



Talking About Risky Behaviors

This resource guide is designed to help you talk with your Little about risky behaviors, especially:

- Using tobacco, alcohol or other drugs
- Skipping school or breaking school rules
- Getting bad grades or not trying hard in school
- Being violent toward others

If your Little is younger (pre-teen) or just doesn't seem to be thinking about these kinds of issues yet, you may want to focus on "risky behaviors" that are more relevant to younger kids- like getting in trouble at school or home.

This guide is about having conversations that protect your Little by helping him see how engaging in risky behaviors would get in the way of having or achieving the things that are really important to him.



Tips for talking about risky behavior

Show your Little you care: Show empathy; try to understand what she thinks, how she feels, and how she looks at the world.

- Let your Little be the expert on her life and ask her to share her perspective and experience, so that you can better understand what she cares about and why.
- Empathy doesn't mean you have to approve of everything your Little thinks or says.
 - While you don't have to approve, try not to respond with judgment. Try to understand why she thinks or acts that way and show respect and care about her even when you don't agree.

Use active listening: Be sure that the way you listen opens conversation and doesn't shut it down.

- Avoid questions that can be answered with a Yes or No- they can make your Little feel like you're interrogating him instead of having a conversation.
 - Instead, ask open-ended questions that take longer to answer and help you learn more about your Little. ("Why do you feel that way?")
- Follow up your questions by putting his answers in your own words and then checking to make sure you understood what he meant.

Don't create unnecessary resistance: It is human nature to be contrary in order to establish independence- this can be especially true for young people, who are trying to define who they are and become independent.

- Avoid trying to persuade your Little why she should avoid risky behaviors: you're likely to find her taking the other side of the argument and thinking of why your reasons don't apply to her.

Strengthen motivation: The goal is to have conversations that help your Little find his own reasons to avoid risky behaviors. The biggest trap you can fall into is being the authority - the adult who has all the answers. His motivation to avoid risky behaviors will be strongest when the reasons are his.

- It will be your job to start conversations about risky behaviors with your Little.
 - Build on conversations you have had about supports and barriers.

- You can say that you want to talk about some things that can be barriers to people getting what they want, that you are curious what he thinks about them.
- Bring up the risky behaviors listed above and explore with your Little how she thinks engaging in them would impact the positive futures she values.
 - Ask about and explore what she thinks.
 - Avoid falling into the trap of trying to convince your Little to avoid risky behaviors.
- Your Little might need help to really think through the impact of risky behaviors on his future. Many Littles only have a shallow understanding of or have not thought through all the consequences of risky behaviors.
 - Ask questions to get past general answers (e.g., “drugs are bad for you”) and get your Little to think through specific ways risky behaviors could get in the way of the positive futures he values.
 - Try providing information, then asking what he thinks about how that could impact him and his goals.
 - For example, if he says “using drugs can make you addicted,” talk about what addiction is and then help him think through how being addicted would affect his ability to have the kind of life he wants.
- Help your Little work her way back from future goals and visions to her choices in the present.
 - For example, if she has a career she wants to pursue, help her think through how risky behaviors now would impact the steps she needs to take to achieve her career goal.
 - Many Littles, especially younger ones, may need information on how their behavior in school now can affect their educational opportunities later.
- If your Little says he thinks risky behaviors would not get in his way, don’t argue.
 - Present him with information, examples of consequences, stories of people you have known, celebrities, etc. and ask how those things might apply to him and his life.
 - For specific information on harms associated with risky behaviors, particularly alcohol and other drug use, see Resources below.
 - For other ideas, ask your Program Staff for additional approaches to preventing risky behaviors.



Resources for talking about risky behaviors

Above the Influence: This website, created by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (a federal government agency) and oriented toward teens, is an easy place to find quick information on alcohol and other drugs, including some of the risks and harms.

<http://www.abovetheinfluence.com/facts/drugsalcohol>

“Parents. The Anti-Drug”: Although the site is designed for parents, it has good information on drug effects on young people’s brains, marijuana and addiction and mental health problems, and inhalants and huffing- a common problem among children and younger teens. <http://www.theantidrug.com/drug-information/>

NIDA for Teens/The Science Behind Drug Abuse: This site (also created by a federal government agency) is designed for teens, but that makes it straightforward and easy to use, and the information is solid. It’s easy to find important facts on most drugs (including tobacco addiction), and there is other useful information on topics such as how drug use and addiction affect the brains of young people. There is also a Parents and Teachers section with lots of good information for concerned adults. <http://teens.drugabuse.gov/>