



BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Talking About Drugs Protects Kids' Brains

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. **Today we are discussing the importance of talking to kids about drug use.***

As parents, all we want to do is protect our children and support their development, education, health, and well-being. But as they get older it gets harder and harder to keep them safe, especially when it comes to experimenting with life, including drugs and other substances. When it comes to substances, one of the most important things we can do is communicate openly and clearly about why avoiding substance use is the best decision for their current brain performance, future brain health, and the implications to their future children as well.

When talking to our kids about substances, it is important to be open and frank, without judgement. We should be talking to our kids about being healthy and this can be part of our discussion about what they should and shouldn't put in their bodies. When we talk about the dangers of drugs and addiction it is also important that it be a two-way conversation and not a lecture. Encourage them to ask questions and share their concerns. They may have friends who use drugs or have tried to get them to try drugs. This is where the no-judgement comes in.

Role models are important when it comes to modeling behavior. Sports stars and celebrities who are against drug use are important, and our own behavior is even more important. Research shows that children whose parents (or caregivers) overuse alcohol or use, produce or distribute drugs face a significantly higher risk of substance abuse themselves. As they say, if we are going to talk the talk, we need to walk the walk.

In addition to open communications, being an involved parent is one of the most effective ways to keep our kids drug-free. If we are involved and active in their lives, we are in a better position to recognize any changes in their behavior that could indicate possible drug use. Signs like mood swings, memory problems, weight changes, evasive answers to questions, and abandoning social

activities and friends may mean it is time to intervene.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

Talking to your kids about substance use— whether it is alcohol, smoking, vaping, or drugs — can be daunting. There is no easy answer for what you should say when talking to your kids about these types of behavior, but here are some suggestions from [Harvard Health](#) and the BHI.

- **Learn the reasons why.** Many teens use substances to help manage anxiety, relieve stress, distract from unpleasant emotions, or connect socially with peers. If your kids tell you they have used substances, try to find out why. Your questions may give you a window into their struggles and lead to suggestions for other ways to manage stress. It may also point to problems that could benefit from professional support.
- **Ask and listen.** You want to impart as much wisdom as we can to help your kids avoid the same mistakes that you made but resist the urge to lecture. Encourage their curiosity and urge them to seek out answers on their own. If they feel like their point of view is valued, they may be more willing to engage in the conversation. You don't need to agree with everything your teen says, but make it clear you are listening.
- **Be clear about your rules and values.** Phrases like “be smart” or “make good decisions,” have different meanings to different people. Be specific. If you mean, using drugs of any kind at any time is unacceptable behavior, say that.
- **When to intervene.** While encouraging openness and honesty, you also want your kids to get the clear messages that you want to help keep them safe and healthy. Teens who have a problem associated with substance use may need to have a professional assessment. Your family doctor or pediatrician can help refer you to a specialist, as necessary.
- **Know your family history.** A predisposition to substance use disorders may be part of your family genetics. Living in a home with substance use is also a major risk factor for kids. Studies suggest the genetic link to addiction is strong, complex, and not limited to a single substance. If there is a family history of unhealthy substance use and addiction, an honest conversation can help provide your teens with a solid reason for deciding not to start using in the first place.
- **Find assistance.** There are resources available that focus on reducing and preventing substance use and abuse in your community. Locally, [Healthy Teens Coalition](#) and [Drug Free Manatee](#) promote the health and wellness of youth and teens through programs and education designed to prevent substance abuse.
- **BE BRAIN HEALTHY and adopt a lifestyle** that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote brain health protective factors:
 - Stress resilience
 - Nutrition
 - Physical activity
 - Sleep

- Social connection
- Emotional wellbeing
- Meaning and Purpose
- Cognitive stimulation and creativity
- Engaging with nature
- General health
- Positive impacts

About the Brain Health Initiative (www.brainhealthinitiative.org)

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge approach to protecting brain health, promoting brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is creating brain healthy communities, cultures that foster brain health protective factors and address risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the ***Be Brain Healthy*** movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference.*** To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).