



Understanding Youth Substance Use: FOR MILITARY PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS



Military families have many strengths. Your child draws upon these strengths to manage the challenges of military life, like stressful family separations, sudden moves, and dangerous operational duties by parent service members. Although military youth are raised in a culture of strength and resiliency, it is important to know that children from military families, particularly during times of parental deployment, may be at greater risk for substance use (e.g., cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana, other drugs) compared to their civilian peers.^[1-3] This fact sheet provides practical information to help guide you, as a military parent/caregiver, to ask questions and provide supportive responses to your child who may be thinking about or actively using substances.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND MILITARY YOUTH

Adolescence is a period when many youth begin to try new and sometimes risky things, including experimenting with tobacco, alcohol, and illicit substances.^[4-6] In the 2018 Monitoring the Future Study,^[6] a study that asked youth aged 12 to 17 years about their drug and alcohol use, the following results were observed:

- 16% had tried cigarettes
- 41% had tried alcohol beyond just a few sips
- Over a third had tried vaping, whether using nicotine, marijuana, or flavored e-liquids**
- 34% had tried drugs, such as marijuana, cocaine, or amphetamines
- 16% reported misuse of prescription drugs (e.g., taking Ritalin, Adderall, or Xanax) not prescribed to them
- More than 50% reported using an illicit substance (e.g., marijuana) in the past 30 days

**Vaping

Vaping is the use of an electronic device to inhale flavored nicotine liquids or “e-liquid.” These flavors are attractive to youth, and include cotton candy, bubblegum and fruit. Vaping can be highly addictive and associated with dangerous health risks.





Military-connected youth, particularly during times of stress (e.g., parental deployment), may be at increased risk for substance use from an early age.^[2,3,7] Additionally:

- Military-connected preteens and teens reported drinking **more often** in a month than other youth.^[2,3]
- **Twice as many** preteens and teens with a currently or recently deployed military parent reported using marijuana or misusing prescription medication in the past month.^[2]
- Rates of illegal substance use can be **three times higher** for preteens and teens with a currently or recently deployed military parent.^[2]



Although military youth face unique challenges and are at risk for increased substance use, there are things you can do to help your child resist using drugs or alcohol. When you have a strong and supportive relationship with your child, this positive connection can promote your child's resilience, even during stressful times like parental military deployment.^[8] Having a strong relationship with your child can also help them develop daily structure and routines, and provides you with opportunities to check in about their activities. Providing your child with age-appropriate responsibilities as well as encouraging their independence and problem-solving abilities might reduce the chances that they will use tobacco, marijuana, or other substances.^[9]

AS A PARENT OR CAREGIVER, IT IS HELPFUL FOR YOU TO KNOW THE WARNING SIGNS OF SUBSTANCE USE. HERE ARE SOME SIGNS THAT MAY INDICATE YOUR CHILD IS USING ALCOHOL OR OTHER DRUGS^[10]:



- Suggestive or direct evidence (e.g., blurry eyes, smells of drugs and alcohol)
- Worsening mood, including depression and anxiety
- Disruptive behaviors, including being more non-compliant than is typical, more argumentative, more secretive, lying, or sneaking out
- Decreases in grades or increases in school avoidance or truancy (e.g., skipping school)
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Changes in peer group
- Negative changes in the parent-child relationship

TALKING TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT SUBSTANCE USE

A healthy parent-child relationship, with open and supportive communication, is particularly critical when talking with your child about the use of drugs and/or alcohol.^[11] One way you can do this, for example, is spending time with your child doing an enjoyable activity like taking a walk. Showing your child that you care creates different opportunities to check in with your child.



You can start a conversation about substances by asking your child what they know about drugs and alcohol and what experiences they might have had with being around/hearing about use. This will give you a starting point to provide a listening ear and shows your child that you are interested in and willing to talk about their experiences. These conversations are also a great place to give information on the risks and dangers associated with using substances.

This is a difficult topic. It is important to remain calm; share that it is okay to talk about this subject. Reinforce that you sincerely care about their wellbeing and what is going on in their life.^[12] Children are more likely to share their thoughts and feelings when you show you understand their experiences and listen to their opinions. In addition, it is important to have clear and consistent expectations regarding their use of alcohol and drugs. Having a conversation can give you a chance to share these clear and consistent expectations.^[11]

There are various ways to talk with your child about their thoughts, feelings, and/or experiences with drugs and alcohol. Here are some ways you might consider starting the conversation:

- *I know that kids drink and try drugs at parties or when they hang out with friends. I also know that there is sometimes pressure to join in. What do you think about that?*
- *What do you know about the effects that alcohol or drug use can have on a person?*
- *What would you do if someone asked you to use drugs or drink? How would you handle that situation?*
- *What do you think/how do you feel about a friend's/family member's substance use? (If you know a particular person in your child's life who uses substances you can insert their name to make the question more personal.)*
- *Sometimes people use substances as a way to deal with things they're struggling with or to fit in. What do you think about that?*
- *I really care about your safety and health. What is it like talking about alcohol and drugs with me/us? Is this something you feel comfortable talking to me/us about? What can we do to make you feel more comfortable to have this conversation?*
- If appropriate, you can follow up with your child by asking, *What substances have you been asked to try or have you tried?*



Although it may not always seem like it, your child does value and look to you for guidance on how to handle social pressures. It is important to balance your messages regarding expectations of substance use with messages of love, openness and understanding.^[13] Be sure to offer subtle and helpful ways that your child can use to get out of a situation where substances are involved. For example, some children like having a secret word or emoji they can send in a text message to you that signals they need to be picked up. This can allow them to blame their “uncool” parents on having to leave the situation if they feel unable to say no on their own. Additionally, you can help your child become or remain drug-free by educating yourself about the risk factors, warning signs and protective factors against substance use and abuse by seeking out different resources available for children and families. For more information, check out this fact sheet from the NCTSN called [Understanding Substance Abuse in Adolescents: A Primer for Mental Health Professionals](#).

It is recommended that you begin your conversation about substance use with your child as early as age 9.^[11] You can also talk with your child's doctor about any concerns you have about substance use.



MONITORING YOUR CHILD

Hand-in-hand with having conversations with your child is the need to supervise or monitor your child. Although monitoring may not completely reduce the risk for your child using alcohol and drugs, it can reduce the chances of these behaviors. Examples of monitoring include^[14]:

- Knowing where and how your child spends their time
- Getting to know your child's friends and their parents
- Becoming familiar with how your child is spending money
- Being aware of your child's social media usage
- Being alert to warning signs that may indicate drug or alcohol use
- Making sure to spend quality time connecting with your child (e.g., eating meals together or watching a show together)



Again, it also is important to clearly communicate expectations about alcohol and drug use, and to be consistent and follow through with consequences for these behaviors.

UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA AND SUBSTANCE USE

For many youth, especially those who have traumatic life experiences, substance use may serve as a way of coping with traumatic stress or reminders of trauma. Given that military children may be faced with a number of potentially traumatic events and unique stressors, it is important that you:

- Identify the stressors or traumatic events that have been faced by your child
- Recognize what strategies your child is using to cope with these challenges
- Support the development and use of healthy coping strategies
- Consider a professional referral for evidence based mental health treatment



It also is important for caregivers/parents to be aware that alcohol or drug use may also expose children to other potentially traumatic experiences. For example, children who use substances may find themselves in unsafe or dangerous situations such as accidents, assaults, or overdose.^[15]

In summary, your child has many strengths that come from being a part of a military family. They also face unique challenges that may increase their risk for substance use. Changes in your child's mood, school performance, sleep, and relationships may be early warning signs of substance use and are good indicators to watch for if you suspect your child may be using substances. Start the conversation with your child early and keep it open and respectful. If you suspect or know that your child is using substances and it is impacting their daily functioning, help is available!



RESOURCES

From NCTSN: Trauma and Substance Abuse

- Understanding the Links between Adolescent Trauma and Substance Abuse: A Toolkit for Providers (2nd Edition)
<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/understanding-links-between-adolescent-trauma-and-substance-abuse-toolkit-providers-2nd>
- Adolescent Trauma and Substance Abuse Online
<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/adolescent-trauma-and-substance-abuse-online>
- Helping Your Teen Cope with Traumatic Stress and Substance Abuse
<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/helping-your-teen-cope-traumatic-stress-and-substance-abuse>

Finding Treatment:

- SAFEProject's SAFE Veteran program: <https://www.safeproject.us/>
- Treatment locator: <https://safetreatmentlocator.org>
- Assistance in Locating Treatment: <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/> or 1-800-662-HELP
- Evidence-Based Approaches for Treating Adolescent Substance Use Disorder:
<https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/principles-adolescent-substance-use-disorder-treatment-research-based-guide/evidence-based-approaches-to-treating-adolescent-substance-use-disorders>

Information on Substance Use for Military Connected Families:

- Talking With Your Child About Marijuana: Keeping Your Kids Safe
https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/marijuana-brochure-military-r14f_508c.pdf
- Talking With Your Child About Opioids: Keeping Your Kids Safe
https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/opioid-brochure_military-r14f_508c.pdf
- Talking with your Military Teen about Substance Abuse
<https://www.militaryonesource.mil/health-wellness/mental-health/substance-abuse-and-addiction/talking-to-your-military-teen-about-substance-use>

General Information on Substance Use:

- UCLA-Duke ASAP Center for Trauma-Informed Suicide, Self-Harm & Substance Abuse Treatment & Prevention ASAP Center
<https://www.asapnctsn.org/>
- Facts for Families: Adolescent Use of Alcohol and Other Drugs:
https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Teens-Alcohol-And-Other-Drugs-003.aspx/
- Facts for Families: Marijuana and Teens:
https://www.aacap.org/aaCaP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Marijuana-and-Teens-106.aspx/
- Information about Alcohol and Drugs for Teens:
https://kidshealth.org/teen/drug_alcohol/
- Information for Teens about Alcohol and Drugs, and their Effects on the Brain:
<https://teens.drugabuse.gov/>
- Tips for Teens – Information about Alcohol and Substance Use:
<https://store.samhsa.gov/series/tips-teens/>

Questions To Ask Your Teens and Professionals About Substance Use:

- Facts for Families: Questions to Ask about Treatment for Alcohol and Drug Use:
https://www.aacap.org/aaCaP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Substance-Abuse-Treatment-For-Children-And-Adolescents-Questions-To-Ask-041.aspx/
- Talking with Children about Substance Use:
<https://ncadd.org/index.php/family-friends/there-is-help/talking-with-children/>



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