



Talking to Children About Addiction

Age-Appropriate Guidance for Parents and Carers

Children are perceptive. They know when something is wrong, even if no one has explained it. Giving them honest, age-appropriate information helps them feel less alone and less responsible.

This resource is produced by Stepwise Recovery and is not affiliated with, endorsed by, or representative of any Twelve Step fellowship.

Before You Begin

Talking to children about addiction — whether it involves a parent, family member, or someone else they know — requires preparation and care:

- Choose a calm, private moment when you will not be interrupted
- Keep your language simple and honest
- Reassure them that they are safe and loved
- Make it clear that the addiction is not their fault
- Be prepared for a range of reactions — tears, anger, silence, or apparent indifference
- Let them know they can ask questions at any time, now or later
- Do not make promises you cannot keep

The three most important messages for any child: It is not your fault. You did not cause it. You are loved.

Ages 4–7: Young Children

Very young children need simple explanations and lots of reassurance. They think in concrete terms and may struggle with abstract concepts.

What to Say

Use language they can understand. Compare addiction to an illness:

"Mummy/Daddy has an illness that makes them feel poorly sometimes. It is called addiction. It makes their brain want something that is bad for them, even though they know it is bad."

"It is not your fault. You did not do anything to cause it. And there are people helping Mummy/Daddy to get better."

"If you ever feel scared or worried, you can always tell me or [trusted adult]. You will not get into trouble for talking about your feelings."

What to Watch For

- Regression (bedwetting, clinginess, thumb-sucking)
- Nightmares or difficulty sleeping
- Separation anxiety
- Acting out or becoming withdrawn

Ages 8–12: Primary School Age

Children in this age group understand more but may struggle with complex emotions. They are developing a sense of fairness and may feel angry or confused.

What to Say

"You might have noticed that things have been difficult at home. I want to explain what's happening. [Person] has an illness called addiction. It affects their brain and makes it very hard for them to stop using [substance], even when they want to."

"This is not your fault — nothing you did or said caused this. And it is not something you can fix, no matter how good you are or how hard you try."

"It is okay to feel angry, sad, confused, or scared. All of those feelings make sense. And you can always talk to me about them."

What to Watch For

- Trying to "fix" the parent or take on adult responsibilities
- Declining school performance
- Social withdrawal or difficulty with friendships
- Anger, defiance, or emotional outbursts
- Excessive worry about the family

Ages 13–17: Teenagers

Teenagers can understand addiction more fully but may react with intense emotions, judgement, or apparent detachment. They are also at an age where their own relationship with substances becomes relevant.

What to Say

"I want to talk to you honestly about what's been going on. [Person] is dealing with addiction. It's a medical condition that affects how the brain works — it's not about being weak or not caring enough."

"You are old enough to understand that this is serious. But I also want you to know that it's not your responsibility to manage. You get to be a teenager. You get to have your own life."

"If you ever want to talk — or if you don't want to talk and just want someone to know how you're feeling — I am here. And there are other people who can help too."

What to Watch For

- Emotional withdrawal or refusal to discuss the situation
- Increased risk-taking behaviour
- Their own experimentation with substances
- Taking on a caretaker role for younger siblings
- Academic decline or loss of interest in activities
- Signs of depression or anxiety

Getting Additional Support

Children affected by a family member's addiction benefit from support beyond what any one parent or carer can provide:

- School counsellors — they can offer support during the school day
- NACOA (National Association for Children of Alcoholics) — free helpline: 0800 358 3456
- Alateen — meetings for young people affected by someone else's drinking or using
- Family therapy — a safe space to talk about feelings together
- Age-appropriate books about addiction and family

If you are concerned about a child's immediate safety, contact the NSPCC helpline on 0808 800 5000 or your local social services.

A Note for Parents in Recovery

If you are the parent in recovery, having this conversation takes enormous courage:

- Your children do not need you to be perfect — they need you to be honest
- Making amends to your children is a process, not a single conversation
- Actions speak louder than words — consistent, reliable presence rebuilds trust
- It is okay to say "I don't know" or "I'm still working on that"
- Seek guidance from your sponsor, a therapist, or a family support worker

The fact that you are reading this guide suggests you care deeply about your children's wellbeing. That care — combined with honesty and consistency — is the foundation for healing.

UK Crisis Support

Samaritans: 116 123 (24/7, free) | **FRANK:** 0300 123 6600

NA UK: 0300 999 1212 | **SHOUT:** Text SHOUT to 85258

NACOA Helpline: 0800 358 3456 | **NSPCC:** 0808 800 5000