

Talking to Your Children about Tough Issues

*Preventing Problems with
Risky Behaviour including
Alcohol and Drug Abuse*



Developed through the Chrysalis Programme
And the Walk Tall Together Partnerships

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOKLET?

Just as we know the predictors of heart disease, and the protective strategies to prevent it, we also know ways to influence children's development. We know through research what things reduce the risk to young people of developing problems through risky behaviour.

WHAT ARE RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS?

Risk factors are those things in a young person's life which raise the likelihood that a young person will develop problems with risky things like alcohol and other drugs as well as teenage pregnancy, school drop out and crime.

Risk factors are found in four areas; community, school, family and the young person themselves. Risk factors build upon each other, so the more risk factors present, then the greater the risk. They are consistent across class, social groups and culture and have the potential to affect us all.

Protective factors are those things that help shield a young person from problems. They balance risk factors by either reducing the impact of the risks or by changing the way a person responds to them.

When risk factors are reduced and protective factors enhanced, children are **less likely** to develop problems.

(Hawkins, J.D, Catalano, R.F and Miller, J.Y 1992)

The aim of this booklet is to introduce you to these risk and protective factors. How this is put into action is the challenge for all of us as parents and carers.

Effective prevention involves reducing risk factors and enhancing protective factors.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHILD'S WORLD

Young people today grow up in a world that is very different from the one parents knew as children. Values and technology have changed. Thousands of TV, music and movie images bombard children with positive and negative messages about alcohol and other drugs almost daily. It's a world of heightened stress and insecurity.

As young people approach adolescence, they can develop different needs. They need to fit in and feel they belong. They are curious and questioning. They can become rebellious. Peer influence is a major issue. Young people will want to fit in with their friends and with people they look up to.

They need to be independent and make their own decisions – like whether or not to smoke, drink or use other drugs.

On the other hand, their needs often contradict themselves. They need to have someone who really cares, someone to turn to for important issues. More often than not, that someone is a parent or carer.

Research shows that parents are the number one influence in their child's world.



THE POWER OF PARENTS

Knowing what raises the risk of developing problems with alcohol and other drugs and other risky behaviours is an important first step.

We do know that a strong relationship with parents and carers is a powerful protective factor.

THE RISK FACTORS

There are a number of things that put our young people at risk. Research has revealed a clear set of risk factors that occur more often in people who develop problems with alcohol and other drugs, along with other concerns. These risk factors can be broken down into 4 areas: family, school, community and the individual.



FAMILY

- A family history of addiction.
- Poor family management of problems (including a lack of clear expectations and rules, supervision, knowing with whom and where they are, a lack of praise and inconsistent, excessive or harsh punishment)
- Family conflict.
- Parents having inconsistent attitudes about alcohol, other drug use or crime.
- Broken family structure - i.e. loss of contact following separation.
- Unclear rules about alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.

- Low parental involvement in their children's lives (i.e. parents' failure to notice children's efforts, not getting their views regarding family decisions that affect them, a lack of doing enjoyable things with parents).
- Past problem behaviour with other brothers and sisters - including use of alcohol and other drugs.
- Children who feel their parents don't understand them.

COMMUNITY

- Availability of alcohol and other drugs in the community.
- Community laws and norms that are favourable towards alcohol and other drug use.
- Transitions and mobility (i.e. moving schools a lot, undergoing a major life style change like divorce, moving house or the death of a loved one).
- Poor community management of problems.
- Poverty and deprivation in the community.

SCHOOL

- Early and persistent anti-social behaviour (particularly in boys).
- Academic failure, especially in late primary school.
- Lack of commitment to school.

INDIVIDUAL / PEER

- Young people feeling they do not belong.
- Rebelliousness.
- Low self-esteem or feeling unvalued.
- Friends who drink or use drugs (in fact, this is the most reliable of the risk factors).
- Favourable attitudes towards alcohol and other drugs.
- Early onset of drinking alcohol or other drug use.

When there is a close relationship with our children, the fear of disappointing a parent is often the biggest deterrent to risky behaviour.

THE PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Research has identified the following factors that are considered protective in nature. They buffer exposure to risk.

Some of these protective factors we are born with. Others can be positively influenced by parents, carers, teachers, other family members and friends. What are these protective factors?

- Bonding - feeling you belong (this includes having opportunities and skills to make meaningful contributions, and being recognised for those contributions).
Bonding is at the heart of prevention. We are more likely to follow the rules and expectations from those we have a bond with.
- Clear, healthy and consistent standards from the family and support systems. This includes clear rules about things like alcohol and other drugs.
- Gender (given equal exposure to risks, girls are less likely to develop health and behaviour problems in adolescence than boys).
- Having a resilient temperament - the ability to bounce back from misfortune or adjust to change.
- Raised self-esteem.
- Having positive social skills - the skills to make healthy choices, and cope with everyday life.
- Alternative activities - not only having things to do, but having the opportunities to get involved and feeling part of something.

WHAT CAN PARENTS AND FAMILIES DO?

Now that you have a better understanding of the factors that put your child at risk, there are two approaches to address these risks and build protective factors.

- Help your children feel involved in the family, school and community.
- Work on your communication with your children.

HOW CAN WE DO THIS?

- It is a process, not an event. It cannot be done overnight.
- Good communication and listening is so important.
- It is being involved and showing you care.
- This process must start early. Children are impressionable about things like smoking and drinking as early as 5 years of age.

NO LECTURES – USE LEARNING MOMENTS

While young people want information and advice, they don't want to be lectured. They do want to be able to talk about important issues, just not in a forced manner. Use any opportunities you can – learning moments – to start a conversation about something you feel is important. Longer conversations may develop later.

SET AN EXAMPLE FOR YOUR CHILDREN

What you say and do must be consistent. Children of drinkers are more likely to drink. Keeping large amounts of drink in the house is only inviting its use. Children will copy what you do. If you do use alcohol, consider how you can use it responsibly. Try not to glamorise it or use it to solve problems.

BE FACTUAL

Increase your knowledge about drugs so you can discuss them in a straight forward, calm manner. Scare tactics and exaggerated stories have been shown not to work. You don't have to be an expert on alcohol and other drugs, just have the confidence to openly talk about them.

STATE YOUR POSITION

Let your children know your views on alcohol and other drugs. Our children won't know what we think unless we openly talk about it.

HAVE CLEAR RULES ABOUT ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS

Our children need to know where they stand and what is expected of them. Do we have family rules about things like alcohol and other drugs?

BUILD PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Can we learn from young people who do not drink or misuse alcohol? What seems to make a difference? Interviews with 2000 young people who do not drink or misuse alcohol created a glimpse into what will make a difference in a young person's world. This research found that rules and discipline, hopes and dreams, and bonds and connections were important protective factors.

(Lyter L.L & Lyter S.C, 2003)

PROTECTIVE FACTORS START IN THE HOME

Parents and carers can be active at building protective factors.

Some things that help are:

- Help your child develop important life skills like talking about their feelings, sharing problems, decision making, coping.
- Use 'I' messages (I worry that....) to express concerns.
- Set clear rules and emphasise the consequences for breaking those rules. This is particularly important with rules that families have about alcohol and other drugs. Discipline is a healthy way to teach those family rules. Discipline involves teaching, not punishment.
- Know your child's hopes and dreams – children are less at risk if they are hopeful about the future
- Work at understanding your children. Believing a parent or carer understands them is a powerful factor for a young person.

How to show you are involved in your children's lives:

- Express pride in them. Notice their efforts, not just their successes.
- Spend time doing fun things.
- Know your children's friends and their parents.
- Watch TV with your children and discuss what you see.
- Listen to their views. You don't have to agree, but listen.
- Help your children become involved in a range of activities.
- Be aware of where your children are and what they are doing.
- Establish jobs and responsibilities for everyone.
- Have regular meals together and talk about what is happening in their lives at school, and with friends.
- Ask more "open ended" questions other than those that require a one word response.
- When appropriate, get your children's views on family decisions.

These are only some suggestions. Discussing them with other parents can help us share what works and expand our ideas. A workshop and workbook *"Talking to your Children About Tough Issues"* has been developed to help us all as parents and carers build upon these protective factors.

Contact your local drug and alcohol forum for more information.

AS PARENTS WE CAN ALSO:

- Help develop alternative activities for young people and encourage participation in those activities.
- Give encouragement to your children's efforts in school and emphasise the importance of school and training.
- Actively work on prevention programmes or parenting programmes in your area.
- Get involved with schools, agencies and community groups trying to deal with substance misuse. You have something to contribute.

A KEY POINT TO REMEMBER – GET HELP IF YOU NEED IT.

No family is immune from difficulties.
Problems with alcohol and other drugs affect
people of all ages and all walks of life.
We can only do our best to try to prevent it.
If a problem does arise, remember, help is available.

WHERE CAN I GET HELP?

- Your local GP
- Parents Advice Centre
Telephone No: 028 9023 8800
Freephone: 0808 8010722
- Talk to Frank: 0800 77 66 00 (National Drugs Helpline)
- www.edact.org
- www.drugsalcohol.info

Northern Ireland Drug and Alcohol Co-ordination Teams:

Eastern Drugs and Alcohol Co-ordination Team	028 9043 4248
Northern Drugs and Alcohol Co-ordination Team	028 2531 1111
Western Drugs and Alcohol Co-ordination Team	028 8225 3950
Southern Drugs and Alcohol Co-ordination Team	028 4066 0926

Local Contacts:

If you as a parent have any concerns, or need help or want to see more done, contact any of the above groups.



Southern Health & Social Services Board



References:

Hawkins, J.D, Catalano, R. F and Millar, J.Y.

"Risk and protective factors for alcohol and other drug problems in adolescence and early adulthood: Implications for substance abuse prevention."

Psychol Bull 112:64-105, 1992.

Lyter L.L & Lyter S.C

"Why Some Youth Don't Use Alcohol: Protective Factors and Implications for Parenting Skills" 2003. Journal of Social Work in Addictions.

With special thanks to Ed Sipler, Down/Lisburn Trust.