

Drugs and Alcohol Among North Dakota Youth:

It Begins With The Family

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Imagine raising children who never start using alcohol, tobacco or drugs. Imagine preventing all the health and relationship problems and the agony that comes when chemicals invade our family circle. Impossible? Not necessarily.

Research has been conducted to examine the best age and most effective teaching methods to address various risk-taking behaviors in youth. Prevention education efforts are available in a variety of programs used in communities by schools, congregations and youth organizations around our state and country. These efforts are an important piece of an overall prevention strategy. But the bottom line is that parents and caring adults in a child's life are not only the ones who can influence the direction their child takes, they are also the ones who must take the lead.

What is it that consistently prevents kids from becoming involved in substance use?

The best predictors of a child's non-involvement with various substances are relationship with and support from family and quality communications with parents and other nurturing adults in their lives. The **communication skills, attitudes, role models and supports established by the family are the keys to prevention.**

Preschoolers and early elementary age children find their parents to be in control of most of their environment. One of the first signs of potential problems is whether **the child is connected with his or her school**. If a child is experiencing difficulty in connecting with friends or accomplishing basic learning tasks at school, the potential for future problems emerges and it's time for adults to intervene immediately.

As the child moves into pre-adolescence, parents may note they become a bit more distant. They no longer want to appear 'too connected' to their parents, particularly in front of their peers. Although this may be normal, parents who assume they must accept this and become more distant make a mistake. The change simply means that **both parent and child must become more respectful of each other's needs and begin now to talk openly about these feelings and behaviors**. This is a parent's first sign that your child needs to be independent from you, rather than completely dependent. This is ultimately a positive part of youth development... becoming an independent and capable adult.

Pre-adolescence and adolescence are times when parents need to observe closely and monitor their child's actions. **Know their friends and take an honest interest in them.** Make them welcome in your home. Encourage the growth of positive friendships. Social development is critical at this age. If your child doesn't seem to connect to any other child, or seems to connect with others who concern you, take action. You can attempt to organize alternative activities with other youth that have the same values as your family. Sometimes this is hard to do, especially in small towns where few options exist and few kids their age available to hang out with. **Be careful not to judge too quickly.** Talk to your children and teens about their friends and what it is they value in them. Get to know their friends and give them a chance, within the limits you have established, to show their strengths. If you are convinced that a friend spells trouble, you will have a better chance of getting that message to your child based on the experiences you've had and the behaviors you have both witnessed during this time.

Be proactive in preventing problems. If you know the annual fall kegger is coming up soon, it might be a good time to offer to take your child and a friend to the Mega Mall or call a relative or friend in another town to see whether they'd like to invite your child to stay for the weekend and hang out with cousins or visit an old friend from another town they haven't seen in a while. Perhaps a local establishment or caring adult is willing to pay your child for completing some tasks and the opportunity to earn money is more inviting than the kegger. You need to think about what it is your child really wants and needs -- then help to organize opportunities to accomplish the goal.

If you live in an area that has few entertainment options, agree to help your child organize an annual ski trip, hunting trip, or get tickets

for the college play in a nearby town. Most parents who **get involved** will find that the time and effort spent are worth it. The kids enjoy the events, experience your support, and know that you care about them and their friends.

Finally, **model the behavior** you want to see in your child. If your main goal is to make it until the Friday "Happy Hour" each week and this is the model you provide, then don't be surprised to see the same in your child. "Do as I say and not as I do" simply doesn't work with youth. So often it seems like we can't do anything to change our child's behavior, but the fact remains that we **can** do something. In fact, the most important thing we can do is model healthy behavior for our children. It's never too late to start. When **you** choose to make a positive change in your life, your child is learning a valuable lesson.

The Family as a Security Blanket

Although the family is consistently cited as the most influential force in a child's life, it's often hard for parents to believe. Somehow, especially for teens, the family operates like a security blanket or stuffed animal that is given to them as a gift in front of all their peers. They may be embarrassed and they may want to hide it. They may be polite and say thanks -- but later feel like it's an embarrassment that needs to be hidden. Yet, when they have it, they use it!

Just as the blanket or stuffed animal may have some worn out spots from being loved so long and so hard, so it is with families and others who may get a little worn looking from all their loving and caring. But some things get better with time, and loving is one of them.

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