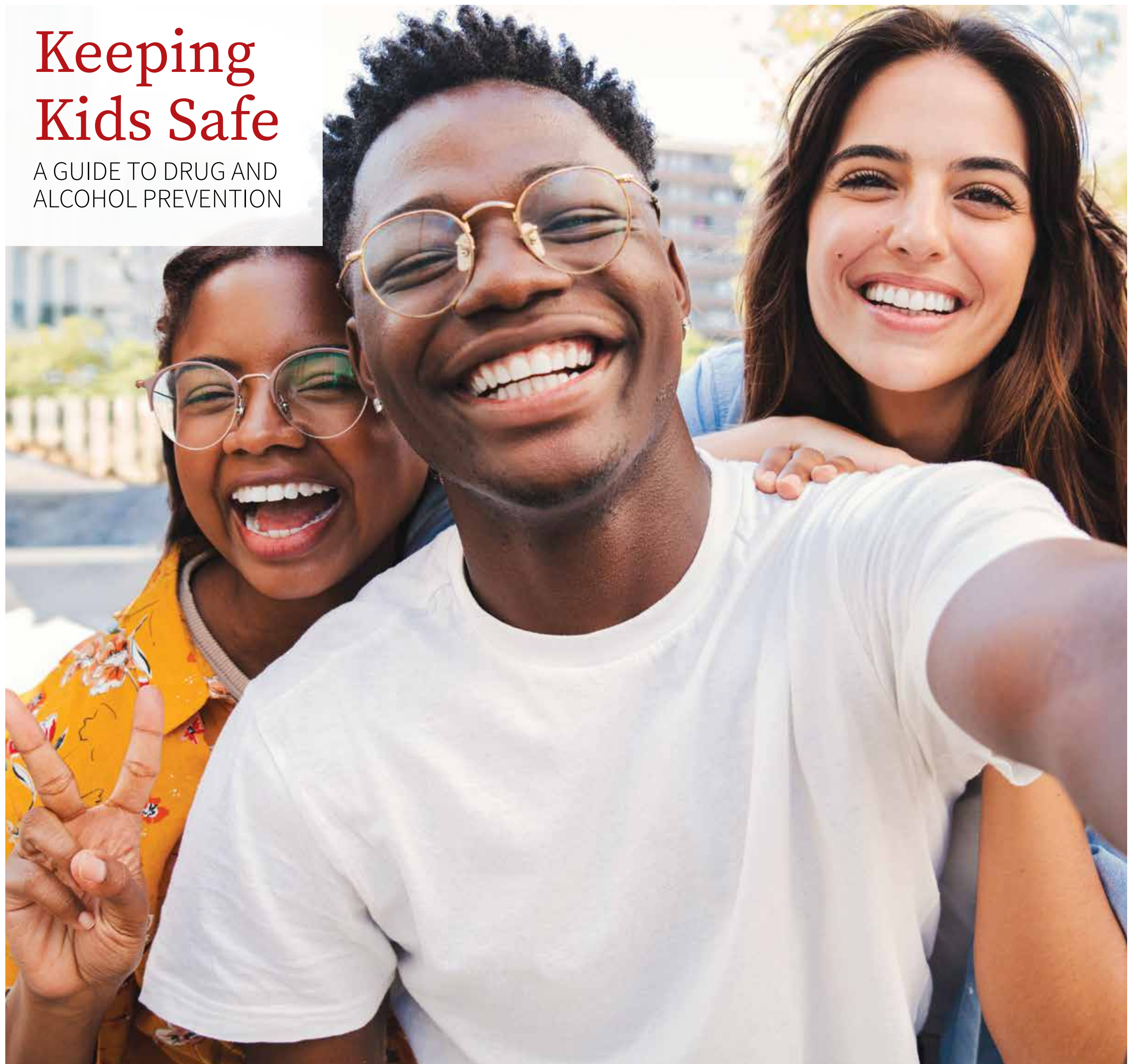


# Keeping Kids Safe

A GUIDE TO DRUG AND ALCOHOL PREVENTION



# 2024 Theme: Life Is a Movie

Every year, students and teachers compete to create the theme for Red Ribbon Week. Entries are taken from Jan. 1 to Dec. 4 and the winner is declared in January.

For 2024, the theme is “Life is a Movie: Film Drug Free.” It was submitted by Cheryl Holsapfel, a digital art teacher, and Devansh Aggarwal, a student, both from Solon Middle School in Solon, Ohio.

The National Family Partnership says it receives millions of submissions nationwide for the annual Red Ribbon Week Theme Contest. This year’s winner was selected, it said, because it “inspires individuals to play their part in fostering safe, healthy and drug-free communities.”

Holsapfel has been enthusiastically integrating the Red Ribbon project into her curriculum.

“I teach a class called digital art, where we focus on design, visual literacy and 21st century skills,” Holsapfel said. “Incorporating the Red Ribbon theme contest into our lessons provides students with real-world application and engagement.”

It was in this class where students came up with ideas and submitted them for the contest.

“We analyze our audience,



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explore various printing applications and refine slogans to ensure clarity and creativity,” Holsapfel said. “It’s incredibly rewarding to witness our students’ ideas come to life and make a difference in the community.”

As winners of the contest, they receive \$500 worth of Red Ribbon-themed merchandise

from Nimco, Inc., the sole provider of Red Ribbon-themed materials.

The president of the National Family Partnership, Peggy B. Sapp, said the contest promotes community engagement.

“The Red Ribbon theme contest is just one of the ways NFP raises awareness in our

communities,” Sapp said.

“Each year we encourage the public to share their perspectives on living drug-free. This year, we invite them to showcase what drug-free living means to them through photography, serving as representatives of our collective commitment to a drug-free lifestyle.”

Building on the 2024 theme, the NFP has created Red Ribbon Movie Mondays. Every week they spotlight a student living their best life without drugs. They invite students to share their star power by creating a video demonstrating what it means to live drug-free. Videos can be found on X at @redribbonweek.

Students are asked to fill out a survey when they submit the video at [redribbon.org](http://redribbon.org).

Entries for the 2025 contest will be taken until 11:59 p.m. on Dec. 4. They can be submitted via email at [redribbon@nfp.org](mailto:redribbon@nfp.org) or via mail to National Family Partnership, 2490 Coral Way, #303, Miami, FL 33145. Include your name, school, telephone number and email address.

NFP offers some hints for those entering the contest. Any theme or design needs to be appropriate to be hung in schools across the country. Banners and signs are hung from marquees and fences. Themes should be brief and catchy.

Past winners have included: “Be Kind To Your Mind. Live Drug Free.”, “Celebrate Life. Live Drug Free.”, “Drug Free Looks Like Me.”, “Be Happy. Be Brave. Be Drug Free.”, “Send A Message. Stay Drug Free.”, “Life Is Your Journey. Travel Drug Free.”, “Your Future Is Key, So Stay Drug Free.”, “YOLO. Be Drug Free.”, “Love Yourself. Be Drug Free.”, “A Healthy Me Is Drug Free.”, “The Best Me Is Drug Free,” and “It’s Up To Me To Be Drug Free.”

# Benefits of Drug Education

Given how much time young people spend at school, it isn't surprising that it plays an important role in whether a student is able to stay drug and alcohol free.

Drug education programs in schools teach skills in preventing substance abuse and promote healthy lifestyles among students. These programs equip young people with the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to make informed decisions and avoid the pitfalls of drug and alcohol abuse.

One prominent and effective drug education initiative is Red Ribbon Week, which provides valuable resources and activities to schools nationwide.

## IMPORTANCE OF DRUG EDUCATION

The primary benefit of drug education programs in schools is the prevention of substance abuse. By providing students with accurate information about the risks and consequences of drug and alcohol use, these programs help reduce the likelihood of experimentation and addiction.

Early education can dispel myths and misconceptions about substance use, fostering a culture of awareness and responsibility among young people.

Drug education enhances



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students' decision-making skills. Programs often incorporate lessons on peer pressure, self-esteem and coping strategies, empowering students to resist the lure of drugs and alcohol.

## THE ROLE OF RED RIBBON WEEK

Red Ribbon Week is the largest and oldest drug prevention

campaign in the United States, celebrated annually from Oct. 23-31. It serves as a platform for schools to promote drug-free lifestyles and engage students, families and communities in meaningful activities.

The campaign was established in honor of Enrique "Kiki" Camarena, a DEA agent who was murdered by drug traffickers in 1985. His sacrifice

inspired a movement to raise awareness about the dangers of drugs and the importance of drug prevention.

Today, Red Ribbon Week reaches millions of people each year, encouraging them to pledge to live drug-free lives.

Red Ribbon Week provides a wealth of resources for schools to implement effective drug education programs. These

include educational materials, lesson plans and activity guides tailored to different age groups. Schools can access posters, videos and fact sheets that highlight the dangers of drug use and the benefits of staying drug-free.

One popular activity during Red Ribbon Week is the Red Ribbon Photo Contest, where students and schools can submit photos showcasing their commitment to a drug-free lifestyle. This contest engages students creatively and reinforces the message of the campaign through visual representation.

## SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

Drug education programs in schools, supported by initiatives like Red Ribbon Week, create a supportive environment where students feel safe to discuss substance abuse issues. By involving parents, teachers and community members, these programs foster a collaborative approach to prevention.

Schools can host workshops, assemblies and parent information sessions to reinforce the importance of drug education and engage the wider community in their efforts.

The long-term impact of drug education programs extends beyond the classroom. Students who receive comprehensive drug education are more likely to make healthier choices throughout their lives. They are better equipped to avoid substance abuse, maintain mental and physical health and contribute positively to society.

# Understanding Addiction

Addiction is a complex and often misunderstood condition that affects millions of people worldwide.

For parents and students, understanding the science behind addiction can foster empathy, awareness and effective prevention.

Addiction is a chronic disorder characterized by the compulsive use of substances or engagement in behaviors despite harmful consequences. It can involve drugs, alcohol or behaviors like gambling and gaming.

Addiction is not a sign of moral failure or a lack of willpower; it is a medical condition with biological, psychological and social dimensions.

## THE BRAIN AND ADDICTION

At the core of addiction is the brain's reward system, which is designed to reinforce behaviors that are essential for survival, such as eating and socializing. When a person uses addictive substances or engages in addictive behaviors, these activities trigger the release of dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and reward.

In a healthy brain, dopamine levels are regulated, and the reward system responds appropriately to natural stimuli. However, addictive substances and behaviors can hijack this system by flooding the brain with excessive dopamine. This surge creates intense feelings of euphoria, reinforcing the behavior and making the individual want to repeat it.

Over time, the brain adjusts to these high levels of dopamine by producing less of it or reducing the number of dopamine receptors. This process,

known as tolerance, means that the person needs more of the substance or behavior to achieve the same pleasurable effect.

As the brain's reward system becomes increasingly desensitized, the individual may struggle to feel pleasure from everyday activities, leading to a cycle of compulsive use.

## FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO ADDICTION

Addiction is influenced by a

combination of genetic, environmental and psychological factors:

**Genetics:** Research indicates that genetics can account for about 40-60% of a person's vulnerability to addiction. Family history of addiction can increase the risk, suggesting that inherited traits may influence how the brain responds to substances and stress.

**Environment:** Environmental factors, such as exposure to drugs and alcohol at an early age, peer pressure and a lack of parental supervision, can

significantly affect the likelihood of developing an addiction. Stressful life events and trauma are also critical risk factors.

**Mental health:** Individuals with mental health disorders, such as depression, anxiety or ADHD, are more susceptible to addiction. Substances may be used as a form of self-medication to cope with symptoms, which can lead to dependency.

**Developmental stage:** Adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable to addiction because their brains are still developing. The areas of the brain responsible for decision-making, impulse control and risk assessment are not fully matured, making young people more prone to taking risks and experimenting with substances.

## PREVENTION AND SUPPORT

Understanding the science behind addiction underscores the importance of prevention and early intervention. Knowledge is a powerful tool. Parents and educators should provide accurate information about the risks and consequences of substance use. Programs like Red Ribbon Week offer valuable resources for drug prevention education.

Encouraging open and honest discussions about substance use can help students feel supported and understood. Parents should create a safe space for their children to talk about their experiences and feelings. Teaching students healthy ways to cope with stress, anxiety and peer pressure can reduce the likelihood of turning to substances. Activities like sports, arts and hobbies can serve as positive outlets.

Positive role models, whether in the family, school or community, can influence students' choices and behaviors. Parents should model healthy behaviors and seek out mentors for their children.



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# Positive Alternatives

In a world where substance abuse remains a pervasive issue, finding positive alternatives to drug and alcohol use promotes healthy lifestyles and prevents addiction.

Engaging in fulfilling activities can provide the physical, mental and emotional benefits that many people seek through substance use.

## PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND EXERCISE

One of the most effective ways to steer clear of drugs and alcohol is through regular physical activity. Exercise releases endorphins, the body's natural mood lifters, which can help reduce stress and improve mental health. Activities like running, swimming, yoga or playing on a sports team boosts physical fitness and provides a sense of accomplishment and community. Many people find the social aspect of team sports or group fitness classes helps them form strong, supportive relationships that reduce the temptation to use substances.

## CREATIVE OUTLETS

Engaging in creative activities can be a powerful way to channel emotions and relieve stress. Whether it's painting, writing, playing a musical



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instrument or dancing, creative outlets allow individuals to express themselves and find joy in their passions. These activities can serve as a therapeutic escape and a way to build self-esteem and resilience. For example, writing in a journal can help people process their thoughts and feelings, while playing an instrument can be a meditative and fulfilling experience.

## VOLUNTEER WORK

Helping others can provide a sense of purpose and fulfillment that is often missing in the lives of those who turn to substance use. Volunteering for a local charity, animal

shelter or community project can foster a sense of belonging and accomplishment. It also helps individuals develop empathy and compassion, which can strengthen their resolve to stay substance-free. Many volunteers find that giving back to their community helps them build meaningful relationships and a support network that can be crucial in avoiding drug and alcohol abuse.

## EDUCATIONAL PURSUITS

Learning new skills can be a constructive way to stay engaged and focused. Taking up a new hobby can open up new opportunities and provide

a sense of direction. Learning new skills boosts self-confidence and provides an alternative to substance use by filling time with productive and rewarding activities. Whether it's cooking, coding or a foreign language, education can be both a diversion from and a solution to the root causes of substance abuse.

## MINDFULNESS AND RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

Practicing mindfulness and relaxation techniques can be highly effective in managing stress and reducing the urge to use drugs or alcohol. Techniques such as meditation,

deep breathing exercises and progressive muscle relaxation can help individuals stay calm and centered.

Mindfulness practices encourage living in the present moment and can reduce anxiety and depression, common triggers for substance use. Incorporating these practices into daily life can provide a healthy coping mechanism for dealing with life's challenges.

## SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Building and maintaining healthy relationships is crucial in avoiding substance use. Surrounding oneself with positive, supportive people can provide the emotional support needed to resist the temptation of drugs and alcohol. Participating in social activities that do not involve substances, such as game nights, hiking clubs or book groups, can help foster strong connections and a sense of community. Positive social interactions can improve mood and provide a reliable support system.

## PURSUING PERSONAL GOALS

Setting and working towards personal goals can provide motivation and a sense of direction. Whether it's school aspirations, fitness milestones or personal development objectives, having clear goals can keep individuals focused and engaged. Achieving these goals provides a sense of accomplishment and builds confidence, making substance use less appealing.

# Helping a Friend

Supporting a friend struggling with substance abuse can be challenging, but a peer's support can make a significant difference in their recovery journey.

Approach the situation with compassion, understanding and patience.

The first step in supporting a friend with substance abuse is to educate yourself about addiction. Understanding that addiction is a complex disease that affects the brain and behavior can help you approach your friend with empathy.

Learn about the signs of substance abuse, the effects it has on individuals and their loved ones and the various treatment options available. This knowledge will prepare you to have informed and constructive conversations with your friend.

## COMMUNICATE WITH CARE

When talking to your friend about their substance abuse, choose a time when they are sober and calm. Express your concerns without judgment or blame. Use “I” statements to convey your feelings, such as “I’m worried about you because I’ve noticed you’re drinking more lately.” Avoid accusatory language, as this can make your friend defensive.



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Listen to them without interrupting and let them know that you are there to support them, not to judge them.

## ENCOURAGE PROFESSIONAL HELP

Encourage your friend to seek professional help. This might include talking to a doctor, therapist or counselor who specializes in addiction. Offer to help them research treatment options, such as outpatient programs, inpatient rehabilitation centers, or support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or Narcotics Anonymous (NA).

If your friend is open to it, offer to accompany them to their first appointment or

meeting. Having someone they trust by their side can make the process less intimidating.

## SET BOUNDARIES

While it's important to support your friend, it's also crucial to set healthy boundaries to protect your own well-being. Make it clear that you won't enable their substance abuse by providing money, covering for them or participating in activities that involve drugs or alcohol.

Be firm but compassionate in maintaining these boundaries. Let your friend know that you care about them and that your boundaries are in place to support their recovery, not to punish them.

Supporting a friend with substance abuse can be emotionally draining, so it's essential to take care of your own mental and physical health. Seek support from other friends, family members or a counselor. Joining a support group for friends and family of people with substance abuse issues, such as Al-Anon, can provide valuable resources and a sense of community. By maintaining your well-being, you'll be better equipped to help your friend.

## ONGOING SUPPORT

Recovery from substance abuse is a long and often difficult process that involves setbacks and relapses. Be

patient with your friend and offer consistent support. Celebrate their successes, no matter how small, and encourage them to keep going.

Avoid giving ultimatums or expressing frustration when progress is slow. Your unwavering support can provide them with the motivation they need to continue their recovery journey.

Encourage your friend to adopt a healthy lifestyle by engaging in activities that don't involve drugs or alcohol. Suggest going for walks, attending a fitness class or exploring new hobbies together. These activities can help your friend build a positive routine and find joy in sober living.

# Online Dangers for Students

Today's generation has grown up on social media, never knowing a world without Facebook, X and Instagram. It shapes their perspectives and behaviors in ways that are still unknown.

While social media offers various benefits, such as connectivity and access to information, it also has a darker side, particularly when it comes to influencing drug use among young people. Parents, educators and policymakers must continue to seek to understand its influence if they want to safeguard the well-being of students.

Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and YouTube are popular among students. These platforms can serve as gateways to information, but they can also expose students to harmful content.

Drug use is often glamorized on social media, with users sharing images and videos of substance use that can make it appear appealing and socially acceptable. This portrayal can significantly influence young, impressionable minds, leading them to experiment with drugs.

The algorithms used by social media platforms can exacerbate this issue. These algorithms often promote



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content that garners high engagement, regardless of its nature. As a result, posts that depict drug use attract attention and are more likely to be seen by a larger audience, including young students.

The normalization of drug use through repeated exposure can lower the perceived risks and increase the likelihood of experimentation among students.

## PEER PRESSURE AND SOCIAL VALIDATION

Social media can also intensify peer pressure. Students are constantly exposed to their peers' activities and lifestyles, and the desire for social validation can drive them to emulate behaviors they see online. If

they perceive that drug use is popular or accepted within their social circles, they may feel compelled to partake to gain approval or avoid feeling left out.

Additionally, the anonymity and perceived distance of online interactions can embolden students to discuss or even boast about drug use in ways they might not in face-to-face settings. This can create a misleading impression that drug use is more widespread and accepted than it actually is.

## COUNTERACTING THE NEGATIVE INFLUENCE

Addressing the influence of social media on drug use trends among K-12 students

requires a multifaceted approach. Education is key. Schools and parents must educate students about the realities of drug use and the potential dangers associated with it. Programs like Red Ribbon Week, which focuses on drug prevention and education, are instrumental in raising awareness and providing students with the knowledge to make informed decisions.

Media literacy programs can help students critically analyze the content they encounter on social media. By teaching students to question the authenticity and motives behind what they see online, these programs can reduce the influence of glamorized depictions of drug use.

Parents and educators should monitor students' social media use and engage in open conversations about their online experiences. Creating a safe space for students to discuss what they see and feel online can help them navigate peer pressure and make healthier choices.

Promoting positive role models and content on social media is another effective strategy. Influencers and public figures who advocate for healthy lifestyles and the dangers of drug use can counterbalance the negative influences. Schools and community organizations can collaborate with such influencers to spread positive messages and provide alternative narratives.

# Sports and Extracurriculars

After-school activities can help keep young people from abusing drugs or alcohol according to numerous studies.

Whether joining a sports team, playing in the band or participating in a club, these activities provide a structured and supportive environment where youth can develop positive behaviors, build self-esteem and form healthy relationships.

Participation in these programs offers numerous benefits that help steer young individuals away from substance abuse. According to a United Nations study, sports and extra-curricular activities that include training on life skills such as self-esteem, resisting peer pressure and effective communication, help to reduce delinquency, alcohol and drug use and school drop-out rates.

One of the primary ways sports and extracurricular activities help prevent drug and alcohol abuse is by fostering a sense of belonging and community. Team sports, clubs and other group activities create an environment where participants feel connected to their peers and mentors. This sense of belonging can reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation, which are often triggers for substance abuse. When young



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people feel supported and valued within a group, they are less likely to seek out drugs or alcohol as a means of coping.

Engagement in sports and extracurricular activities also promotes the development of important life skills. These activities teach discipline, time management, teamwork and leadership. For instance, student-athletes must balance their academic responsibilities with their training and competition schedules, which instills a sense of discipline and accountability. Learning to work as part of a team fosters cooperation and communication skills, which are valuable in all areas of life.

These skills contribute to personal growth and provide young people with the tools they need to make healthy choices and resist peer pressure.

Moreover, participation in sports and extracurricular activities can improve mental health, which is a significant factor in substance abuse prevention. Physical activity has been shown to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, providing a natural and healthy outlet for stress relief. Engaging in creative pursuits, such as music, art or drama, allows individuals to express their emotions and develop a positive self-image.

By maintaining good mental health, young people are better equipped to handle challenges without resorting to drugs or alcohol.

Another factor is that students are given positive role models in the form of coaches, instructors and mentors. These role models can influence attitudes and behaviors by setting a good example and offering advice on handling difficult situations. Having a trusted adult to turn to can make a significant difference in a young person's life, helping them stay on the right path.

“Sport offers an opportunity to leverage a team

environment to influence youth, allow for targeted prevention efforts and promote harm reduction,” said Anna Goodman, a Research and Policy Analyst at Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction. “The involvement of coaches, however, is key, with results showing that without this coaching structure there is a comparable increase in substance use.”

Many sports teams and clubs have strict policies against drug and alcohol use, and participants may be subject to regular testing. This creates a strong deterrent and reinforces the importance of staying substance-free.