



# The Family's Role in Substance Use Prevention

A practical guide for educators and prevention professionals on why the family is prevention's most powerful setting — and how to strengthen it.

## Why the family comes first

Long before a young person meets a prevention program, a teacher, or a peer group, they are shaped at home. The family is where attitudes toward risk are formed, where daily behaviour is observed and copied, and where a child first learns whether the adults around them are paying attention. For prevention professionals, this makes the family not a side channel but the primary one.

International evidence reflects this. The UNODC/WHO *International Standards on Drug Use Prevention* identify family-based programs — those that build parenting skills, warmth, and supervision — among the most effective and cost-effective interventions available, particularly when delivered early. Strengthening the family does not compete with school or community prevention; it multiplies it.

### Protective factors families provide

- Strong emotional bonding and a sense of belonging
- Consistent, age-appropriate supervision and monitoring
- Clear family rules and predictable, fair consequences
- Open, two-way communication that is safe to use
- Parents and caregivers who model healthy choices
- Involvement in a child's school, friendships, and interests

### Risk factors to help families reduce

- Little or inconsistent supervision of free time
- Harsh, unpredictable, or absent discipline
- Ongoing family conflict or poor communication
- Permissive or approving attitudes toward substance use
- Weak attachment or low day-to-day involvement
- Easy, unmonitored access to alcohol or other substances

## Prevention, not fear

The goal is not to frighten families into control. Scare tactics rarely change behaviour and often close down the very conversations prevention depends on. The stronger approach — and the one SUPE is built on — is to give parents and caregivers accurate information and practical tools so that young people can understand real risks and develop their own sound judgment.

*“Education is the most reliable way to reduce the number of people who will ever need treatment — and it begins at home.”*

## What effective family prevention builds

When you work with parents and caregivers, five capacities do most of the protective work. Frame your guidance around building these rather than issuing warnings.

- 1 Connection.** Time and attention that tell a child they matter. Bonded young people are far more likely to absorb a family's values and to come to a trusted adult when something goes wrong.
- 2 Supervision.** Knowing where a child is, who they are with, and what they are doing — adjusted to their age. Monitoring works best as caring involvement, not surveillance.
- 3 Clear expectations.** Simple, consistent family rules about alcohol and other substances, stated early and applied fairly, so a young person always knows where the line is.
- 4 Communication.** Ongoing, calm conversations — not one dramatic talk. Families that listen without overreacting keep the channel open through the risk years.
- 5 Modelling.** Children read what adults do more than what they say. Caregivers who handle stress, alcohol, and setbacks well are teaching prevention every day.

## Meeting families where the child is

### Ages 4–8

- Warmth, routine, simple rules
- Naming feelings, healthy coping
- Everyday supervision and praise

### Ages 9–12

- Begin clear talks before the teen years
- Build confidence and refusal skills
- Know their friends and online life

### Teens

- Negotiated limits, consistent rules
- Peer-pressure and refusal skills
- Stay connected as independence grows

## Make the home environment safer

- Store medicines, alcohol, and any substances securely, and dispose of unused medication rather than keeping it at home.
- Know the online risks — sellers use social media to reach minors, sometimes with coded language.
- Address root causes such as bullying and stress, and build a child's resilience against peer pressure.
- Treat caregivers as partners: send the same message home that children hear at school.

### Key takeaways

- The family is prevention's strongest and earliest setting — start early and keep talking.
- Connection, supervision, clear rules, communication, and modelling are the levers.
- Make the home safer, know the online risks, and give families tools — not fear — reinforced at home and school.

### About SUPE

SUPE is a free, evidence-based prevention platform offering age-appropriate lessons and tools for children, families, educators, and communities — helping people learn to live drug-free. A program of a U.S. 501(c)(3) nonprofit, active across Africa and Asia.

### About the author

Marcel Gemme has worked in substance use prevention and education for more than 20 years. He leads SUPE and hosts the podcast *From Prevention to Recovery with Marcel Gemme*.