

Parenting Kids Who Don't Use Tobacco



“My parents are involved in everything I do. If I go out, I have to leave the phone number and call home to check in.”

—Jessica, Pennsylvania

It's not too early to talk to your kids about not using tobacco products, even if they're in elementary school. Use simple language and clear rules. If your child is a teenager and doesn't use tobacco, the discussions shouldn't stop. Your teen is still at risk. As your child grows, repeat the message in terms they can relate to.

And today tobacco isn't just cigarettes. While high school cigarette smoking rates have declined recently, the use of smokeless tobacco has seen a recent increase.¹

It's important to remain calm and relaxed when raising the subject with your kid. Nothing turns off kids more than a lecture. Don't do all the talking. Ask questions and listen to your child's answers, without judging.

If you keep them from using tobacco as kids, chances are greater that they won't as adults. “Nearly two decades of research demonstrates that a child who gets through age 21 without smoking, abusing alcohol, or using illegal drugs is virtually certain never to do so.”²

Other Kinds of Tobacco

Cigarettes aren't the only kind of tobacco. Any tobacco is dangerous.³ What do you know about these products?

Bidis: small, hand-rolled cigarettes that may have colorful string tied at one or both ends. They come in cherry, mango, chocolate, and unflavored.⁴

Kreteks: clove cigarettes imported from Indonesia.⁵

Hookahs: water pipes to smoke tobacco in flavors from watermelon to licorice.⁶

Electronic cigarettes: these tar-free cigarettes (also known as “Ecigs” or “e-cigarettes”) still contain nicotine and have not been evaluated by the FDA.

Cigars and cigarillos: according to a recent study, 13.6% of high school students smoked cigars in the past 30 days.⁷

Chewing tobacco (loose leaf, plug, twist): some young people may appear to be chewing gum when they're actually chewing smokeless tobacco. Almost one out of five white high-school-age males currently use smokeless tobacco.⁸

Snuff or “Dip”: moist ground tobacco that is placed between the lip and gums, usually leading to spitting.

Snus: small pouches of dry tobacco that are placed between the gum and lip but are usually not spitted

Ways to start the conversation

- **Look for openings.** Be alert for opportunities to talk about not using tobacco. If your daughter asks for permission to go to a party on Friday night, talk about the situations she might encounter and how she can deal with them. If your son mentions the rules his high school coach has set down for a team, discuss some of the health reasons for those rules.
- **State your own values clearly.** Younger children may respond well to simple rules, such as “In this family we don’t smoke. I don’t want you to smoke.” As your child grows older, she may be more concerned with fitting in with peers. But she is still listening closely to what you have to say—even if it doesn’t feel that way at times.
- **Emphasize what matters to your child.** You know your child better than anyone. That puts you in a great position to know which messages about not using tobacco may make the biggest impression.
- **Focus on short-term consequences.** As adults, we know that tobacco can lead to life-threatening illnesses such as heart disease, emphysema, and lung cancer. But most kids don’t worry about long-term risks. They can’t imagine what it’s like to be older or to be sick. Make sure you also focus on the immediate consequences of smoking. Kids don’t like bad breath, smelly clothes, yellow teeth, or poor performance in sports, which can all be caused by using tobacco.
- **Run a reality check.** Kids tend to overestimate the number of children their age and older who engage in all sorts of risky behaviors, including smoking, using drugs, and drinking alcohol. Make sure your child knows that the large majority of high school students don’t smoke.⁹
- **Talk about peer pressure.** Acknowledge some of the tough situations your child may face, and suggest positive ways of dealing with them. Remember, too, that positive peer pressure can help keep your child away from tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs. Talk about classmates and friends your child admires who don’t engage in these behaviors.
- **Point out the costs.** Figure out together how much it would cost each year to smoke and how many hours it would take, at typical teen wages, to earn that. Then talk about what else your kids might do with that money.
- **Set the rules.** Tell your child the consequences for using tobacco in your family. If you discover your child is using tobacco, make sure you follow through on the consequences you set.

“My parents talk to me all the time about different things. Sometimes it’s hard. But knowing what they think about important things really helps me make up my mind.”

—Jillian, New Jersey



ParentFurther is a website with research-based, practical advice to help parents talk to their kids about not using tobacco—and all kinds of other issues.

Visit ParentFurther online at www.parentfurther.com

Some of the things you will find on ParentFurther include:

- tips on how to talk to your kids about not using tobacco, including ways to listen and respond
- information on peer pressure and how you can help your kids say no to negative peer pressure and yes to positive peer pressure
- conversation starters for tough issues
- a free parenting e-newsletter filled with current topics and practical ideas
- interactive quizzes and activities
- links to other helpful resources for more information

More Information on Youth Tobacco Use Prevention:

American Cancer Society
www.cancer.org

CDC’s Youth Tobacco Prevention
www.cdc.gov/tobacco/youth/index.htm

Office of the Surgeon General
www.surgeongeneral.gov

American Lung Association
www.lungusa.org

National Institute on Drug Abuse
www.nida.nih.gov

1. Johnston LD, O’Malley PM, Bachman PM, Schulenberg JE. Monitoring the Future: Smoking Continues Gradual Decline Among U.S. Teens, Smokeless Tobacco Threatens a Comeback Ann Arbor (MI): University of Michigan News Service, 2009 2. Joseph Califano, Jr., How to Raise a Drug-Free Kid (New York: Fireside Books, 2009), xx. 3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Bidis and Kreteks,” May 29, 2009, http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/fact_sheets/tobacco_industry/bidis_kreteks/ 4. Ibid. 5. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Hookahs,” September 16, 2009, http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/fact_sheets/tobacco_industry/hookahs/ 6. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Cigars,” May 29, 2009, http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/fact_sheets/tobacco_industry/cigars/ 7. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance,” Surveillance Summaries, MMWR 57, no. SS-4 (2008): 69. 8. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, The NSDUH Report: Perceptions of Risk from Substance Use among Adolescents (Rockville, MD: 2009). 9. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance,” Surveillance Summaries, MMWR 57, no. SS-4 (2008): 11.