



# Child Builders

Houston's Advocates for Mental Health in Children

## Helping Children Avoid Substance Abuse

By Dorothy F. Matthews, PhD.

As a parent, you are probably concerned about helping your child avoid getting involved in drugs, alcohol, and other illegal substances. Children as young as elementary school age have been found with drugs, so it's important to help children learn how to stay away from illegal substances.

### Risks for substance abuse

There is evidence that being at risk to abuse substances can be inherited from your family. For example, if a parent is alcoholic, the child may be more likely to be alcoholic, too.

There is also evidence that substance abuse is related to the family environment. Children tend to imitate people they love or admire. If adults or older brothers and sisters in the family are using or abusing substances, the younger children may feel this behavior is OK.

When scary or stressful situations arise, people who do not have emotional support and good self-esteem are at greater risk for many problems, including substance abuse. For example, if a child is experiencing one or more of the following:

- Abuse, neglect, or bullying
- Having or living with a family member with chronic illness
- Stress about grades or sports or other achievement
- Loss of a loved one through death or divorce, or
- Strong peer pressure - wanting to be a part of a group

the child may become so stressed that he or she may not be able to stand these feelings. Without support and good coping skills, he or she may feel the need to escape reality.

Substance use is one place people turn for relief from feelings they cannot face. Substances can temporarily make your feelings different. Things a person cannot face can be forgotten. A shy person can be the "life of the party." A person in constant pain can have the pain dulled. Substance use does not always become substance abuse. For children, however, substance use shows that they have not developed other ways to solve their problems.

### What can be done to help protect my child?

People who learn to express their feelings, to ask for help, to solve problems, to tell the truth, and to value themselves have skills that help prevent substance abuse. Here are some specific things you can do to help your child build these

important life skills:

- 1) *Consider how substances are used in your home.* How available are alcohol and drugs? What example do you set for your children? What kind of supervision is available, and to whom can a child go to for help?
- 2) *Model how to talk about feelings, especially difficult ones.* A simple way to start is to express your feelings in situations with children -- “Johnny, when you ....., I felt .....”.” And then ask about the child’s feelings – “Johnny, how do you feel?”
- 3) *Listen to your child.* Set aside some time each day for each child to tell you what’s going on with him or her. It is important to look at the child, sit close, get on the child’s level, and have private time for each child. Children are more comfortable if adults take their concerns seriously and are able to express an understanding of the child’s feelings. This lets children know that it is OK to have feelings – **of all kinds.**
- 4) *Encourage your child to come to you with problems.* In order for children to bring personal issues to parents, there must be trust and honesty between child and parent. The child will be more comfortable if the parent offers encouragement, works together with the child on how to solve the problem, and respects the child’s feelings. When children bring problems to adults they can learn problem solving skills. Always thank the child for bringing up the problem in an open and honest way.
- 5) *Encourage your child to develop good judgment.* There will be times when children will not be able to ask a trusted adult for advice or support. The child will have to decide what to do on his or her own. Having “common sense” or good judgment will help children to make healthy choices. Talk over the choices that children make, before and after. Teach children to use their imagination to think about how different choices will make everyone feel – them, you, and others. Help children learn how to decide which way would be better. Be supportive so that children will continue to share with you even when they know that they made a bad choice.
- 6) *Finally, teach your children that you do not want them to use or abuse substances.* Be direct about the age limits you expect them to honor, and the supervision and other rules you have set up to keep them safe.

If some of these actions are new to you as well as your children, don’t worry. Strong feelings are challenging to work with. Your willingness to learn new skills will be a wonderful example for your children as you help them become emotionally healthy and able to avoid substance abuse.

ChildBuilders (formerly known as HAMIC), founded in 1974, is a non-profit organization that provides innovative programs to educate parents, children, teachers and the community about the emotional well-being of children and their families. [www.childbuilders.org](http://www.childbuilders.org) ChildBuilders Community Education.

For further information & referral  
call your child’s school counselor

DePelchin Children’s Center	713-730-2335
ESCAPE Family Resource Center	713-942-9500
Harris County Psychiatric Center	713-741-5000
Jewish Family Service	713-667-9336
Mental Health Association	713-522-5161
MHMRA of Harris County	713-970-7070
NAMI Metro Houston	281-579-3750
United Way of Texas Gulf Coast	211 or 713-957-4357

