

Ten Ways To Help Girls Avoid Substance Abuse

1. Start early! Chances are one in six that a girl will smoke her first cigarette by the end of fifth grade; by the time she's ready for high school, more than half of her classmates have tried alcohol.
2. Remember that teens look at their world in terms of today and tomorrow, not the next fifty years. A girl will be more concerned about the bad breath and smelly clothes she gets if she smokes cigarettes than the threat of lung cancer in some far distant future. Just like she'll be more worried about getting drunk and making a fool of herself in front of her friends than the long-term health issues that plague alcoholics.
3. Be responsible about your own substance use. How can we expect a girl to think drugs are bad when she sees her parents aim directly for the liquor cabinet when they come home from work?
4. Encourage her to be assertive. If she is strong in her desire to stay substance-free, she will leave a party where drugs and alcohol are being used and is less likely to be swayed by negative peer pressure.
5. Help her become a media critic so she can recognize messages that are intended to make her think that cigarettes and light beer will help her be thin, active and attractive. Help her realize that movies and television glamorize drugs, alcohol and cigarettes.
6. Teach her that even the most seemingly harmless drugs can be abused. Although over-the-counter diet pills and caffeine pills can be bought by anyone, they can be very harmful if misused.
7. Help her find healthy ways to manage stress. Many more adolescent girls than boys report feeling a lot of stress in their lives and more girls than boys report that a reason they use drugs is to combat stress. Healthy ways to deal with feelings of stress include exercise, artistic endeavors, letting off steam by yelling in an out-of-the-way place or punching a pillow, quiet relaxation and visualizing a restful place.
8. Help her develop a healthy body image. Teach her that beauty comes in different sizes, shapes and colors, and that a beautiful body is a healthy, strong one.
9. Praise her for what she does, not what she looks like. If a girl gains confidence from her skills, not her appearance, she'll be less likely to suffer from a poor body image.
10. Enlist her aid in teaching younger children about substance abuse, peer pressure, media pressure and stress. If she teaches someone else, she may see herself as a substance-free role model and her resolve will be that much stronger.

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