

How to Develop a Family Policy

Question: Is a “Family Policy” on Drugs and alcohol really necessary? Isn’t it enough that my kids know I don’t want them using drugs or drinking alcohol?

Answer: Are you sure your kids know exactly where you stand on drugs, alcohol and tobacco? Before you respond with a resounding “Of course!” consider how you might answer the following questions:

1. Have you sat down with them and told them exactly what you expect from them?
2. Have you discussed consequences for not obeying the rules?
3. Have you thought through various scenarios your kids might encounter, and walked through how you would respond?
4. Have you discussed your feelings with your spouse, ex-spouse, or co-parent? Are you all in agreement?
5. Have you empowered your kids with ways to say “no” to drugs and alcohol, but still have friends and fun?

Here are a couple of scenarios to get you thinking:

Your family is at the wedding of a special friend and everyone is getting ready to toast the couple with a glass of champagne. Your 13 year old wants to join in the champagne toast. How would you respond? Would your spouse respond the same way?

Now, take the same wedding celebration scene, but now your child is 17 ½. Is it okay now?

Here’s another question to consider:

Is it okay for a child to accept a ride in a car with a driver that has been drinking?

What if that driver is you, your spouse or a trusted friend? Does that make a difference?

Does your family ever go out to dinner and both you and your spouse have a glass of wine? Who drives everyone home?

You can see that before we can create a Family Policy, we have to first understand how we feel about drugs and alcohol. Once the policy is established and everyone has signed off on it, you can place it in a prominent spot to help keep kids accountable.

What goes into a Family Policy? There are several obvious items you can start with: drugs, alcohol and tobacco. Once you have these completed, you could add on other important topics such as “House Rules” and “Money.”

Steps for developing a clear Family Policy about drug and alcohol use:

1. Be clear about what you want for your child’s future (what is your vision for their life?).
2. Decide what specific behaviors you expect concerning the use of drugs and alcohol (No alcohol, no drugs, no tobacco).

3. Determine your family's position on drug and alcohol use (parents must be in agreement on the family position).
4. Decide on the consequences of both following, and of not following the Family Policy.
5. Lastly, be sure to review the Family Policy at least once per year.

Starting with your vision for your child's future helps set the tone for your Family Policy. Try starting with just three wishes for your child's future. Once you've completed that, think about how drugs and alcohol could ruin those wishes and your child's future. That's why it's important to develop your Family Policy now. Decisions your child makes now will help to shape their future, and the problems they may encounter with alcohol and drugs later on in life.

When you are ready to sit down with your kids and review the Family Policy, here are a few guidelines to help the meeting go smoothly:

1. Explain why you wanted to get everyone together and go over the "ground rules" for family meetings (no interruptions, no put-downs, etc.).
2. Share your vision or wishes for your child's future.
3. Listen to your child tell you their vision for their future.
4. Discuss how drugs and alcohol would impact those visions.
5. Discuss expectations about drug and alcohol use.
6. Discuss consequences for drug and alcohol use.
7. Once the Family Policy has been agreed upon, have each family member sign and date.
8. Post the Family Policy where it can be seen by all.

Will having a Family Policy in place eliminate the risks that surround your kids concerning drugs and alcohol? No. But it's a really good place to start.

If you like the Family Policy activity, consider joining us for a Guiding Good Choices Workshop series. New workshops will start in the fall. Dates and locations will be posted on the DrugFreeAz.org website soon.