

# How You Can Positively Influence Your Siblings' Substance Use

*By Samantha Richter and Reanna Felix, Getting Candid Youth Ambassadors*

Your family can influence your desire to try substances and how you think about substance use. Siblings, in particular, impact each other's success and wellness -- as well as their risk-taking behaviors (Feinberg et al., 2012). For example, older siblings' substance use has a direct impact on younger siblings' use, as does the dynamics of their relationship (Low et al., 2012). Older siblings who do not use substances or who discourage substance use can decrease their younger siblings' likelihood of using substances (Fagan & Najman, 2005). Other factors, such as parental support and environment, can also play a role in shaping substance use habits.

A person's expectations about, and inclinations towards, substance use are often directly and indirectly shaped by their siblings' experiences (Maiya et al., 2023). This provides an opportunity for siblings to positively influence each other to prevent substance use. There are several ways siblings can support each other to promote prevention when dealing with the presence or pressure of substances:

**Be involved:** Spending time with your siblings and checking in with them regularly can be an easy way to be a positive presence and offer support. This can help you better understand their interests and concerns, and it may provide opportunities to talk about substance use, whether as a concern or just a relevant topic.

**Be purposeful with language:** You have influence on your siblings based not just on the actions you take, but also from the way you talk about substances. Whether you're looking up information about substance use together, addressing specific concerns, or discussing the topic casually, use accurate, person-first language. Avoid normalizing or glamorizing substance use, especially when talking about TV shows, "party culture", and other pop culture. Using factual language centered around prevention is helpful for thinking critically about substance use.

**Build a trusting relationship:** An open and comfortable dynamic with your siblings can lead to the kind of relationship that allows for communication about difficult topics, advice, mentorship and emotional support. Getting to this type of relationship requires self-awareness about the influence and presence you have in your sibling's life. Co-create a stronger bond by demonstrating support through consistency and reliability, and by listening openly without rejecting them.

**Communicate openly:** Communicate openly, honestly and nonjudgmentally with your siblings about the risks and consequences of substance use. Nonjudgmental communication is about creating a safe and open environment for someone to share their thoughts and feelings without feeling criticized or judged (National Council for Mental Wellbeing, 2022).

## EXAMPLES OF NONJUDGMENTAL COMMUNICATION INCLUDE:

- "I want to understand your experience and what it is like for you."
- "I want you to know that I care about you and your wellbeing, and I'm here to support you however I can."

**Encourage healthy activities:** Encourage your siblings to participate in healthy activities, such as sports, music, art and volunteer work, especially when they are dealing with mental health challenges. Healthy hobbies, like physical activity, can provide positive outlets for energy and help build self-esteem (Liu et al., 2015).

**Learn together:** No one expects you to have all the answers to the difficult questions and topics surrounding substance use. Sharing knowledge with your siblings in an open and curious environment can lead to interesting new questions and exploration. You can work together to research the risks of substance use, ways to cope with mental health struggles or how to deal with peer pressure. You may feel more honest and open with your sibling than other people in your life, so it can be rewarding to utilize that dynamic as an opportunity to grow together.

**Offer guidance:** Offer guidance and support to your siblings when they face difficult situations or peer pressure. This can be a mix of guidance from professionals and how you have dealt with similar situations in the past. Remember: You don't have to have all the answers. You can research the topic, whether it's risks of substance use, ways to cope with mental health, or responding to peer pressure, together.

**Set a good example:** Older siblings who do not use substances or who encourage healthy ways to cope can serve as positive role models for their younger siblings. This can be as simple as modeling spending time with friends or going for a walk as healthy ways to cope. This also includes being open to having challenging conversations with a sibling when they have questions or are seeking help, and being honest with them when you yourself are seeking help.

**Seek help:** If you notice that your sibling is struggling with their mental health or using substances, talk to a trusted adult to get them the support they need.

You can be a powerful source of aid and guidance, and a role model for your siblings. Siblings can positively influence the substance use habits of their siblings through positive role modeling, open communication and by offering guidance and support. Youth substance use prevention is a challenge that is often viewed as a job only for skilled professionals, caring parents, and providers, but expanding these conversations to supportive sibling relationships can be a way for you to help, too.

**BACKGROUND:** [Getting Candid: Framing the Conversation Around Youth Substance Use Prevention](#) addresses the rising concern of youth substance use during the COVID-19 pandemic through the creation of a comprehensive message guide and toolkit to equip youth-serving providers with enhanced skills for delivering meaningful substance use prevention messaging.

**FINANCIAL DISCLAIMER:** This project is supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$1,500,000 with 100% funded by CDC/HHS. The content is that of the author(s) and does not represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by CDC/HHS or the U.S. Government.

## REFERENCES

1. Fagan, A. A., & Najman, J. M. (2005). The Relative Contributions of Parental and Sibling Substance Use to Adolescent Tobacco, Alcohol, and other Drug Use. *Journal of Drug Issues*, 35(4), 869-883. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002204260503500410>
2. Feinberg, M. E., Solmeyer, A. R., & McHale, S. M. (2012). The Third Rail of Family Systems: Sibling Relationships, Mental and Behavioral Health, and Preventive Intervention in Childhood and Adolescence. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 15(1), 43-57. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-011-0104-5>
3. Liu, M., Wu, L., & Ming, Q. (2015). How Does Physical Activity Intervention Improve Self-Esteem and Self-Concept in Children and Adolescents? Evidence from a Meta-Analysis. *PLOS ONE*, 10(8), e0134804. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0134804>
4. Low, S., Shortt, J. W., & Snyder, J. (2012). Sibling influences on adolescent substance use: The role of modeling, collusion, and conflict. *Development and Psychopathology*, 24(1), 287-300. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579411000836>
5. Maiya, S., Whiteman, S. D., Serang, S., Dayley, J. C., Maggs, J. L., Mustillo, S. A., & Kelly, B. C. (2023). Associations between older siblings' substance use and younger siblings' substance use intentions: Indirect effects via substance use expectations. *Addictive Behaviors*, 136, 107493. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2022.107493>
6. National Council for Mental Wellbeing. (2022). Motivational Conversations for Youth (p. 5). National Council for Mental Wellbeing. [https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Truth-and-Getting-Candid-Guide\\_Motivational-Conversations-for-Youth-22.11.30-v1-2.pdf](https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Truth-and-Getting-Candid-Guide_Motivational-Conversations-for-Youth-22.11.30-v1-2.pdf)