

A Parent's Guide to Talking with Your Teen About Substance Use

From the adolescent behavioral health team at River's Bend



Why This Conversation Matters

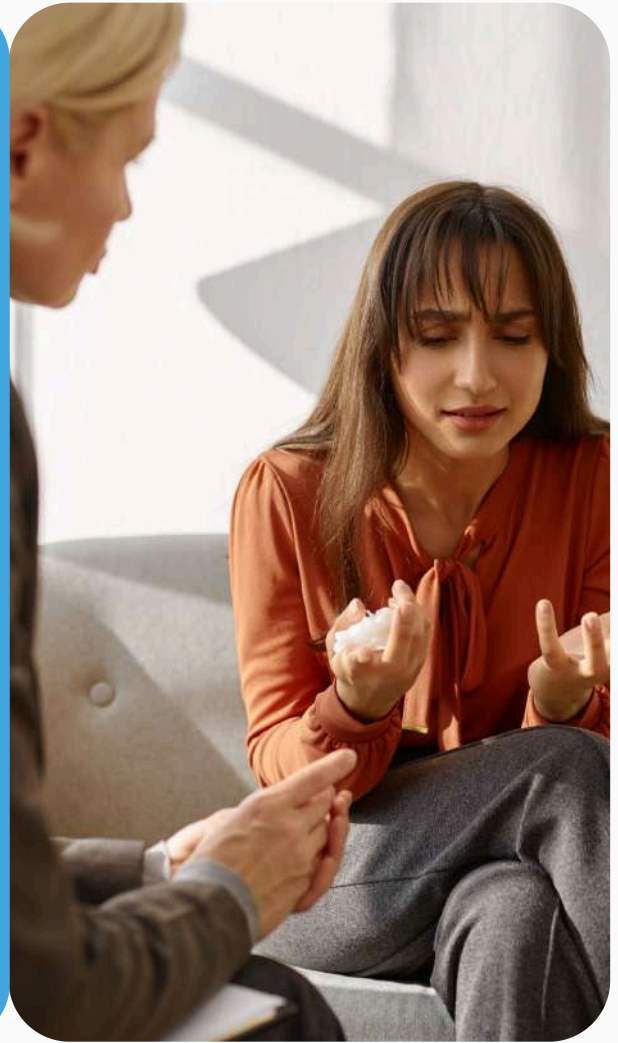
Discussing substance use early can strengthen your relationship and encourage your teen to seek help when needed. At River's Bend, we prioritize compassionate and respectful conversations, as open dialogue promotes support rather than confrontation or shame.

Before You Talk: Setting the Stage

Choose the right moment – Pick a calm, private time with no distractions. Avoid high-stress moments like right after a fight or during busy mornings.

Check your mindset – Go in with the goal of listening and understanding, not “catching” or punishing.

Be informed – Learn about common substances, slang, and signs of use. Visit NIDA for Teens or SAMHSA for accurate information.



Starting the Conversation

Lead with observation, not accusation:

“I’ve noticed you’ve been spending more time alone lately, and I wanted to check in on how you’re doing.”

“I saw your grades have changed this semester. Is there anything going on you’d like to talk about?”

Ask open-ended questions:

“What’s your take on the drinking and vaping that happens at school?”

“How do you feel about the pressure to fit in or try new things?”

Share your values and expectations:

“In our family, we don’t use substances because they can affect your health, safety, and future goals. I want you to know I’m here for you if you ever feel pressured.”





Example Conversation:

- **Parent:** “Hey, I hoped we could talk for a few minutes. I’ve noticed you’ve been spending more time alone lately and skipping some activities you used to enjoy. I’m worried about you.”
- **Teen:** “I’m fine. You don’t need to worry.”
- **Parent:** “I hear you saying you’re fine, and I want to believe that. But I care about you too much to ignore changes I’m seeing. Can you help me understand what’s been going on?”
- **Teen:** “I don’t know... school’s been stressful.”
- **Parent:** “That makes sense. School can feel overwhelming. I’m here to listen, not judge. Whatever’s going on, we’ll figure it out together. But I also need you to know there are certain things like drinking or using drugs that I can’t allow because your safety is my priority.”

Listening with Compassion

Pause before responding – Give your teen time to share without jumping in.

Reflect back what you hear – “It sounds like you’ve been stressed and don’t know how to handle it sometimes.”

Avoid loaded language – Words like “addict” or “ruining your life” can shut down dialogue.

Acknowledge courage – If your teen shares something hard, thank them for trusting you.

Taking Care of Yourself While Supporting Your Teen

Your well-being directly impacts how you show up for your child.

Get your own support – Join a parent support group like Al-Anon or Families Against Narcotics.

Set healthy boundaries – Being supportive doesn’t mean allowing harmful behavior.

Practice stress management – Use mindfulness, exercise, or journaling to cope. You can also try deep breathing exercises, meditation, or engaging in a hobby you enjoy.

Stay connected – Talk to friends or mentors who understand.

Rest when you can – Exhaustion makes it harder to respond calmly.

Listening with Compassion

Remember, this conversation isn't about winning an argument—it's about opening a door. You don't have to cover everything in one talk. Each calm, compassionate exchange builds trust.



“When a teen feels safe to be honest, we’ve already taken the first step toward change.”

— **Kelley Gavigan, LMSW,**
Director of Partial Hospitalization
Program at River’s Bend

Kelley is excited to bring her personal and professional experience to the team at River’s Bend West! Respect, integrity, and compassion are the values that drive everything she does. Her motivation comes from personal experience with substance abuse, grief, and trauma, understanding firsthand that recovery and healing are possible.