

How To Be A Better Parent

A Guide to What Works and Why



Metropolitan Life Foundation

This booklet will help guide you in using your greatest strengths— your love for your children, your concern for their well-being, and skills you *already* have— to help keep your children away from drugs and other kinds of problem behaviors. Topics include:

- How to Lay the Groundwork
- How to Set Clear Rules
- How to Praise and Reward
- How to Stay Actively Involved
- How to Monitor Your Children

Yes, You Can...

*“When Timmy entered middle school,
I was scared to death.”*

*“What can Jessica say when
her teenage friends pressure her?
I don’t know what to tell her.”*

*“I wouldn’t know what to do
if I suspected Keisha was getting high.
She’s only twelve.”*

When we parents talk about our children, we voice some of our greatest fears and concerns. With good reason. The education our children are getting in school is not nearly as extensive— or powerful— as the “street education” they get from their peers and popular culture. They receive news and entertainment not only from movies and TV, but from video cassettes, CDs, billboards, magazines targeted at them directly, web sites, and chat rooms— information sources and formats that didn’t even exist a generation ago. Even the lyrics piped into



store try-on rooms can reinforce the impression that sex, drugs, drinking, and smoking are glamorous activities or– even more worrisome– a normal, standard, expected part of growing up.

So what's a parent to do? Schools, churches, and law enforcement can certainly help. But **no one can replace the family.** Being involved with the prevention of risky behavior lets our children know that we care. That we are the kind of parents they *want* us to be (even though they rarely show it).

As parents, we profoundly shape the choices our children make. A study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that teenagers who reported feeling close to their families were the *least likely* to engage in any of the risky behaviors studied, which included drinking and smoking marijuana or cigarettes. This finding supports what a majority of parents believe: that we *can* teach our children to regard drugs and other anti-social behavior as serious concerns– and that we *can* influence our children's decisions.

Laying the Groundwork

Once your children begin to talk, it's not long before their questions follow. "Why is the grass green?" soon gives way to "What's wrong with that man sitting in the park?" and "Why does grandma smell funny?" If you show your child that you're ready to give honest answers at any time— even when the subject makes you uncomfortable— you'll forge a trusting relationship. Your children will come to you with their concerns because they know you take them seriously.

Being a good listener gives you insight into your children's world— the sights and sounds that influence them every day. Since they're the experts about fashions, music, TV, and movies, ask them what music groups are popular and what their songs are about. What their friends like to do after school. What's cool and what's not and why. Encourage them with phrases such as "That's interesting" or "I didn't know that" and by asking follow-up questions.

In these conversations you can **steer the talk to social problems**— drugs, sex, drinking, and smoking— you're concerned about. If you can ingrain your values in your children before they're faced with making difficult choices, experts say they'll be more likely to follow the family line. By introducing these topics you're not "putting ideas into their heads"— any more than talking about traffic safety might make them want to jump in front of a car. You're simply



letting them know about potential dangers in their environment—so that when they're confronted with them they'll know what to do.

With families juggling the multiple demands of work, school, after-school activities, and religious and social commitments, it can be a challenge for parents and children to be in the same place at the same time. It helps to **plan for togetherness**.

Weekly family meetings at a mutually agreed-on time provide a regular forum for discussing triumphs, grievances, projects, discipline questions, and any topic of concern to any family member. Ground rules: Everyone gets a chance to talk; one person talks at a time without interruption; and only positive, constructive feedback is allowed. To enroll a rebellious child in the idea, try an incentive like post-meeting pizza or assign him an important role—recording secretary or rule enforcer.

Regular parent-child rituals eliminate the need for constant planning and give each child personal time with you to count on. Try taking the long way home from school every Tuesday and get ice cream. Or make Saturday visits to the library together. Even a few minutes of conversation while you're cleaning up after dinner or right before bedtime keeps open the channels of communication key to establishing common values.

Setting Clear Rules

Research has shown that young people are three times more likely to use tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs if their parents don't make clear rules about them. To keep drug use out of your family, it's vitally important to get your children used to obeying established rules **around basic daily activities** early on. (This gives you a better chance of getting them to obey a single rule about not using marijuana or other drugs later on.) Keep your list of house rules short—just enough to ensure that children are doing homework, completing chores, and staying involved with friends who are good influences.

At the same time that you set up the rules, establish specific, proportionate, non-harsh consequences for breaking them. Hesitating to punish small violations only teaches children that rules don't have to be followed. And if you wait for major misbehavior, you may be too late. Avoid arguing and criticizing when you impose a consequence. Ignore any negative reaction that follows.



HOUSE RULES...

1. Don't go to a friend's house– or invite friends to your house– when there are no adults around.
2. Finish homework before watching TV.
3. Complete chores before going out with friends.
4. Be home by set curfew.
5. Call if you're going to be late or if you go somewhere other than planned.

...AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF BREAKING THEM

Removal of a privilege for a day (because you didn't feed the cat).

Staying home Friday night (because you didn't come home on time Tuesday).

Grounding from social activities for two weeks (because you were smoking).

Making a two-minute speech at the next family meeting on specific ways to regain family trust.

Don't worry that your rules will alienate your children. They want you to show that you care enough to set rules and go to the trouble of enforcing them. Rules about what's acceptable and expected– from curfews to call-ins– make children feel loved and secure. And rules about drugs give them something to fall back on when they feel tempted to make unwise decisions.

The Power of Praise and Rewards

Praising and rewarding our children's behavior helps them establish strengths and interests that leave little room for drinking, smoking, sex, drugs, and crime. When we emphasize what our children do right instead of focusing on what's wrong, they learn to feel good about themselves, and they develop self-confidence.

It's never too early to start the habit of praise. Whenever possible, for instance, let a young child select what to wear and praise the choice. Even if the clothes don't quite match, you are reinforcing your child's ability to make decisions. If a child's tower of blocks collapses, play together until you turn the frustrating situation into a confidence-building success.

WHAT TO SAY

- Instead of being vague or general ("You are certainly a smart boy"), direct your praise at specific acts:
- *"You got a B on the social studies test. Good job."*
- *"Mrs. Royce said you helped bring her groceries in. That was very thoughtful."*
- *"What you told me about the Civil War was interesting. I didn't know that."*
- *"That's a cool outfit you're wearing. Nobody puts clothes together the way you do."*
- *"You were shooting baskets with Angel. No wonder he looks up to you."*

WHAT TO DO

- Set up a small reward for every time children call in to inform you of their whereabouts.
- Let children stay up longer if they complete their homework before dinner or some other agreed-on time.
- Allow children to invite a friend to stay overnight on a weekend as a reward for not having friends over without an adult present.
- Make home displays of schoolwork and art projects for family and friends to see.

When school starts, praise and rewards can increase academic achievement, which provides a positive alternative to risky behavior as a way of gaining self-esteem.

Rewards can help middle-school kids learn habits they are having problems with— habits such as getting off to school on time, calling in if they're going to be late or change plans, and doing homework first, all of which establish the kinds of structures that leave little room for getting into trouble. Teens, in particular, respond to praise and encouragement for things they do well and the positive choices they make. When you are proud of your son or daughter, say so. Knowing that they are “seen” and appreciated by the adults in their lives can shore up teens’ abilities to resist peer pressure. A teen may also be impressed by the importance of serving as a good role model for a younger sister or brother.



Staying Actively Involved

The more involved you are in the daily lives of your children, the more likely they are to be successful in school and with peers. Other benefits: You'll feel more in touch with their lives and be in a better position to recognize trouble spots. Key to getting more involved is finding activities to do regularly with your child that the two of you enjoy. It doesn't have to take money or a lot of time. In fact, brief meaningful activities each day are probably best.

ACTIVITIES TO SHARE

- Playing cards
- Cooking or crafts projects
- Playing video or board games
- Doing jigsaw puzzles
- Going to the movies
- Following a sports team
- Playing sports
- Hiking, fishing, or camping
- Surfing the net

With young children at home, set aside regular time to give your son or daughter your full, sole attention. Get on the floor and play with him; learn about her likes and dislikes; tell them that you love them. You will build strong bonds of trust and affection that will make turning away from risky behavior easier in the years ahead.

WHAT ELSE TO DO

- Get to know your children's friends by taking them to and from after-school activities, games, the library, and movies.
- Invite your children's friends to join your family for special outings or events.
- Volunteer for school activities like dances or trips where you can observe your children with their peers.
- Put your television and computer where you can keep an eye on what your children are seeing. (You may want to set up viewing guidelines.) Also familiarize yourself with their favorite radio stations, CDs, and tapes. Since listening to music is a favorite non-school activity, you'll want to know (and be able to counter) any questionable messages they're hearing.
- Familiarize yourself with the policies and education programs regarding alcohol and drug use at your child's school. Read any materials given out.
- Make sure your children are well-versed in the reasons to avoid alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and sex. Waiting for them to bring up the subjects may mean being too late. Two-thirds of fourth graders polled on this subject said that they wished their parents would talk more with them about drugs.

When children enter **middle school** or **junior high**, they're little fish in a big pond, and they want to fit in. At this time, when peer approval means everything, your children may make you feel that they are embarrassed by you. But at the very time they are pulling away from you to establish their own identities, they actually need you to be more involved than ever.

Parental Monitoring

“You don’t trust me…”

*“I do love you and trust you,
but I don’t trust the world around you,
and I need to know what’s going on in your life
so I can be a good parent to you.”*

Your skill and consistency in monitoring what your children do is key to preventing most problem behaviors. What is monitoring? It’s knowing where your children are, what they are doing during and after school, and talking with them about it each day. Why does it work? It makes your children’s success in school and with friends more likely, while allowing you to guide them away from trouble.

WHAT TO DO

- Talk with your children about what happened in school today: assignments, tests, friends, and problems.
- Know where your children are after school and whom they’re with.
- Have your children call you to let you know their whereabouts.
- Check that chores are completed.
- Ask to see school assignments before they’re handed in– and after they’re returned.
- Talk with teachers about your children’s academic and social progress.
- Bring refreshments to your children and their friends when they come over.
- Keep in touch with the parents of your children’s friends so you can reinforce each others’ efforts.



WHEN YOU CAN'T BE THERE YOURSELF

Leaving children without adult supervision in their own or a friend's home is an open invitation to all kinds of experimentation, especially once middle school begins. What helps: having these practices in place before then.

- Arrange to have your children looked after and engaged between the end of school and the time you get home. Encourage them to get involved with supervised youth groups, arts, music, sports, community service and academic clubs.
- Make sure that children who are unattended for periods during the day feel your presence. Give them a schedule and set limits on their behavior. Assign household chores to accomplish. Enforce a strict phone-in-to-you policy. Leave notes for them around the house. Provide easy-to-find snacks.
- Call parents whose home is to be used for a party. Make sure you agree with their rules for behavior.
- Make it easy for your children to leave any place where they feel uncomfortable. Discuss in advance how to contact you or another designated adult to get a ride home and be home when they arrive to discuss the situation.

Teachable Moments

Take advantage of concrete, everyday examples to make abstract values come alive.

- Use family time at dinner or in the car to explore moral issues by posing hypothetical questions: “What would you do if the person ahead of you in the movie line dropped a dollar bill? If the waitress made a mistake in your favor when she added up the check? If your friend wanted you to skip class and play video games with him?”
- Take examples of the consequences of alcohol and drug abuse right from the daily newspaper. “Did you see this article about the mother who used drugs and was arrested? Was using drugs a wise decision? Who will care for her baby now?”
- Watch TV with your children and discuss programs, news items, and advertising. Do they make anti-social behavior look acceptable/routine/exciting? Do they show its downside? Point out the full implications to families and society at large. (You may also want to reassure children that the world is not as bleak as it appears in the news, which focuses on society’s problems.)
- When you’re together and see an anti-drinking, anti-drug, anti-smoking or safe-sex advertisement, use it as an opening to talk.

Where to Turn

A selected list of resources that provide information, advocacy and, in some cases, advice.

American Council for Drug Education

164 West 74th Street
New York, NY 10025
(800) 488-DRUG
Referrals: (800) DRUG-HELP

Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

5600 Fishers Lane, Rockwall II Building
Suite 900
Rockville, MD 20857

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information

P.O. Box 2345
Rockville, MD 20847-2345
(800) 729-6686 / (301) 443-0365

National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)

5600 Fishers Lane, Room 10A03
Rockville, MD 20857
(301) 443-1124

National PTA Drug and Alcohol Abuse Prevention Project

330 N. Wabash Ave.
Suite 2100
Chicago, IL 60611-3690
(800) 307-4782 / (312) 670-6782
Web site: www.pta.org

Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP)

P.O. Box 6000
Rockville, MD 20849-6000
(800) 666-3332
Web site: www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov

The Parents Collaboration

Web site: www.parentingisprevention.org

Partnership for a Drug-Free America

405 Lexington Ave.
Suite 1601
New York, NY 10174
(212) 922-1560
Web site: www.drugfreeamerica.org





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