Students for Sensible Drug Policy

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS, GUARDIANS, AND TEACHERS

HOW TO TALK ABOUT DRUG USE WITH CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS, AND YOUNG ADULTS



Drug use affects many families and communities in South Africa.

Children and young people may be exposed to substances through peers, social media, neighbourhood environments, or stress.



PARENTS



CAREGIVERS



EDUCATORS

Parents, caregivers,and teachers play an important role in helping young people understand risks, make informed decisions, and seek help when needed.

1

Start Conversations Early

Talking about drugs should begin before children are exposed to them. Young people who feel comfortable speaking with trusted adults are less likely to hide risky behaviour.

Tips:

- ✓ Listen without interrupting.
- ✓ Choose calm moments to talk.
- ✓ Encourage questions.
- ✓ Avoid judgement or punishment during discussions.



1

Start Conversations Early

Focus on Listening Rather Than Lecturing

Young people are more likely to engage in meaningful discussions when adults listen respectfully and avoid lecturing or judging them.



When young people feel heard, they are more likely to share their thoughts, experiences, and concerns honestly.

1

Start Conversations Early

Open questions help adults understand what young people already know or believe.

Examples include:

"What have you heard about drugs at school?"

"Why do you think some people use drugs?"

"How would you handle it if a friend offered you something?"



These questions encourage conversation rather than confrontation reveal misunderstandings or misinformation, help adults guide the discussion more effectively. Listening carefully also allows adults to correct inaccurate information in a supportive way.

2 Use Age-Appropriate Conversations

CHILDREN (6–10 YEARS)

Focus on health and safety.

- Some substances can harm the body and brain.
- Medicines should only be taken when given by a parent or doctor.
- They should say no if someone offers them something unsafe.

Example:
"Some things can make our bodies sick, so we only take medicine from adults we trust."



Avoid being vague
Children benefit from clear explanations rather than confusing or overly general warnings. Instead of saying: "Drugs are bad."

Explain why:
"Some drugs can hurt our bodies and make it hard for our brains to think clearly, which is why they should never be taken unless a doctor says it is medicine."

2 Use Age-Appropriate Conversations

ADOLESCENTS (11–17 YEARS)

Teenagers often experience peer pressure and curiosity.

Discuss:

- Why some people use drugs
- Risks such as addiction, health problems, and legal consequences
- How to respond to peer pressure

Encourage them to think about real-life situations.

Example:
"If a friend offered you something like alcohol or drugs, what do you think you would do?"



2 Use Age-Appropriate Conversations

YOUNG ADULTS (18+)

Young adults benefit from honest and realistic discussions.

TOPICS TO DISCUSS:



Safer decision making.



Mental health & stress.



Looking out for friends.



Knowing when to seek help

Example:
"If you ever find yourself or a friend in trouble, the most important thing is to get help quickly."

3 Address Social and Community Influences

Children and adolescents are exposed to messages about drugs through music, movies, television, social media, and online influencers. These portrayals can sometimes glamorise or normalise drug use.

Adults should help young people critically evaluate these messages.



- How media sometimes glamorises drug use



- Entertainment VS Real life



- Marketing aimed at young people

Important topics to discuss

- How media sometimes glamorises drug use or presents it as exciting or fashionable.
- The difference between entertainment and real life consequences.
- How companies may target young people through marketing and advertising.

3 Address Social and Community Influences

ENCOURAGE CRITICAL THINKING

You might ask questions such as:

- "What do you think that movie or song is trying to show about drugs?"
- "Do you think it shows the real consequences?"
- "Why do you think companies advertise these products?"



Encouraging young people to question what they see online helps them develop media literacy and independent thinking.

4

The Importance of Reassurance

Children and young people need to know that they can approach trusted adults without fear of punishment or judgement. Reassurance builds trust and encourages young people to seek help early if they feel pressured or confused.

Important messages to communicate:

- ☑ They can always come to you.
- ☑ They will not be punished for asking questions or seeking help
- ☑ Their safety and wellbeing come first.



Example reassurance statement:
"Even if you make a mistake or feel unsure about something, you can always talk to me."
This helps create a supportive environment where young people feel safe discussing difficult topics.

5

Guidance for Trusted Adults
(Parents, Guardians, and educaters)

Adults play a key role in recognising when a young person may need additional support.

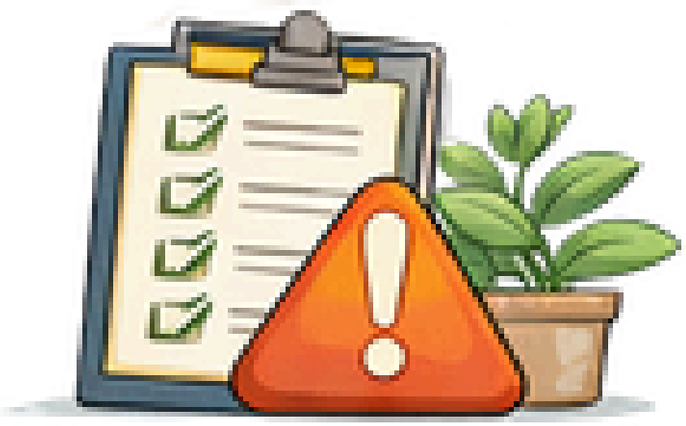
Changes in behaviour may sometimes indicate a problem.



Know the warning signs of possible substance use.

Warning signs can include:

- Sudden mood or behaviour changes
- Withdrawing from family or friends
- Declining school performance
- Increased secrecy about activities
- Noticeable changes in sleep or appetite.



5

Guidance for Trusted Adults
(Parents, Guardians, and educaters)

It is important to remember that these signs do not always mean substance use, but they may indicate that a young person is struggling and needs support.

How to respond if you notice concerning changes

- ✓ Approach the young person calmly.
- ✓ Express concern rather than accusation.
- ✓ Focus on listening and understanding.



For example:
"I've noticed you seem different lately and I'm concerned about you. If something is bothering you, I'm here to listen.

6

Know Where to Get Help

If a young person is struggling with substance use, early support can make a significant difference. Families and educators should not feel they must manage the situation alone.

Support can be accessed through:

- ✓ Counselling services
- ✓ School psychologists or social workers
- ✓ Community support groups
- ✓ Substance use treatment services.

Seeking professional help ensures that young people receive appropriate guidance, counselling, and care.

South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) – 0800 456 789
Substance Abuse Helpline (Department of Social Development) – 0800 12 13 14
Childline South Africa – 011 645 2000
SANCA – 011 892 3829 WhatsApp : 076 535 1701

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STRONG RELATIONSHIPS, OPEN CONVERSATIONS, AND ACCESS TO SUPPORT SERVICES ARE KEY TO HELPING YOUNG PEOPLE MAKE HEALTHY AND SAFE DECISIONS.



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