

# Additional Approaches to Preventing Risky Behaviors



Big Brothers Big Sisters

For some Littles, the approach of talking about Sparks, the future, and supports and barriers may not be enough to help them avoid risky behaviors – perhaps because there are other factors at play in the Little's life, because risky behaviors have already become part of the Little's daily reality, or because current circumstances make thinking about the future too difficult. In those cases, there are a number of other approaches, supported by research, that Bigs can try.



## Handling Peer Influences

One of the strongest influences on whether a young person will engage in risky behavior is their peers. Peers can serve as both positive and negative influences on Littles' behavior.

**Reducing Negative Peer Influence:** Peers can be a negative influence in a variety of ways. Keep in mind that for most youth, the way peers influence is not by insistent offers of drugs or coercive pressure to engage in risky behavior. The reality is that youth tend to naturally adopt the behaviors of their friends, and to find friends who share their orientation toward risky behavior. Youth go along with peers' risky behavior because they want to fit in, look cool, seem mature, gain prestige, or think engaging in risky behavior will be rewarding in some way.

### You can:

- Help your Little think about which peers are negative influences, then help problem-solve ways to avoid them, decrease involvement with them, or avoid hanging around with them in situations where engaging in risky behavior is likely to occur.
- Help your Little learn how to plan ahead to avoid situations where it may be hard to not join peers in risky behaviors.
- If direct peer pressure is a concern, you can coach your Little on the development of "refusal skills". (Check out the websites listed in the Resource Guide "Talking About Risky Behaviors")

**Increasing Positive Peer Influence:** One of the best ways to counter negative peer influence is to make connections with positive peers who model and support healthy behavior and good choices.

**You can:**

- Help your Little identify positive peers, then strategize and problem-solve how to make better connections and get more involved with them.
  - Consider helping your Little get involved in structured activities that involve positive peers (sports, school clubs, after school activities, scouts, 4H, church groups, theater, music, etc.).
- Help your Little to identify peer role models, youth who he might not know but who he wants to be more like.
  - Discuss the positive attributes and behaviors those peers have that he wants to develop and discuss ways he can be more like them.

**Reducing Peer Rejection:** Young people are more successful when they have friends. Littles who are disliked and rejected by peers are at higher risk for a variety of risky behaviors and negative outcomes.

**You can:**

- Help your Little identify interests and strengths and get involved in structured activities where she might meet other kids and make friends.
- Help your Little learn social and self-control skills, as discussed below.
- Arrange to have lunch with a socially unpopular Little at school, or find other ways to spend time with him around his peers.



### Improving Adult Relationships

Positive relationships with adults are important for healthy youth development. One of the ways mentoring has been shown to create positive impact is by improving Littles' relationships with their parents. Bigs can help Littles develop communication and other relationship skills they can use to improve relationships with adults at school, with parents or with other adults in the community.

**You can:**

- Provide a non-judgmental and supportive context to improve social and relational skills.
- Model appropriate ways to interact by being a mature, caring adult and avoiding acting like a peer.
- Help your Little practice conversations with adults – if your Little is nervous about asking



her teacher to let her make up a test, help her practice what she wants to say and what her teacher might say in response.

- Help your Little identify positive adults in his school or community and help him problem-solve ways to make better connections.



### Building Skills

Bigs whose Littles really want their help to avoid risky behaviors can raise these issues directly and try to engage the Little in addressing them. Otherwise, Bigs can look for opportunities to address these areas of their Little's life as they arise.

**Emotion Management:** Many young people have difficulty controlling or managing their emotions, including anger. Powerful emotions can sometimes propel youth into poor decisions, especially things like fighting and breaking school rules. There are basic emotion management techniques that have been shown to work. Calming down techniques help Littles to de-activate their fight or flight reaction and engage the thinking part of their brain so they can make good decisions.

#### You can:

- Debrief situations where your Little got very upset: what were the signs she could look for the next time? (e.g. yelling, breathing hard, fast heart rate, feeling hot, seeing red, angry self-talk)
  - The first, and often hardest, step is for the Little to recognize when she is so upset (angry, ashamed, anxious, etc.) that she needs to calm down to better handle a situation.
- Coach your Little on simple but effective techniques for calming down.
  - Deep breathing: breathing slowly, deeply into the lungs so the stomach rises, not just the chest
  - Counting backwards or other methods of distraction: something simple to take their mind off the trigger
  - Brief vigorous exercise
  - Positive self-talk: using calming words internally helps calm the emotion and helps with problem solving
- Help him practice when he's not upset so it comes more naturally when he is.

**Social Skills:** Research has clearly shown that social skills protect youth from engaging in alcohol and drug use and other risky behaviors including violence.

**You can:**

- Model good social skills.
- Give your Little positive feedback when she uses good social skills.
- Look for opportunities to comment on people's use of good (or bad) social skills.
- If your Little is interested, work directly with her on specific social skills.
  - Explain what the skill is and why it is valuable.
  - Model or demonstrate it.
  - Have her practice using it and give feedback.
  - Look for opportunities for her to use it in your interactions and with other people.

**Self-control:** Research on youth development identifies self-control as a key factor that supports a wide range of positive outcomes and protects young people from engaging in risky behavior. Self-control includes being able to manage emotions, thoughts and behaviors.

**You can:**

- Support your Little in developing emotion management/calming down skills.
- Encourage your Little to practice delaying gratification.
  - Look for small, ideally fun, opportunities to challenge him to choose a later, larger reward over a smaller, more immediate one.
- Encourage your Little to put in sustained effort to get better at something she values.
- Help your Little become more aware of his self-talk (internal monologue each person has about thoughts and events) and encourage him to consciously try using more positive self-talk in situations that challenge self-control.



### Other Research-Based Prevention Approaches

**School Connectedness:** Feeling bonded or connected to their school protects young people from engaging in risky behaviors. The goal is for students to feel welcome, safe and connected at school. This has more to do with relationships with school staff and other students than with academic performance. The most effective way to increase school bonding is to improve relationships with peers and adults at school, as discussed above.

**In addition, You can:**

- Help your Little find out about opportunities to get involved at school: clubs, sports, after school activities, student government, anything that can help him feel more a part of school and make positive connections.

**Personal Problems:** One of the challenging reasons young people start using alcohol and other drugs, or even act out at school or engage in violence is as a way to escape from problems,



feelings or thoughts they don't know how to cope with. Getting drunk or high may provide a temporary relief from emotions the young person does not know how to manage.

**You can:**

- Consult with program staff immediately if you suspect your Little might need professional help.
- Help your Little learn active coping skills.
  - Help her learn to actively try to cope with problems rather than respond passively or seek to escape.
  - Help her be assertive and seek help from adults or positive peers in her life.
  - Help her use emotion management strategies then problem solving to tackle difficult challenges.
  - Help her identify positive outlets for stress or sadness – maybe expressing herself through art, music, or journaling.

**Expectations:** Young people are more likely to use alcohol and other drugs when they expect them to have positive effects, when they don't see them as harmful or dangerous and don't see or anticipate negative consequences. Talking about the harms of substance use is an important strategy for reducing risk but one that can backfire or be ineffective if handled poorly.

**You can:**

- Avoid violating the Little's expectations for the relationship by lecturing him about substances and risky behaviors.
- Talk about examples, if you have some, of people you know or know of who have been hurt by substance use. This may be better than facts or statistics.
- Ask your Little about people she knows of in their neighborhood or community who have been harmed through using substances.
  - Be careful because the Little may have family members or other people close to her who struggle with substance abuse and addiction.
- Don't glamorize use, but be realistic about the fact that your Little may have heard that people enjoy how it feels to use alcohol and other drugs.

