

# How to Talk to Your Kids About a Family Member's Addiction

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If you have a family member who struggles with addiction, you know how much it impacts the entire family. Children feel the effects of addiction, whether directly or indirectly, even if they don't feel like they can talk about it. What and how much should you tell your child about your family member's addiction?

## For Kids Under 14

Though experts have slightly different approaches, the bottom line is to be honest and establish trust and loving communication. Mark Blakeley, a licensed addiction counselor and marriage and family therapist in Englewood, Colorado, encourages parents to answer questions at an age-appropriate level. "For me, it's the same as talking to them about the birds and the bees," he says. "You answer the question, but only the question they ask. Don't give them extra information. Children are great about letting you know what they understand because they'll start asking questions to move things forward with the conversation."

## If the Family Member Is Going to Treatment

For kids under the age of 14, explain that the family member has a sickness for which he or she is getting treatment, recommends Kimberley Berlin, a licensed social worker and integrated addiction therapist in Leesburg, Virginia. Reassure the child that the loved one will get better with time and make sure she understands that he isn't going to die. "I believe in really clear explanations to children," Berlin says. No matter what kind of addiction it is, emphasize that, like any illness, addiction needs to be treated, she says. Tell the child that the loved one is going away for a specified period of time to get treatment and that when he gets home, the whole family will be working together as a team to make sure he stays well. Explain how the family will be supporting the loved one upon his return by going to meetings and/or therapy. "Be very conversational, very supportive, very positive and very engaging, with a lot of questions reflecting back questions," suggests Berlin. "For every one statement, you reflect back and say, 'What do you think about that?'"

"Also consider bringing the child in to see the treatment facility, Blakeley advises. "In the treatment programs I've worked in, we always allowed children to come to the center because we wanted them to see that Mommy or Daddy or whomever is okay. It's not a scary

place,” he says. Blakeley stresses that it’s important to tell kids what’s going on because when they find out later, they feel like they were lied to and trust is broken. “If they can plan it, I even encourage the person going into treatment, beforehand, to sit down and tell the child, as long as they’re sober when they do so,” he says. “If they can do it beforehand or tell before the child asks, I think it’s always better to just be forthcoming. In the long run, anything that we can do to teach children that parents are trustworthy furthers attachment, it furthers the relationship.”

## If the Family Member Isn’t in Treatment, But Is Going to Meetings

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Use an explanation similar to the one above, and describe how the family is going to work together and everyone is going to go to meetings. Tell the child that he will get to meet people just like him, while the loved one will also get to meet people just like her, Berlin says. If therapy is a part of the recovery plan, ideally, the entire family should be involved, so explain that it’s a place where the child can find support and ask questions. As in the first scenario, reassure him that although the loved one does have an illness, it’s not an illness that’s going to kill her. Clarify that the illness does need to be treated, since she gets sick when she drinks or uses drugs.

## If the Family Member Doesn’t Want to Get Treatment or Go to Meetings

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“In this case, you just say, ‘Listen, I know that you’re very smart and I’m sure you have seen that Dad drinks and he gets really weird. I just want you to know that he’s got a sickness with alcohol and he really shouldn’t drink, but right now he’s not at a place where he wants to get help. What I want you to do is when Dad gets like that, if you feel frightened, you just come to me right away and we’ll talk,’” Berlin says. Answer all questions honestly and be supportive and positive, reminding the child that addiction is an illness. As in the other scenarios, Blakeley recommends answering kids’ questions as they come up. “Answer questions truthfully,” he says. “You let them go off and think about it and come back and they’ll process it.”

## For Any Situation

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Berlin suggests comparing the addiction to diabetes. Like people with diabetes shouldn’t eat sugar because it makes them sick, people who have a substance use disorder shouldn’t drink alcohol or take drugs because it makes them sick. “The most important thing is to get the child to open up and talk and to remove any sense of shame or stigma, because it’s inherent in our society. If we normalize it into an illness, then it’s a lot easier for a young brain to wrap itself around,” she says.

## For Teens 14 and Up

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“Be absolutely brutally honest and straight up,” advises Berlin. “Use adult language and ask them if they know what it means.” Blakeley agrees. “It’s even more imperative to be truthful and honest [with teens]. They’re not stupid,” he says. “All too often, parents forget that their kids see and hear pretty much everything that goes on in the house anyway, so they probably already know. Answer the questions and again, no more, no less, but always just answer their questions.” This also may be a good time to address any potential substance use issues your teenager has, Berlin notes. Since families dealing with addiction often have emotional issues that lead to stress, anxiety and depression, many teens who have a parent with an addiction will self-medicate to try to numb the pain.

## Keep Negativity Out of It

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Be sure to keep blame, resentment or anger out of any conversation with a child of any age. “Otherwise, the kid is going to pick it up and get very confused,” Berlin says. “No matter what question the child has, answer it honestly and compassionately and with love, lovingly both to the child and also lovingly about the individual because whatever message you give the child about the addict, they’re going to internalize it.” The message you want to give your child, no matter her age, is that the family is there to support the individual and help him get well, says Berlin. Make sure your child understands that it’s okay to be angry, upset or scared and that she can come to you to talk.

## All Ages

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- **Let kids be kids.** Don’t burden kids of any age with adult problems or responsibilities. Let them enjoy their childhood as much as they can.
- **Give unconditional love and support.** Let your child know that you love her no matter what and reassure her that you are there to listen to any feelings she’s having, positive or negative.
- **Allow kids to ask questions and answer them honestly.** Don’t shut your child down when he has questions. Listen and answer as honestly as you can, giving as much information as you feel he can handle. Kids can tell when parents aren’t being forthright and it makes them feel insecure and unworthy of knowing the truth.
- **Establish trust and keep communication lines open.** Your child will learn to trust you when you are honest. Engage your child in conversation daily and encourage her to come to you any time. Be sure to stress that not talking about feelings is extremely unhealthy because that’s part of how the addiction affects the whole family, Berlin says.

- **Remind kids that the addiction is not their fault.** Therapy and/or meetings may help with this as well, but reassure your child that the addiction has nothing to do with him.
- **Get the entire family into therapy and/or meetings.** “Where you have an alcoholic or drug addict who’s using, you have an entire family who’s also sick and needs treatment,” Berlin says. Not only does treatment give everyone a safe space to find support and comfort, it enables the family to be supportive to the loved one with an addiction.

## Helpful Books

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For younger kids: [Pirates Have Feelings, Too!](#)

For families: Berlin recommends [It Takes a Family: A Cooperative Approach to Lasting Sobriety](#)

## Helpful Websites

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[Al-Anon Family Groups](#)

[Nar-Anon Family Groups](#)

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