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#### Weeding Out Fact from Fiction: Drug and Alcohol Use/Abuse Prevention

- I. Prevention: Upstream/Downstream Metaphor
  - A. Importance of focusing upstream starting at very early ages (3<sup>rd</sup>-grade)
  - B. Definition
    - 1. Stop children from using/abusing drugs and alcohol – unrealistic since don't have control over enough variables in our children's lives.
    - 2. Want to TRY to stop children from using/abusing – stack the deck in their favor.
    - 3. Subtle but very important adjustment to expectations of ourselves and children.
  - i. How to do it
    - A. ID variables put child at risk for dangerous experimentation and/or dependence.
    - B. Create strategies, solve problems and parent with these risk factors in mind.
    - C. Try to delay use and abuse as long as possible.
    - D. Catch dangerous experimentation early.
- II. Variables and Strategies
  - A. Temperament – Get to know your child as individual separate from you not as an extension of you. Pay attention to how they handle change, stress, challenges. Are they more introverted, extroverted, risk-adverse, risk-seeking, highly sensitive, perfectionistic, easily influenced by other's. Knowing your child may not answer the question of whether they are at risk for substance use/abuse. Bottom line – getting to know your child will help you connect, communicate and guide them.
  - B. Trauma – If your child has experienced significant trauma they are at risk due to a state of chronic discomfort in their nervous systems. Proactive therapy may be helpful. Elementary school aged children do best in art therapy when trying to get at complex emotions stored in their nervous systems.
  - C. Home life – Unstable marriage, divorce, depression/anxiety, substance abuse, financial stress, chronic illness, pandemic etc. Don't fool yourself. Your kids pick up on everything! Get help for yourselves. Do your best to maintain structure and create predictability during difficult times. Spend time connecting in simple ways that speak to your child.
  - D. Mental Health – children with anxiety, depression, ADHD etc. are at risk for substance use and abuse. If your child is struggling consistently for 3-6 months get professional help.
  - E. Family History – Very rare for a family not to have some history of substance use/abuse. We still don't know for sure but seems that risk for dependence is about 50% genetic. Good news is that means the other 50% is modifiable. Pay attention to what you can control.
  - F. Adolescence - Puzzling contradiction during adolescence: Close to life-long peak of physical health, strength and mental capacity to learn yet also very sensitive time of brain development, self-discovery, and social-emotional development. They do not think like adults which puts them at risk. The Brain, Thoughts and Behavior:
    - 1. Early human brain development changes in response to experience. Sensitive time for permanent changes (positive and negative) to occur in brain structure and function.
    - 2. Proliferation – Produce new brain cells and synapses (connections) in pre-frontal cortex and beyond (in utero and pre-adolescence). Thickening of the Gray Matter due to cell production and synaptic connections. Pruning: Reduction of brain cells and connections controlled by genes, experience and intensified with stress. Myelination: Brain integration to make communication between cells more efficient and effective.
    - 3. Pre-Frontal Cortex: Purpose is complex problem solving/decision making, planning, memory, attention, execution of tasks, allows us to consider risk and benefits of actions, impulse control.
    - 4. Increase activity of neural circuits utilizing dopamine and greater release of dopamine in response to experiences. Leads to: Impulsivity; increased susceptibility for addiction; hyper-rationality and circular reasoning – think in literal, concrete terms. Look at facts not big picture (vs gist thinking – consider larger context of decisions and use intuition to aim for positive values we care about rather than focusing on the immediate dopamine based driven rewards.)
    - 5. Added developmental milestones: identity formation, increased independence, increased experimentation, risk taking, peer relationships, puberty and sexual development. – Most Teens Survive! Whether we do is questionable! ☺
    - 6. Adolescents can make rational decisions and know the difference between right and wrong. However, when confronted with stressful or emotional decisions they are more likely to act impulsively, on instinct, irrationally, without full understanding or analyzing the consequences of their actions.





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- III. Do your best to delay use/abuse as long as possible! If your child gets to 21 without a dependence there is a very good chance they will never have one.
- A. Parents have the greatest influence over whether their children use/abuse substances. However, you are not the all powerful. Do not minimize these three things:
1. The influence of your own behavior on your children's choices.
  2. The influence your connection/relationship with your child has on their choices.
  3. The power technology/social media has to parent/influence your child. Is your biggest competitor and does not have your child's best interest in mind. Are seeing "age compression" where kids are acting older at younger ages due to exposure to inappropriate content on social media. Puts them at risk.
- B. Positive Feedback Loop – Promote and support positive behavior that supports better choices and mitigates risk. Leads to feeling of happiness, fulfillment, satisfaction which leads to wanting to do more things that are good for us.
1. We all need multiple positive feedback loops to help us find grit and resilience during challenging times.
  2. Help your child figure out what THEY like to do that feels good and is good for them, not what you think they should do in order to get into a good college.
- C. Develop/Maintain positive/healthy connection.
1. Best way to TRY to prevent use/abuse is have a healthy relationship with your child. More about getting it right most of the time, not all of the time. When you screw up, apologize! Your credibility will go through the roof.
  2. Work on family cohesiveness by having meals together, spending time together, put the screens away, be silly, laugh, share feelings.
  3. Positive communication/collaboration – reinforce what your children do right/well more than what they do wrong. Do best not to shame to get your child to listen/obey.
  4. Set realistically developmentally appropriate expectations based on your child not by comparing your child to another. Use books as guidelines not the bible.
  5. Set expectations/consequences proactively and with your children's input.
  6. Give them second, third, fourth chances. They are learning!
  7. Identify your family values and use them as a filter for everything you do as a parent, adult, spouse etc.
- D. Conversations specific to drugs and alcohol
1. These are not one and done. They are ongoing starting in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. (see other handout for specifics and tips)
  2. Ask for permission to have convo.
  3. Make them short.
  4. Do not lecture. Do not threaten. It doesn't work.
  5. Learn to listen more than you talk.
  6. Give them time to process. Walk away.
  7. Provide them with credible resources so child can educate themselves. (i.e., put an article on their pillow. Do not ask if they have read it!)
  8. Don't take what they say literally, particularly when emotional. Look for patterns of thoughts, behaviors, action that are troublesome before you get overly concerned.
  9. Challenge them to look at different sides of the issue not from a place of right/wrong but just to take different perspectives. Don't judge, criticize, correct their opinions.
  10. Talk to teens as adult even when they are acting like children. Want to transition into a more mentorship relationship than adult/child. Does not mean you are giving up your authority or responsibility as a parent. Instead you are learning to let go.
- V. Catch dangerous experimentation early
- A. Know the signs of drug use
  - B. Monitor technology
  - C. Delay giving your child a smart phone as long as possible.
  - D. Partner with teen so know if they are in trouble they can reach out to you, no questions asked. (i.e., safe word they can use if have to call you around peers and need to be picked up.)
  - E. Know their friends. Know where they are.
  - F. Random drug test to catch experimentation early.