

CREATING HEALTHY ENVIRONMENTS: Making Good Choices

Preschoolers may be too young to understand complex facts about tobacco, drugs or alcohol but it's not too early to help them make good choices about what to put in their bodies. Preschoolers can understand rules about what's "good" and what's "bad" for them. However, they may not be able to distinguish between "bad" behavior (such as smoking) and being a "bad" person. Too much information can frighten them, especially if someone they love smokes. The following tips can help when discussing these topics with preschoolers:

- Offer your child choices whenever possible, "Do you want to wear the red shirt or the brown shirt?" or "Do you want to take your bath before dinner or after dinner?" This will make your child feel more in control and help him or her build confidence in decision making.
- Talk about healthy foods with your children. Tell them what the foods they are eating can do for their bodies. "Milk builds strong bones" or "Oranges have lots of vitamin C which helps to keep you from getting sick." Be sure to notice when they make good food choices. "I see you chose a banana, it has lots of vitamins that help you grow." Of course, modeling good food choices yourself sends the most powerful message!
- Encourage problem solving skills by letting your child make mistakes and figuring out ways to fix them. For example, if she gets frustrated because her block tower keeps collapsing ask her, "What can you do different this time to make it stronger?" Let your child come up with the answers and this will build her confidence.
- If you or someone in your family smokes explain to your children that smoking is a bad habit and that it is hard to quit once started. "Grandpa started smoking many years ago, and now it is difficult for him to stop. He wishes he never started smoking." Let your children know that they have a right to breathe clean air. Be your child's advocate by asking family members to smoke outside, and away from where your children are playing.