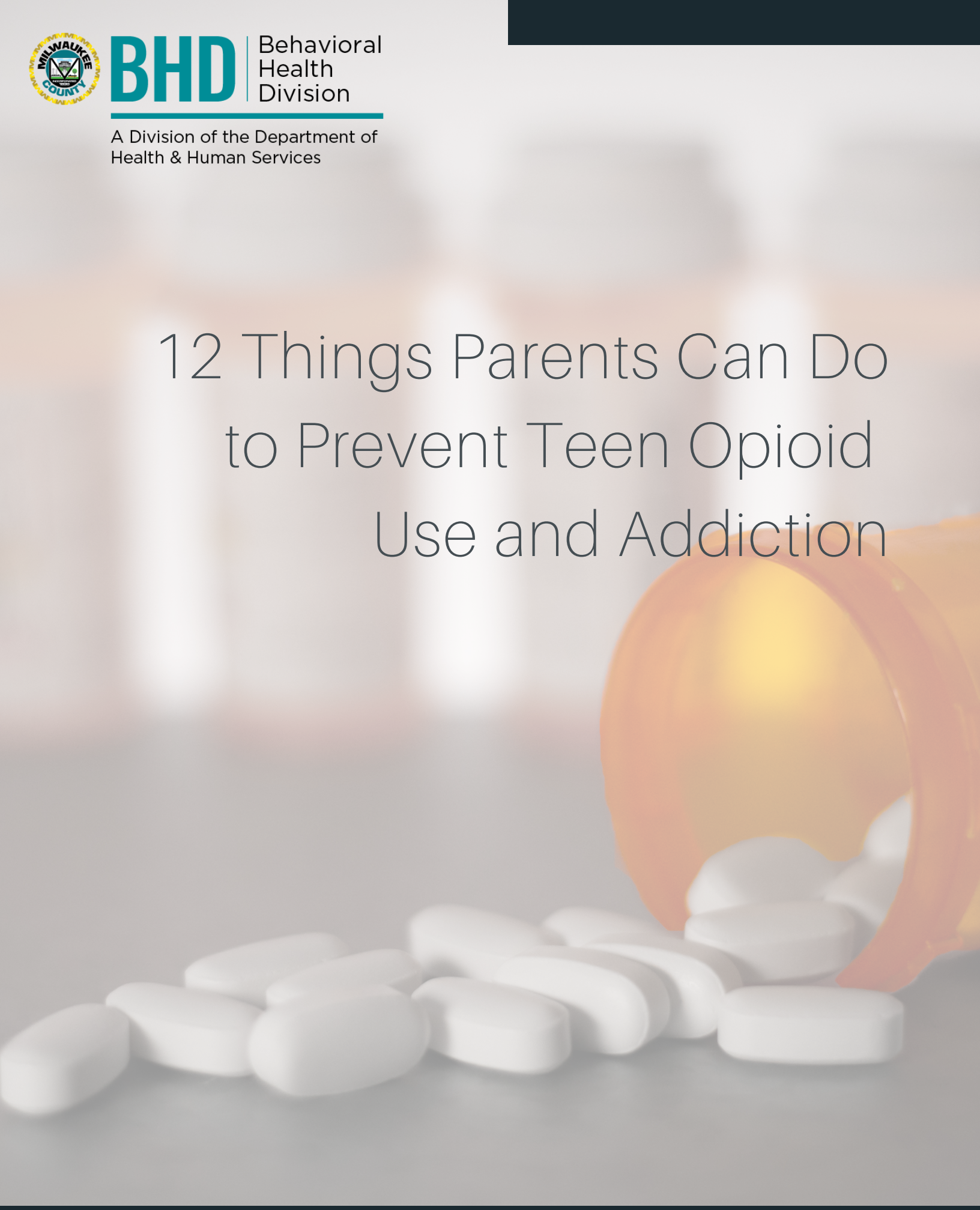
BHD Behavioral Health Division

A Division of the Department of Health & Human Services

12 Things Parents Can Do to Prevent Teen Opioid Use and Addiction



Introduction

Just as we build protection against other medical conditions well before the symptoms are likely to appear, it is essential that we begin strengthening our kids' protective factors against the disease of addiction prior to the teen years, and well in advance of situation when they are offered drugs or alcohol.

This toolkit translates the science of prevention into simple strategies parents and caregivers can incorporate into busy daily lives -- to do what we can to protect our kids from developing an addiction later in life.

Talk Early & Often

The research is clear– talk early and often with your kids about the risks of using alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, prescription medications and other substances. This isn't a one-time chat, but an ongoing dialogue that will change over time.

Try to bring it up in casual settings where everyone can talk freely, such as during a meal, on a walk, or while in the car. Talking about teen substance use does not increase usage– in fact, just the opposite.

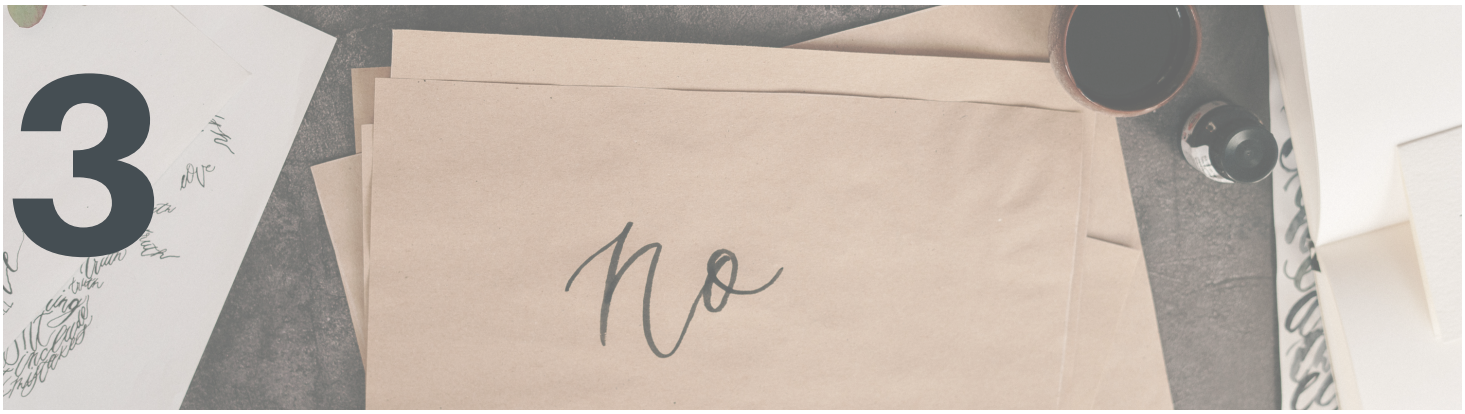
Talking about addiction can be hard. Take some time to think about your own relationship to substances, and whether your family has a history of addiction. If you drink alcohol in front of your child, that's an opportunity to explain the differences between adult and adolescent brains, and why it is so important for them to delay substance use until their brain is fully developed in their twenties.

Children whose parents talk to them about the risks of drugs and alcohol use are 50% less likely to use substances.[1]

Support Healthy Activities

Two of the key factors that reduce the risk of kids developing addictions are "healthy attachment" and "prosocial engagement," which are fancy words for feeling like you belong and are engaged in positive activities.

Whether it's sports, church, Future Farmers of America, 4-H, music, drama, volunteering, or surfing, kids do better when they are kept busy and feel part of a healthy community. It turns out those extracurriculars are less about résumé-building and more about building protective factors to keep them safe!



Set Clear Expectations of No Use

A key element in preventing the development of a substance use disorder is delaying the age of drug and alcohol use initiation, especially while the adolescent brain is still developing. Remind your kids that you expect them not to use alcohol or drugs, and be clear about these expectations.

Don't assume that they know what you are thinking.More than 80% of kids ages 10-18 say their parents are the biggest influence on their decision to drink or not drink alcohol. [2]

Practice Refusal Skills

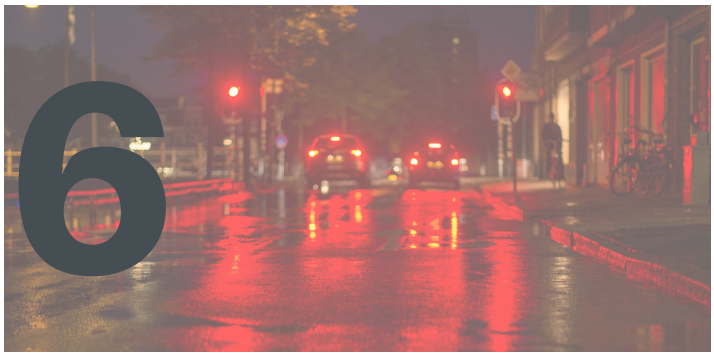
Practice key messaging that your kids can use in risky situations. For example, a conversation with your kids about how to respond to offers from peers or others to drink or use drugs with specific responses can help prepare adolescents. Responses such as, "No thanks, I have a game," or "Nope, but I'll take a water," can help them manage difficult social situations. Even let them blame you. "My parents are strict , we've got to be really healthy."

Refusal Skills by Category

Category	Example
Simple	No, thanks.
Declarative	No, I don't drink. No, I don't do drugs.
Excuses	No, I'm the designated driver. No, I could get suspended from the team. Not tonight, I have a big game. No, my parents are strict. No, my parents drug test me. No, my coach is strict about that stuff.
Alternatives	No, but can I grab a water? No, but let's [insert alternative activity].
Reversal	No, why are you messing with that crap? No, I thought we were friends?

Establish Clear Consequences

Be clear, consistent, and specific about what the immediate consequences of substance use are in your family. Rather than saying "you'll be grounded" or "you'll be in big trouble," be specific: If you use alcohol or drugs, then the consequence will be X for Y amount of time. On the flip side, remember to reward your child for healthy behaviors and positive decision-making.



It's Not Your Job to Be Cool

It's tempting to want to be friends with our kids, but what they need most is a parent to guide and support them safely into adulthood by setting clear expectations and holding them accountable. It's important to let kids know that if they find themselves in a risky situation, they should always feel comfortable calling on us to come pick them up.

Do Not Provide Alcohol or Drugs to Your Teen

It's understandable to think that kids would be safer doing something if we are there to monitor them, but this doesn't extend to substance use.

Parents condoning or supplying alcohol to their teens– sometimes referred to as "social hosting"– increases adolescent alcohol usage, as well as other unsafe behaviors. [3]

Teen drinking is not inevitable. Take steps to limit access to substances, don't partake in social hosting, and remind other parents that adolescent substance use is dangerous no matter where it happens.

Pay Close Attention

It can seem like kids need us less as they grow up, but staying engaged throughout the adolescent years is critically important. Stay involved in your growing kids' lives.

Build relationships with other parents in your community and work with them to keep tabs on where teens are gathering and what they are doing.

Let other parents know that your kid is not allowed to use substances under any circumstance, and ask about their house rules regarding alcohol and drug use. Be transparent with your kids about having these conversations– it is possible to give them freedom, while also doing your job to keep them safe.

Carve out Family Time

As you nurture your kids' passions outside of the home, remember to also carve out family time.

Research shows that spending time with family members and loved ones– bonding over favorite activities or talking about your days– has a long-lasting positive impact and strengthens healthy attachment (even if your teen claims they would rather be doing anything else!).[4]

Quality time builds trust and strengthens relationships, which increases the likelihood that if your teen starts to struggle with substance use or another issue, they'll feel more comfortable coming to you for advice and support.

Prioritize Sleep

Getting a good night's sleep is critical for mental and physical health– especially during the adolescent years when brains are undergoing such an important phase of growth and development.

Make sleep a priority in your household and find ways to ensure that your child is getting enough rest, such as by implementing lights-out guidelines when appropriate or reducing screen-access before bed. A lack of sleep may not seem like a big deal, but over time it can lead to serious health conditions and make your teen more susceptible to using substances.

Six to twelve-year-olds need 9-12 hours of sleep per night, while teenagers aged 13–18 years should sleep 8–10 hours per night.[5]

Help Your Teen with an Escape Plan

Pressure from peers can be difficult for adolescents to navigate.-- whether it's being at a party with alcohol, in a car with someone drinking or using drugs, or other risky situations with peers. Setting up an escape plan beforehand can help your teen exit difficult situations.

Start a conversation with your teen about peer pressure and difficult scenarios. Build together an escape plan, a secret code that they can text a parent or caregiver to be immediately picked up by an adult and exit the situation. Some have called this an X strategy, and text an X to a parent. Others have decided on a code word or emoji that signifies they need help with their exit plan, whether sushi, or pineapple or another agreed upon message.

Let them know that if they feel uncomfortable for any reason in a situation, they have a way out.

Intervene Early

Substance use disorders get worse over time. The earlier treatment starts the better the chances for long-term recovery. Many families are wrongly told to "wait for rock bottom" and that their loved one needs to feel ready to seek treatment in order for it to work. The idea that we should wait for the disease to get worse before seeking treatment is dangerous. Imagine if we waited until stage 4 to treat cancer. Decades of research has proven that the earlier someone is treated, the better their outcomes—and that treatment works just as well for patients who are compelled to start treatment by outside forces as it does for those who are self-motivated to enter treatment.

Signs & Symptoms

- Behaving differently for no apparent reason — such as acting withdrawn, frequently tired or depressed, or hostile
- Disinterest in activities that were previously enjoyable
- Loss of money, missing valuables, and borrowing
- Change in daily routine
- Loss of interest in overall health, hygiene, preventative and dental care
- Changes in mood
- Change in weight or appearance
- Change in weight, eating or sleeping habits
- A decline in performance at school
- Change in peer group
- Secrecy regarding phone
- A tendency to disappear for hours at a time
- Deteriorating relationships
- Inability to be present when in conversation

DSM-5

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, or DSM-5, is the American Psychiatric Association's gold-standard text on mental health that was crafted by hundreds of mental health experts.

The DSM-5 has eleven criteria, or symptoms, for substance use disorders based on decades of research.

Symptoms of substance use disorders in the DSM 5 fall into four categories: 1) impaired control; 2) social problems; 3) risky use, and 4) physical dependence.

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Categories of SUD Symptoms			
Impaired Control	Social Problems	Risky Use	Physical Dependence
Using more of a substance or more often than intended Wanting to cut down or stop using but not being able to	Neglecting responsibilities and relationships Giving up activities they used to care about because of their substance use Inability to complete tasks at home, school or work	Using in risky settings Continued use despite known problems	Needing more of the substance to get the same effect (tolerance) Having withdrawal symptoms when a substance isn't used

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3 Van der Vorst, H.; Engels, R.C.; and Burk, W.J. Do parents and best friends influence the normative increase in adolescents' alcohol use at home and outside the home? Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs 71(1):105–114, 2010.

4 Kosterman, R.; Hawkins, J.D.; Spoth, R.; Haggerty, K.P.; and Zhu, K. Effects of a preventive parent-training intervention on observed family interactions: Proximal outcomes from Preparing for the Drug Free Years. Journal of Community Psychology 25(4):337–352, 1997.

5 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018, September 18). Healthy Schools - Sleep and Health. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/sleep.htm.

The Addiction Policy Forum

The vision at the Addiction Policy Forum is to eliminate addiction as a major health problem by translating the science of addiction and bringing all stakeholders to the table. The organization works to elevate awareness around substance use disorders and help patients and families in crisis. Founded in 2015, Addiction Policy Forum empowers patients and families to bring innovative responses to their communities and end stigma through science and learning.

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