

The Consequences of Sexting

In an effort to connect with peers, some [youth begin to send sexually explicit text messages](#) to their friends. They may also send photos that include full or partial nudity. This is called “sexting”. Some teens don’t see it as a big deal but the consequences of sexting may be very significant.

Sexting Warrants Help From Parents

Sexting often occurs when a boy or girl asks someone else to send them nude or semi-nude photos. Many girls who have sent such pictures say they did so because a boy pressured them. Other times, a girl may volunteer to send sexual images of herself, or even ask a guy to send indecent snaps. The feeling of being wanted or the excitement of exploring sexual curiosities can be very enticing to some teens. Given the consequences of sexting, help from parents is advised.

Sexting is damaging for girls *and* guys. Girls, who should be treated with honor and respect, are instead viewed as objects whose purpose is to provide gratification. They often begin to see themselves in that light. Guys quickly learn lessons about male-female relationships that are unrealistic. This can lead to pornography addiction and relationship failures.

Beyond that, transmitting naked pictures of a minor (in most states, a person under 18) [legally constitutes child pornography](#). Many adolescent minors have faced charges for transmitting nude pictures of themselves. Additionally, some teen boys have even faced child pornography charges. One of the consequences of sexting is being placed on sex offender registries for sharing pictures of girlfriends.

Sadly, many teens have been victimized by their boyfriends or girlfriends. A promise may have been made to keep nude pictures confidential. However, after a breakup there’s no guarantee. Teens can seek revenge by posting these photos online (often called “revenge porn”). Also, once a photo gets posted electronically, there’s no controlling who else might see it. Cyberbullying can ensue. The results—violation of privacy, ruined reputation and repercussions from parents—can be devastating. The humiliation can be so overwhelming that some boys and girls have committed suicide.

Being Proactive

Help from parents is essential, beginning with them [monitoring their kids’ technology use](#). Your teen does not have a “right” to online privacy from *you*. The eventual goal is to have your child learn self-control and self-monitoring. However, remember that your teen’s brain is still developing and often not ready to handle technology’s numerous dangers. The teen brain is primed for risk, sensation seeking and novelty. These things, when harnessed correctly and according to God’s design, will enable them to leave home someday. On the other hand, one of the consequences of sexting is addiction. Technology is addictive, but especially when it involves sexual imagery.

Help From Parents Requires Intentional Involvement

The best approach to sexting is to prevent it. Here are some things you can do to minimize the risks of sexting:

- Have the talk – Have ongoing conversations about the beauty of sex as God created it. Emphasize to your daughter that she's worthy of respect and that her body should be treated with respect. Remind her that she also needs to respect the young men in her life. Teach your son the importance of treating girls as sisters in Christ who bear the image of God. And, emphasize the need for your son to respect the body God gave Him.
- Openness – Discuss the topic of sexting. Ask your child if she knows if kids at school are sexting. Has anyone ever sent her an explicit photo, or asked her to send one? Ask her thoughts on the topic, and also how she *feels* about it. Make sure she understands the consequences of sexting. Talk about the heartache that can come from what might seem like harmless sharing of photos.
- Legal Realities – Make sure your child knows there are legal ramifications for sharing sexually explicit photos of a minor.
- Safety – Let your child know that it's safe for her to confide in you if she ever has made a mistake in this area. Fear of an explosive reaction never inspires a child to be open. Help from parents is most effective when it is given with a balance of [grace](#) and truth.
- True Freedom – Remind your child that freedom is found in being trustworthy. Therefore, all electronic devices [will be open to your eyes](#) at any time. Consider adopting a “nothing to hide” policy for electronics in your family, without rights to privacy. You may also consider installing software on your child's devices to help monitor and limit their activity.

Helping Your Child

If you discover that your child has been involved in sexting:

- Calmly and compassionately review the potential spiritual, legal and personal consequences of sexting. Your teen likely knows she did something she shouldn't have. Our brains are primed to learn when we make mistakes. Strive for the end result of your conversation to be genuine remorse, learning, relationship building and maturing.
- On your child's phone, block the numbers of anyone who has shared explicit messages with him.
- Ask who your child has shared photos with. You may need to speak with the other teens' parents to prevent sensitive pictures from being spread. Additionally, help from parents can keep a bad situation from getting worse. It's important not to act aggressively toward the other person.
- Emphasize the need to rebuild trust. Your first thought may be to take away her phone forever and ground her until college. Regardless of whatever discipline you impose, she needs to understand that trust was broken and needs to be reestablished. Trust is on a continuum. It is not “you have it or you don't.” There are different levels of trust. Provide measurable goals and verifiable actions she must take in order to move up the continuum of trust.

Teaching Kids How to Respond to Friends

What can your child do if he discovers that a friend is involved in sexting? The personality of your child could greatly influence his response. You may have a natural-born leader or a follower. As a result, this next step could be easy for some kids and very difficult for others. Help from parents includes equipping kids to do the following:

- Respond with wisdom and not judgment. If it's a girl who has been sexting, remind your child that many girls sext because they've been pressured into it. If the "sexter" is a guy, it may be appropriate to remind him of the possible life-changing damage he could do to a girl if any pictures of her got around. Also let him know about the consequences of sexting according to the law. Tell him that a court might not deal kindly with him if photos of an underage girl were discovered on his phone.
- Remind the person involved that he or she is a person [created in the image of God](#)—and therefore of infinite worth. That person deserves to be treated with the utmost respect and should treat others likewise.
- Encourage the person involved to speak with a parent or other trusted adult.
- Reach out to the recipient of the sexting and make sure he or she is willing to delete all images. Ask if this person has sent the photos to others, and act accordingly.

Sexting Abbreviations You Should Know

Remember these can change quickly. Keep up to date on what abbreviations are being used through research, counselors or school staff:

NIFOC – Naked In Front of Computer

GNOC – Get Naked on Camera

NP4NP – Naked Pic 4 Naked Pic

POS – Parent Over Shoulder

Talking to Your Kids About It

Be a noticer

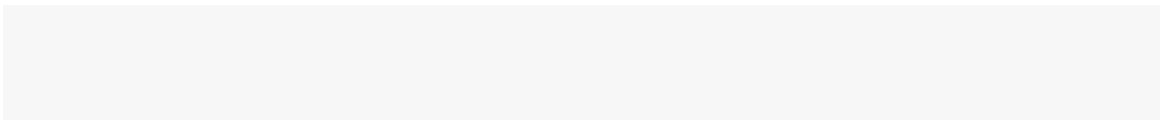
- Despite pressures to participate in sexting, how could the consequences of sexting hurt you far into your future?
- Do you think the person asking for nude selfies really cares about the sender of the images? Why or why not?
- Have you ever seen any sexting messages or know anybody who regularly sexts?

Be a builder

- How can you be compassionate toward friends that have sent sexual texts? What advice would you give them if they would listen to you?
- How would you feel if other members of our family suddenly had naked pictures of themselves posted online or saved on someone else's phone?

Be a connector

- What would you do if someone asked you to send them a naked selfie? What would you tell a friend who felt pressure to sext?
- Why is it important for us to have an “open for review” policy for technology in the home? How can you encourage your friends to do the same in their homes? How can you enlist help from parents?



7 Cell Phone Safety Tips Your Kids Need to Know

It seems that everyone owns a cell phone today, and kids are far from an exception; the average age at which an adolescent receives their first cell phone is about 11 years. It can't be denied that there is value in kids' having cell phones; cell phones can be an effective means of keeping in touch with your kids and keeping them safe; can benefit older kids socially; and can be a good way to give your kids some responsibility and accountability. However, owning a cell phone carries a number of risks. For parents whose kids have cell phones or who are considering giving their child a phone, we have compiled a list of essential safety tips to help your child avoid these risks.

1. Don't talk to strangers.

It's old advice, but it's good advice; your child should only accept calls or respond to messages from people they know, and should also only call or message those they know in real life. While the threat of strangers is often exaggerated, it still exists, and children and young adolescents in particular should take steps to protect themselves by being cautious in whom they speak to using their phone.

2. Know what cyberbullying looks like.

Unfortunately, cyberbullying remains a substantial problem. Your child should know what constitutes cyberbullying and what the consequences are, both for the perpetrator and the victim. Teach your child against engaging in bullying behavior on their phone, and make sure they know that they should come straight to you if they observe cyberbullying, whether they are the victim or someone else is.

3. Don't share private information.

It's amazing how easily content and information can be shared and spread using cell phones. To prevent your child from falling victim to this phenomenon, teach them not to send personal information using their phone or to use their device to post it on social media, if their phone is Internet-capable. Your child should also not give out their cell phone number to those they don't know well. Finally, your child should know not to say or share anything inappropriate using their phone, especially anything rude or sexual in nature.

4. Don't "check in."

Social networking sites such as Facebook offer geolocation, a service that allows users to "check in" to their current physical location and posts this information to their profile. Because publishing your whereabouts online makes you easier to find and follow, this feature comes with some risk, especially for younger users who may be more easily targeted. If your child has an Internet-capable phone, advise them against using geolocation.

5. Practice Internet safety.

Another issue to consider if your child has an Internet-capable phone is their level of access. While your child's being able to access the Internet on their phone can be useful and practical, it can also increase access to unsafe or inappropriate websites and content. Teach your child about what you consider acceptable use of the Internet, and instruct them on how to stay safe online. You may even want to consider placing a filter or limit on their online

mobile activity.

6. Keep it safe.

Your child should know not only how to keep themselves safe, but how to keep their phone safe. After all, their phones are useless to help them stay safe if they are broken or stolen. Give your child a protective case for their phone to prevent damage, and instruct them only to use their phone discreetly and only to have it out when they are using it so that it is less likely to be lost or stolen.

7. Follow the rules.

Be sure that your rules and expectations for cell phone use are clear to your child; this way, they will know exactly what they are supposed to do to stay safe, and can be held accountable if they fail to take those steps. Consider establishing punishments for failing to follow the rules, such as taking your child's phone for a few days.

These tips can go a long way to protect your child from the threats and problems that cell phone ownership may carry. However, to ensure their safety as fully as possible, be sure to teach your child how to stay out of dangerous situations and remain safe in all aspects of life. Additionally, remember that these tips merely concern safety; you should also consider educating your child about other aspects of owning and using a phone, such as etiquette, and even placing restrictions on your child's cell phone use because of these aspects, depending on the child's age and character. Together, these tactics are sure to equip your child to be a safe and smart cell phone user.

The First Cell Phone: Rules for Responsibility

"I can't believe my daughter is old enough for a cell phone already. I'm scared. How do I keep her safe? Am I worrying too much?" ^{[[L]]}_{SEP} Nadine

You're not worrying too much.

Research shows that virtually all kids who are allowed to keep their cell phone in their room overnight will answer a late-night text, and most of them have spent at least some late nights sending texts.

Only 4 percent of parents believe their teens have ever texted while driving, while 45% of teens admit that they routinely text while driving.

Only 11 percent of parents suspect their teens have ever sent, received or forwarded a sexual text or photo, while 41% of teens admit they've done so. Studies show that the pressure to send "sexy" photos via phone (sexting) begins in the fifth grade, on average. The average age of first pornography exposure is around age 8.*

Half of all kids say they are addicted to their cell phones and worry that they use them too much. Their parents agree, and 36 percent of parents say they have daily arguments with their children about their phones.**

Our own experience tells us that it takes a fair amount of self discipline to manage the responsibility of a mobile phone. Most kids are not ready for that responsibility before middle school, if then. In fact, since the prefrontal cortex is not fully developed until the mid-20s, middle schoolers are famous for not having as much impulse control as we'd like. Middle schoolers have a hard enough time managing the temptations of social media, sexting, and addictive games on computers. Handing them a phone that they can use constantly, without your supervision, is like handing a child an addictive substance and then not monitoring them.

So it's natural to worry when your child is ready for her first cell phone, even if you think he or she is generally responsible. Yes, this device is an instrument of connection, and it will allow you and your child to be more connected when you're apart. But it's also a symbol of separation, a reminder that your child is now spending enough time at a distance from you – and other supervising adults -- to need it. Worse, it's a reminder of the dangers lurking in the outside world that could menace your child, without you there to stop them.

The problem isn't with kids today. In fact, the research shows that teens today are more responsible than my generation was in driving, drinking, sexuality and drug use. No, the problem is that smart phones pose new risks.

Luckily, communication and supervision can dramatically lessen the risks. How?

1. Don't give your child a phone too early.

If your child is with a trusted adult, he shouldn't need a cell phone. It's when kids start to walk to school by themselves, or otherwise are without supervision, that they need a cell phone for safety reasons. The younger your child is when she gets the cell phone, the more you're asking of her, because it will just be harder for her to act responsibly with it. Can you trust that she'll follow your rules about which apps to download, for instance? How often does he lose things? Some parents give their younger child devices that are more limited than a smart phone, that can't be used to go online, or to call anyone not authorized by the parent.

2. Agree to rules, before that first cell phone.

Most parents think a "contract" with their child is unnecessary and silly. But a written agreement is a great way for your child to step into this new responsibility without you "over-parenting." When that first cell phone comes with written rules and responsibilities in the form of a signed agreement, young people are more likely to learn how to handle them responsibly. If you ask your kids what they think the rules should be, and negotiate until you're happy, they will "own" those rules. For a starting place, check out the suggested rules at the end of this article.

3. Use parental controls.

There are parental control apps available for all phones, and iPhones have built-in parental controls that can be enabled.

4. Scaffold.

You know how when a building goes up, there's a framework around it? Once the building is complete, the scaffolding is unnecessary. Your job is to give your child support --like scaffolding-- as he learns each new skill.

So don't just buy a cell phone, give a lecture, and hope for the best. Instead, see this as a year-long project. In the beginning, plan to talk with your child every single night about his mobile use that day. Review with him what calls and texts came in and out, what apps he used. Ask how it felt to him to use his phone. Did it change anything in his life to have those calls and texts come in? Were there any challenges as he considered how to respond? When you see a mean text from one friend about another one, you'll have the perfect opportunity to ask him about social dynamics, listen to the dilemmas he's facing, and coach him about how to handle these challenges. Even once your kids have had a phone for awhile, I recommend that parents reserve the right to spot check their messages and texts occasionally without warning. Erased messages should be checked on the bill. This gets kids in the habit of being responsible, because their phone use doesn't feel so "invisible."

5. Talk, and listen.

At the dinner table, comment on news stories that involve cell phones, from sexting to dangerous apps to driving deaths. Ask questions about what your child thinks, and listen more. You might find, for instance that your teen thinks sending nude selfies via Snapchat is fine because the photo will self-destruct. But does your child realize that the receiver can take a screenshot? And does your child know that having a photo of a naked underage person on his cell phone is illegal, no matter how old he is?

6. Role Play.

When a young person is faced with a new situation, how will he know what to do? Roleplays may be hokey, but they give your child a chance to think through the situation and his options. By planting those seeds, your child has more resources to act responsibly in the heat of the moment. I've often launched into parent-child roleplays about the topic of the day to help my child consider various responses, for instance pretending to be a friend asking "Hey, send me that photo you took at the sleepover!"

7. Porn-Proof your child.

All kids will eventually see porn; it is just a question of when. But smart phones give children access to porn, so before you give your child a cell phone, you need to educate him about porn. Porn is almost always dehumanizing, because it depicts sex without warmth, intimacy or love. Most porn today also includes verbal and/or physical aggression toward women. If you need help talking with your child about this difficult issue, check out the book [Good Pictures, Bad Pictures](#) by Kristen Jenson, which you can read with children as young as seven.

8. Know your child.

The research shows that when kids have problems with technology of any kind, it's because they're having problems that go beyond technology, and those problems will show up in the rest of their life. So if your child is mostly responsible, considerate and happy, he or she will probably be responsible with technology, too.

Cell Phone Rules

1. Remember that everything you send can become public. Never write a message or forward a photo or text, that you wouldn't want forwarded to

everyone in your school, plus your principal and your parents.

2. Always ask before you forward a text or photo.

Be respectful. How would you feel if someone forwarded an unflattering photo of you?

3. Always ask before you take a photo or video.

And even once someone has given you permission to take a photo, ask before you post it.

4. If someone asks you to send a sexy photo...

...remember that even with Snapchat (which "evaporates" the photo), the picture can be copied and forwarded to others. Anyone could see it -- every kid in the school, your teachers, your parents. It happens all the time to great kids. Just don't send it. And talk to your parents about it.

5. If you receive a sexy photo...

... immediately delete it from your phone, tell your parents, and block the number so you can't receive more. Possession or distribution of sexual pictures of people who are under-age is illegal. If the person who sent it to you asks why, just say "It's illegal. Let's talk instead."

6. Never post your cell phone number

...on Facebook, or broadcast it beyond your friends (because it leaves you open to stalking.)

7. Never broadcast your location

...except in a direct text to specific friends (because it leaves you open to stalking.) Don't use location apps that post your location.

8. Never respond to numbers you don't recognize.

9. If you receive an unsolicited text, that's spam.

Don't click on it. Instead, tell your parents so they can report the problem and have the caller blocked.

10. Don't download apps without your parents' permission.

11. Don't spend your baby-sitting money all in one place.

You don't need more ringtones. Get unlimited texts so you don't have to worry about budgeting.

12. Don't wear your cell phone on your body

...and don't use it if you can use a landline. Cell phones are always looking for a signal, and that means they're sending out waves that you don't want going through your body. Cancer? Maybe. We don't know enough yet. So why not just be cautious?

13. Leave your phone at a charging station in the living room overnight

...so your phone is not in your room at night. It's too tempting to respond to, and sleeping near it is bad for your brain.

14. No cell phones at the dining room table.

15. No cell phones out of your backpack while you're in class.

And of course turn the sound off.

16. Have a life.

Don't feel obligated to respond to texts right away and don't text until homework is done, during dinner, or after 9pm.

17. L8R – Later! If you're driving, turn off your cell phone ...and put it in a bag where you can't reach it in the back seat. (Make sure you have directions before you start out.) Cars kill people.

18. Nothing replaces FtF.

If a "friend" sends you a mean message, take a deep breath and turn off your phone. Talk to them the next day, Face to Face, about it. Never say anything via text that you wouldn't say Face to Face.

19. Monitor your phone usage to prevent addiction.

Our brains get a little rush of dopamine every time we interact with our phones, so every text you send or receive, every post or update, feels good. Why is that a problem? Because it can distract us from other things that are important but maybe not so immediately rewarding, like connecting with our families, doing our homework, and just thinking about life. Research shows that people who use social media more often become more unhappy, because it causes them to constantly compare their lives to others, and to worry about whether they are being left out of things their friend group is experiencing.

To prevent addiction, make sure you block out time every day -- like while you have dinner and do homework -- when your phone is off. Also limit the number of times you check social media accounts. If you feel like that's too hard, talk to your parents about it and ask for their help. There are programs that prevent your phone from being used at times you designate.

What Can Parents Do to Prevent Vaping?

SIGNS OF VAPING:

- Presence of vaping equipment or related product packaging
- Unusual online purchases or packages
- The scent is faint, but you may catch a whiff of flavoring like bubble gum or chocolate cake
- Increased thirst or nose bleeds
- Decreased caffeine use
- Use of vaping lingo in text messages or on social media
- Appearance and/or behavior changes

Be equipped with facts. Download the [vaping guide for parents](#) and read it over. Remain familiar with vape devices, what's being vaped and the risks associates.

Have conversations. Opportunities to discuss vaping can present themselves in many ways: letters from the school, advertisements, seeing it on TV, walking by someone vaping or passing a vape shop. Be ready to listen rather than lecture. Try using an open-ended question like *"What do you think about vaping?"* to get the conversation going.

Convey your expectations. Express your understanding of the risks along with why you don't want your child vaping. If you choose to set consequences, be sure to follow through while reinforcing healthier choices.

Be a good role model. Set a positive example by being vape and tobacco-free. If you do vape, keep your equipment and supplies secured.

What to Say When Your Teen Asks

Q: Isn't vaping safer than smoking cigarettes?

Exposure to toxic substances may be reduced, but there are still significant concerns when [replacing smoking cigarettes with vaping](#). One's lungs are exposed to fine particles, metals, other toxins and nicotine which are all harmful. You may use the example that "Driving 90 miles an hour with a seat belt on is safer than without one, but neither is safe." The same goes for vaping. And as with all substance use, ask your child why they're interested in vaping in the first place.

Q: Everyone is doing it, why do you care?

You can say, "I know you might think this because of what you see in school or on social media, but the fact is that the majority of teens are choosing not to vape. It might be popular among some kids, but that doesn't mean it's safe."

Q: You smoke, so why shouldn't I?

If you've tried to quit, respond by saying something like, "You're right, smoking is unhealthy and I've tried to quit and wish I had never started. I don't want you to start an unhealthy habit and struggle the way I have."

What Parents Should Know About Kids Using CBD

THC (Tetrahydrocannabinol) is the most well-known component of **marijuana**, and it is the one that “gets you high,” so to speak. But have you heard of **CBD**? Many parents haven’t, or even if they have, they aren’t sure what to make of it or even understand if their son or daughter is using CBD. What’s certain is that it’s becoming more and more widely available, and like **vaping**, is often marketed to young people. Below is an overview of CBD, the numerous forms it’s sold in, its efficacy in treating various problems and current knowledge about its relative safety.

What is CBD?

CBD, short for **Cannabidiol**, is the largest non-psychoactive component of marijuana, and interest in its effects is growing. High levels of CBD and low levels of THC are found in most medical marijuana products, but the CBD industry has started to expand and market their products as “life promoting” to healthy individuals.

There are hundreds of online companies selling CBD, with the market estimated to grow to \$2.1 billion by 2020. CBD tinctures, edibles, sprays, vaping liquid, capsules and items such as gels, hand lotions and shampoos are widely available, varying in price and CBD content.

Some of these products are illegal, while others can be purchased in supermarkets and health stores by anyone. The legality of CBD varies by state, often based upon whether it is hemp-derived or marijuana-derived. Hemp and marijuana both originate from the cannabis plant, but cannabis crops grown for their flowers have high THC levels, while when grown for their fibers and stalks are usually called hemp. Regardless of how CBD is derived, it’s best to check your state laws with respect to legality as it’s a rapidly changing landscape.

Why is CBD so Interesting to Young People?

The U.S. in general is becoming increasingly interested in CBD because of its ability to produce the medicinal benefits of cannabis without the high. It’s seen as a potential medicine without the side effects typically associated with marijuana — especially for cancer, serious chronic pain and epilepsy. For the first time, the FDA approved a new drug based upon CBD derived from marijuana called Epidiolex in June 2018. It provides patients with a concentrated dose of CBD to treat seizures in rare forms of epilepsy.

Teens and young adults are using CBD as a homeopathic remedy for pain relief, depression and anxiety symptoms, acne, insomnia and boosting productivity. However, there’s a crucial difference between CBD that’s studied in labs for medical conditions like epilepsy and CBD products that are sold to consumers for

well-being.

The biggest problem with CBD is that there is a lack of well-controlled trials and little understanding of the long-term effects. Further, the trials are focused on the action and benefits of the purified CBD compound, not an extract of CBD, which is typically found in commercial products. CBD products are for the most part unregulated, so users have to rely on the quality assurances of the companies that manufacture and sell them.



An assortment of different forms that CBD products can take

CBD does not appear to be dangerous in and of itself for short-term use, but many CBD products contain dangerous chemicals or synthetic CBD oil. For example, there were 52 cases of serious adverse effects including seizures, loss of consciousness, vomiting, nausea and altered mental status, in Utah from 2017 to 2018 after people ingested a CBD product. Surprisingly, no CBD was found in blood samples, only 4-cyano CUMYL-BUTINACA (4-CCB), or fake CBD oil. There aren't any known brands that include harmful ingredients, but many producers do not test their products in labs nor share how they are produced. It's difficult to know what you are getting.

For the most part, side effects from CBD alone are minor (dry mouth, dizziness, nausea), but they can be serious if the CBD products interact with other medications. CBD and other plant cannabinoids can interact with many pharmaceuticals by hindering the activity of cytochrome P450, a group of liver enzymes, so other drugs don't metabolize as expected. Steroids, antihistamines, calcium channel blockers, immune modulators, benzodiazepines, antibiotics,

anesthetics, antipsychotics, antidepressants, anti-epileptics and beta blockers could all potentially cause an adverse reaction when taken with CBD.

How Would I Know if My Kid is Using CBD? What Should I Look For?

It may be hard to know if your child is consuming CBD because of the minimal side effects and absence of a psychoactive effect. If you learn that your child is using CBD without a doctor's or your permission, you should question it, and may even want to discuss the health impacts of it with your child's doctor.

The World Health Organization declared CBD non-addictive, writing, "In humans, CBD exhibits no effects indicative of any abuse or dependence potential." They do not, however, recommend consumption. While CBD does not appear to be harmful by itself, CBD producers are largely unregulated, so it's difficult to know what is in products and the level of CBD concentration. Further, it may be worth questioning product claims in terms of capabilities as there are few studies demonstrating effectiveness for the host of problems CBD allegedly addresses. If it isn't hemp-derived, it may be illegal in your state.

The bottom line is that if you're a concerned parent, the best thing to do is to **talk with your child about CBD** just like any other substance. Start a conversation about why they're interested in it, how it makes them feel and why they feel the need to use it. Come from a place of understanding and patience, and work to help your son or daughter make healthy decisions.

Talking to Your Child About Drugs

Just as you protect your kids against illnesses like measles, you can help "immunize" them against drug use by giving them the facts before they're in a risky situation.

When kids don't feel comfortable talking to parents, they'll seek answers elsewhere, even if their sources are unreliable. And kids who aren't properly informed are at greater risk of engaging in unsafe behaviors and experimenting with drugs.

Parents who are educated about the effects of drug use and learn the facts can give their kids correct information and clear up any misconceptions. You're a role models for your kids, and your views on alcohol, tobacco, and drugs can strongly influence how they think about them. So make talking about drugs a part of your general health and safety conversations.

Preschool to Age 7

Before you get nervous about talking to young kids, take heart. You've probably already laid the groundwork for a discussion. For instance, whenever you give a fever medicine or an antibiotic to your child, you can discuss why and when these medicines should be given. This is also a time when your child is likely to pay attention to your behavior and guidance.

Take advantage of "teachable moments" now. If you see a character in a movie or on TV with a cigarette, talk about smoking, [nicotine](#) addiction, and what smoking does to a person's body. This can lead into a discussion about other drugs and how they could cause harm. Keep the tone of these discussions calm and use terms that your child can understand. Be specific about the effects of the drugs: how they make a person feel, the risk of overdose, and the other long-term damage they can cause. To give your kids these facts, you might have to do a little [research](#).

Ages 8 to 12

As your kids grow older, you can begin talks with them by asking them what they think about drugs. By asking the questions in a nonjudgmental, open-ended way, you're more likely to get an honest response.

Remember to show your kids that you're listening and really paying attention to their concerns and questions.

Kids this age usually are still willing to talk openly to their parents about touchy subjects. Starting a dialogue now helps keep the door open as kids get older and are less inclined to share their thoughts and feelings.

Even if your questions don't immediately result in a discussion, you'll get your kids thinking about the issue. Show them that you're willing to discuss the topic and hear what they have to say. Then, they might be more willing to come to you for help in the future.

News, such as steroid use in professional sports, can be springboards for casual conversations about current events. Use these discussions to give your kids information about the risks of drugs.

Ages 13 to 17

Kids this age are likely to know other kids who use alcohol or drugs, and to have friends who drive. Many are still willing to express their thoughts or concerns with parents about it. They may ask you more specific questions about drugs.

Use these conversations not only to understand your child's thoughts and feelings, but also to talk about the dangers of driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Talk about the legal issues — jail time and fines — and the possibility that they or someone else might be killed or seriously injured.

Consider making a written or verbal contract on the rules about going out or using the car. You can promise to pick your kids up at any time (even 2 a.m.!), no questions asked, if they call you when the person responsible for driving has been drinking or using drugs.

The contract also can detail other situations: For example, if you find out that someone drank or used drugs in your car while your son or daughter was behind the wheel, you may want to suspend driving privileges for 6 months. By discussing all of this with your kids from the start, you eliminate surprises and make your expectations clear.

Laying Good Groundwork

No parent, child, or family is immune to the effects of drugs. Any kid can end up in trouble, even those who have made an effort to avoid it and even when they have been given the proper guidance from their parents.

However, certain groups of kids may be more likely to use drugs than others. Kids who have friends who use drugs are likely to try drugs themselves. Those feeling socially isolated for whatever reason may turn to drugs.

So it's important to know your child's friends — and their parents. Be involved in your children's lives. If your child's school runs an anti-drug program, get involved. You might learn something! Pay attention to how your kids are feeling and let them know that you're available and willing to listen in a nonjudgmental way. Recognize when your kids are going through difficult times so that you can provide the support they need or seek additional care if it's needed.

Role-playing can help your child develop strategies to turn down drugs if they are offered. Act out possible scenarios they may encounter. Helping them construct phrases and responses to say no prepares them to know how to respond before they are even in that situation.

A warm, open family environment — where kids can talk about their feelings, where their achievements are praised, and where their self-esteem is boosted — encourages kids to come forward with their questions and concerns. When censored in their own homes, kids go elsewhere to find support and answers to their most important questions.

Make talking and having conversations with your kids a regular part of your day. Finding time to do things you enjoy together as a family helps everyone stay connected and maintain open communication.

If you are looking for more resources for yourself or your child, be sure to also talk to your doctor.