



Engaging conversations with inquisitive students

FCD prevention specialists offer a unique perspective on addiction and prevention for the hundreds of schools around the world that they visit every year. FCD's time on campus is considered a valuable resource to each of these communities, and our students always have plenty of questions for us when we arrive.

FCD prevention specialists strive to inspire students to keep prevention-minded discussions going long after they leave campus. FCD often receives follow-up questions from our students following an on-site program. Students are often eager to dig even deeper into the prevention conversations sparked in the classroom, to interview us for their school newspaper, or to delve further into the science of substances for a school assignment. FCD encourages inquiries to prevention@fcd.org when further information on substance abuse prevention issues is needed.

Want to know more about the prevention topics that FCD students find most interesting? We've collected prevention specialist responses to students' most commonly asked follow-up questions and assembled them here, in the hopes that they can inform and encourage you, too.

Questions about prevention education

Who should educate kids and teens about alcohol and other drugs?

FCD believes anyone can do their part to share prevention information so long as they are equipped with high-quality educational sources from a health perspective. Sometimes kids and even adults will mistakenly spread misinformation about the health-based risks and realities of a substance and its use. When passing along information, it is important to check the facts first and present only what is assuredly accurate. There are many sound resources available to young people all over the world. You can learn from FCD (www.fcd.org), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov), the National Institute on Drug Abuse (www.drugabuse.gov), Above the Influence (www.abovetheinfluence.com), or the Partnership for Drug-Free Kids (www.drugfree.org).

At what age should youth start being educated? Should the same prevention education be used for kids as adults?

FCD believes in age-appropriate prevention education for all people. This education should start early and ideally continue throughout one's life!

Before school starts and in the elementary/lower grade levels, education can include discussions and role modeling that help little ones understand and define health and healthy behaviors in all

facets of their lives, including the role of nutrition, medicines, safety rules, and how to adapt to and alter one's mood through self-management like time outs, breathing, and talking about feelings. It's also important to clear up any misperceptions about alcohol, other drugs, and addiction they might develop from messages within the home, media, or their community.

For older elementary and middle school students we can talk more specifically about alcohol, tobacco/nicotine, and any other substance use that may be prevalent in their communities. This is a good time to explain the short- and long-term consequences of alcohol and other drug use, and the disease-basis of addiction. The sooner and more often the general principle of "all use equals risk" is reinforced, the better. It's also appropriate to help these students create protective factors, such as healthy stress management techniques.

In upper school grades, we can help students understand the concept of the social norms approach to prevention in more detail. We can also guide them through the multidimensional relationship they will have to substances as they mature into adulthood, including their participation in culture and politics, communities shaped by the use or non-use of substances, and how their own individual lives may be impacted.

At every stage of life, we encourage everyone we work with to think critically, value their health and wellbeing, and to reach out for help if at any point they require information related to alcohol or other drugs.

Why do kids and teens need to be educated both at home and at school?

FCD's approach to prevention is a collaborative process. That means that it is intended to involve an entire community. Effective prevention is not an educational course that can be taken once a year at school. It should be an ongoing conversation that relates to one's attitudes, beliefs, values, relationships, activities, character, and decisions. Addiction is a chronic, progressive, and often fatal disease for which there is no cure. While we may have fun in the classrooms while talking about such a serious subject, we do take our commitment to the health and safety of our school communities very seriously. Therefore, we rely on the members of those communities, including parents and caregivers, faculty, coaches, counselors, administrators, health care providers, trustees, and other students, to continue the health promotion that we have started.

Students spend a lot of time at school, but their homes and families are even more influential in their lives. Sharing information at home is a healthy and positive way for students, siblings, parents, and other family members to work together to define prevention goals and build support in and out of the school environment.

What do you think is the best way to keep kids away from alcohol and other drugs? What specifically should youth be educated about? Should the scary facts be avoided?

Over the past four decades, FCD has found that atmosphere is key when presenting someone with resources designed to encourage healthy choices regarding alcohol and other drugs. In our mission, we raise awareness, clear up misinformation, and answer questions in a nonthreatening way at all times, creating fun when it's possible, interest where it's most needed, and learning environments without fear, despite the seriousness of the health issue we address.

We remain nonjudgmental toward all. While we might share a few personal stories in our classes, we never try to force our personal opinions into any topic. Instead, we believe young people deserve accurate information about their own health, and so FCD researches the latest

findings and fact-based evidence around use rates, emerging drugs, cultural norms, and all other related topics to back up the information we're sharing.

Science clearly shows that the longer a person delays their use of alcohol and other drugs, the lower the risk can be. We also know that it really can be tough sometimes to know what our healthiest choices are at any given moment, because there are so many mixed messages out there. So we try to guide our students with the data, support, and skills paired with the respect and compassion they need to make each "healthiest" decision that comes their way.

FCD feels the best way to keep healthy kids healthy is not through scare tactics, but by providing facts and skills to assist in making informed decisions.

Questions about addiction

How do you define addiction?

Addiction is a disease that occurs when, after exposure to a substance or behavior, the brain - through thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and sensations - directs an individual to continue using that substance or repeat that behavior obsessively and compulsively, even as related negative consequences mount.

How does addiction progress?

Addiction changes how an individual thinks, behaves, and relates to the world. As alcohol or other drug use continues, cravings increase and tolerance builds. Higher and/or more frequent doses of the drug are required to intoxicate the individual to the same extent as lower and less frequent doses were previously capable of. As progression continues, the initial level of intoxication can no longer be reached, but the individual is compelled to use the substance in an attempt to reach it, sometimes forgoing healthy activities and life priorities. Tolerance progresses to the point at which an individual can no longer feel like themselves without use of the substance. Substance-taking is now required to feel normal as opposed to simply desired for intoxication. Physical, mental, financial, relational, and myriad other health problems increase in severity, but the disease of addiction interferes with the ability of the individual to resolve these problems. Ultimately, the person with addiction may be brought to intervention, treatment, and recovery or, based on the chronic nature of the disease, may experience other disease conditions, death, or a life of other serious dysfunctions.

What part of your mind makes you feel addicted to something?

There are many parts of the brain responsible for addiction. The most important is the reward pathway, whose job it is to make sure you do things that are important for your survival. This includes things like eating, sleeping, and getting enough water. Anything addictive will tend to overstimulate and distract the reward pathway from its healthy interests and will shift those interests toward use of the addictive substance or behavior. However, addiction is a whole-brain disorder: once you have it, it affects every part of your brain in one way or another and is known to impair a diversity of brain functions - from memory and learning, to emotional processing to the sleep-wake cycle and autonomic functions like breathing and the beating of the heart.

How do you know someone is addicted?

When someone is becoming addicted, their life begins to center around their addiction. This shift can be very subtle at first, changing the decisions the person may make about how they

sleep, eat, and manage their stress. Eventually, it may seem as if someone's personality has changed when they have a problem with something addictive. Despite any signals of a problem, however, it can be hard to tell whether someone is facing a problem with alcohol or another drug. The best thing to do if you're concerned about someone you love is to share your worries with them and to get support for yourself.

If a person is addicted to drugs how can he get over his addiction?

Recovery is a life-long process requiring help from outside of the individual, meaning support from a therapist, a treatment center, a 12-step group - resources that help the individual learn about their problem and how to live life outside of active addiction. Addiction is a chronic disease, so treatment and recovery take a lot of effort and must be ongoing to ensure the best chance of the individual staying healthy over time.

What is the most significant way that addiction has affected your life, and what do you think is the simplest way to prevent falling into the same trap?

One of the most significant ways that addiction can affect a person's life is through a multitude of missed opportunities. The simplest way to prevent having this same experience is certainly to make the choice of non-use or delayed use.

Questions about risk and protection

Is it healthy for kids and teens to experiment?

FCD doesn't use the term "experiment" when it comes to adolescent alcohol or other drug use. Instead, we know from research and our own experience that "all use equals risk," and that this truth applies to both first-time and continued use. Alcohol and other drug use can be risky at any time, especially at this time of heightened vulnerability to the development of addiction.

Instead, we hope young people will ask questions; find adventure and embrace new experiences; challenge the status quo; feel excited, at peace, energized, and relaxed; seek out fun and growth. All of these rewarding and important practices can be undertaken without ever using alcohol or another drug outside of its medicinal purpose. At FCD, we encourage and work with students to help them identify all the natural highs they can endeavor to achieve in their lives to relieve stress, enjoy their time, bond with friends, and find themselves.

Do you think there is an "addiction gene" that is passed on?

Scientists have identified hundreds of genes that they believe have some role in increasing or decreasing the risk of addiction.

The expression of addiction as a genetically-bound trait is very complex, and more akin to inheriting athletic or anxious traits from one's biological family, as opposed to traits that are genetically coded more simply, like eye color or height. Many factors determine the likelihood that someone will become an addict, including both inherited and environmental factors.

We cannot know exactly how much each individual's genetic load paired with their environment will increase or decrease their risk for developing an addiction. Fortunately, we do know plenty about protective factors that, no matter our genetic risks, we can choose to best protect ourselves and keep ourselves healthy over time.

How can I overcome my family genetics? What coping skills should I develop to transform this tendency for people in my family to face addiction to alcohol and other drugs?

There are so many things you can do to stay healthy! Firstly, you may choose not to use alcohol or other drugs at all. Make this commitment to yourself, own it, and find ways to honor, appreciate, and love the healthy choice you've made. This is a safe and very normal choice as a teen, and most teens, regardless of their family background, are already making this healthy choice.

Secondly, if you are in a social environment where you feel internal or external pressure to use alcohol or another drug, don't be afraid to say "no" confidently and politely, time and time again as needed. While it's natural, try not to be afraid of what others' reactions might be to your healthy choices. Instead, keep a mental list of all the reasons you are making this decision for yourself, and revisit it often, especially if you ever feel pressure to use. Remind yourself of your commitment and the many gifts you gain from choosing this healthy decision in any and every circumstance.

Thirdly, build connections with your healthy friends to avoid negative peer pressure. Who do you spend time with most often? If you are hanging out with a group in which the majority of kids are drinking alcohol or using other drugs, you may want to think about making some new friends. Again, this will be easy to do because so many people in this world do not drink alcohol or use other drugs. Of course it is okay to retain friendships in your life with other people too, but try to be mindful of these relationships; the more you surround yourself with people making the healthiest choices, the easier it will be to keep making those healthy choices yourself. Remember it's absolutely within your ability to be polite and kind to friends who might make different choices than you do, but that doesn't mean that you will be influenced by the friends who use alcohol or other drugs. Instead, find friends and mentors who inspire what you want out of life, and try to be that kind of role model as well!

Fourthly, make connections with your parents or other trusted adults. As you grow up, having people you can rely on, people you can talk to about life, life's challenges, and your decisions about alcohol and other drugs is very important. The opportunity to benefit from someone else's life experiences can be invaluable and help put things in perspective. You don't always have to agree with the adults in your life to still have a strong and healthy relationship with them, so choose a few trusted adults who you look up to and build those connections to keep as you grow.

And fifth, but not finally - because you can and surely will find many other of your own ways to stay healthy - enjoy life! Do what you love without adding alcohol or other drugs. They can change who you are, limit your potential, and complicate your life. Too often, "I'm bored" is just an excuse. Get active in school and community activities such as music, sports, arts, or a part-time job. Learn how to become passionate about life and the people in it, perhaps by being of service to your community, by finding ways to appreciate and relish the activities and friends you hold most dear, and by setting goals for yourself to work toward over time. You're already on a healthy path, so keep going and have fun!

Questions about alcohol and other drugs

How can alcohol have a long-term negative effect on health?

Alcohol is most likely to have long-term negative effects on health if it is used frequently, heavily, and/or by a child or adolescent as opposed to an adult. However, as a nervous system depressant and body tissue irritant, any use by any individual may pose health risks.

Some of the common long-term negative physical consequences from frequent, heavy alcohol use or addiction to alcohol are damage of the liver, heart, and brain; skin problems; issues of appetite, vitamin deficiency, etc.; and an increase in the risk of certain cancers. Additionally, when individuals use alcohol in ways that impact physical health, this use also negatively impacts their healthy relationship to themselves and others. Lost opportunities, feelings of regret and shame, loss of personal integrity, interpersonal conflicts with loved ones, and emotional pain are common long-term effects of an addiction to alcohol.

Which drug is the most dangerous?

That's a hard question to answer, for a couple of reasons. One, it depends on what you consider to be the most significant negative consequence of alcohol or other drug use. Since different drugs have different combinations of effects, which vary depending on the makeup of each individual who might choose to use, it's difficult to compare. Two, many drugs share side effects - for example, alcohol and marijuana both impair judgment.

We maintain that all use equals risk. This means that one substance might ultimately be more dangerous for one individual, and another substance might be most risky for another.

Questions about social norms and social environment

Do people who use alcohol and other drugs know how harmful they are? I think if every teen knew how dangerous substances can be for them, use numbers would drop.

As people in recovery, many of our prevention specialists report that if they had known the risks they know about now, they never would have started using alcohol or other drugs.

There are a number of reasons why a young person might use alcohol or other drugs, even though most young people choose to refrain from use. There are certainly others, but here's what FCD generally finds as main reasons some students may use:

- lack of information, incorrect risk perceptions, and incorrect perceptions about what effects substances will have on them
- boredom
- peer pressure (spoken and unspoken)
- rebellion
- curiosity
- perceived acceptance of use from peers
- feelings of, "it can't happen to me!"
- media and other cultural influences.

Once a person starts using, there can be a change in how their brain works. Though a person's response to a substance may vary, often after alcohol or other drug use there is a release of chemical neurotransmitters in the brain that tells a person that the feeling that they are experiencing is one that they will want to experience again. The brain actually catalogues the feelings experienced and begins to anticipate experiencing those feelings again. The result may be a craving to use the substance more often and in higher doses, building tolerance to alcohol or the other drug, and encouraging a progression to addiction.

Once addiction progresses, the very real risks of use hold less importance in the mind of the

person using, whose brain is chemically and physically altered to seek continued use over healthy, substance-free highs. This is why leading experts in addiction are now classifying it as a brain disease.

At what age a person begins to use has a major effect on how the body responds to the drug. Though the risk never completely disappears at any age, the adolescent brain is at a much higher risk for addiction than the brain of a person who starts using as an adult.

In short, educating young people and equipping them with life skills to abstain from or delay use, as well as informing them of the risks of use prior to any exposure to alcohol or other drugs, is absolutely one effective way to protect people from use at an early age, and therefore to limit some of the risks and costs of addiction.

What should you do if you are in a situation where you feel peer pressured into using alcohol or another drug? What are some ways to avoid being peer pressured?

First, make up your mind to be substance free. Have a list of goals, relationships, interests, and hobbies that are important to you. Decide that you do not want to risk losing these things as a result of alcohol or other drug use. These are the pieces of your life that you are saying "yes" to every time you make the decision not to use substances.

Recite this list in your head often, even in situations where there is absolutely no pressure on you to use. Value yourself above the jeopardy that the use of alcohol or another drug might place you under.

Practice saying, "No, thanks!" with a smile and with an exit plan as needed. Be kind, firm, and move on quickly from the situation by having an alternative activity ready for yourself.

If you think alcohol or other drugs will be available to you at a location or gathering, and you are unsure that you will feel confident enough to abstain from use once you are there, choose to plan something more fulfilling for your time.

Develop yourself as an individual with skills and traits that you like! You will find learning these skills and developing these traits will help you to build friendships with likeminded people who will not exert pressure upon you to use, or, if they do, who will respect your decision not to use and will still enjoy your company because of your other shared interests. Being the person you wish to be will also encourage your confidence in situations where pressure may exist. It will be easiest to decline pressure to use when you are sure that anyone who knows and respects you will also understand and support your decision.