teen-years/) and effectively address topics such as [**vaping**](https://drugfree.org/article/how-to-talk-with-your-kids-about-vaping/), [**marijuana**](https://drugfree.org/article/how-to-talk-about-marijuana/) and [**underage drinking**](https://drugfree.org/article/how-to-address-underage-drinking/). Take time to explore our full range of [**prevention resources**](https://drugfree.org/landing-page/learn/prevention/) or get started here:

* Have ongoing age-appropriate conversations and be clear about your expectations related to substance use. [**Get prevention tips for all ages >>**](https://drugfree.org/article/prevention-tips-for-every-age/)
* Be aware of their activities and personal relationships, even if those activities are inside the home and the relationships are virtual. [**Read more on setting limits & monitoring >>**](https://drugfree.org/article/set-limits-monitor-your-teens-behavior/)
* Know their social media passwords and scan apps from time to time. Let them know you are doing this, not because of nosiness and curiosity, but to protect their health and safety.
* Be a credible and informed source of information about substances. Your children can learn from you rather than social media or ads. [**Review our Parent Drug Guide >>**](https://drugfree.org/drug-guide/)
* Model healthy behaviors to help your child learn how to handle stress without turning to substance use.
* Stay aware of the types of substances your child may encounter. Some kids are still seeing their friends outside the home, going outdoors for exercise or getting packages in the mail. Secure substances like alcohol, medications, etc., within your home as well.

If you suspect or know your child may be using substances, please reach out for help. Our [**free and confidential helpline**](https://drugfree.org/article/get-one-on-one-help/) remains open, and we are here to ensure you have the information and support you need.