

TALKING WITH YOUR CHILD ABOUT SUBSTANCE USE

Talking about substances isn't a one-time "big talk." It is a series of small, open, and ongoing conversations that evolve as your child grows.



1

Ground Yourself First

Regulation first. Conversation second.

Your reaction in the first moments can influence whether your child feels safe opening up again.

- Take one slow breath
- Notice the urge to lecture, punish, or panic
- Give your nervous system a moment to settle

2

Lead with Curiosity

When conversations begin with accusatory questions, kids often feel cornered and may shut down or become less open. Curiosity creates a bridge for more open conversation.

Common Reflex	Curious Response
"Why would you do that?"	"What did you hope (the drug) would do for you in that moment?"
"What were you thinking?"	"What was the 'vibe' or the feeling in the room right before it happened?"
"Who gave that to you?"	"Help me understand what was going on for you emotionally beforehand."

3

Focus on the Behavior

When we label a child's character, they may begin to see the label as who they are. Focus on the specific behavior instead so the path to change stays open.

Common Reflex	Behavior-Focused Response
"You're so irresponsible."	"I'm concerned about the choice you made, not about who you are as a person."
"You're throwing your life away."	"I care about your safety, and this choice worries me."
"You're a liar."	"This makes it harder for me to trust right now, and I want us to work on rebuilding that."

Use "I" statements (e.g., "I feel worried when...") to express concern without triggering defensiveness or shame.

4

Understand the Function of the Behavior

Kids rarely use substances “just because.” Often, the substance is solving a problem for them in the moment. If we don’t understand the problem, it’s harder to help them find a healthier solution.

Common reasons substances may feel helpful:

- Reducing social anxiety
- “It helps me talk to people without feeling awkward.”
- Numbing difficult emotions
- “It quiets my anxiety or stress for a while.”
- Managing pressure or exhaustion
- “It helps me stay up to study.”
- “It helps me stop thinking about my grades.”

How to ask (gently):

- “What did the substance do for you in that moment? Did it make things feel easier or different?”
- “If you weren’t using it, what feeling do you think might have been there instead?”

5

Pair Validation with Clear Boundaries

Validation is not the same as approval. You can acknowledge your child’s feelings while still holding firm on your family’s safety expectations.

Example language:

“I understand that using (substance) made you feel less anxious in the moment, and I’m still not okay with it. My job is to keep you safe.”

“I hear that you felt pressured to fit in, and we need to talk about our expectations for safety in this house.”

“I can understand why that felt helpful in the moment, and we still need to find safer ways to handle that.”

6

Warning Signs

Consider seeking professional support if you notice:

- Increasing frequency of substance use
- Secrecy or isolation
- Significant mood shifts
- Academic decline
- Risk-taking behavior

7

Keep the Door Open

End conversations with connection. Remember: connection protects more than control.

- “Thank you for telling me.”
- “I’m glad you came to me.”
- “We’ll figure this out together.”

Scan the code to schedule an appointment with Dr. Sydney Brinson ▶▶▶



Dr. Brinson is a licensed clinical psychologist dedicated to providing evidence-based, compassionate care to teens, young adults, and adults. She specializes in treating with generalized anxiety, social anxiety, panic attacks, OCD, and depression. She has extensive experience working with clients whose concerns about alcohol or other drugs overlap with anxiety, mood, and day-to-day functioning.