



Having Conversations Around Harm Reduction

The idea of harm reduction is nothing new. It is very common for people to make sure that family and friends who are going out drinking have a way to get home that won't result in a drunk driving accident. They may take public transportation or have a designated driver. We are not asking our loved one to drink less or to stop altogether; rather, we want them to be safe.

When you talk to your child about harm reduction, you can extend this idea of safety and reducing risks to all substances. There are proven ways to reduce the risks of substance use to prevent overdoses and death, the spread of diseases, reduce infections, and more.

While not using substances is the safest course of action, harm reduction “meets loved ones where they are at”. Although you probably want your child to stop using substances entirely, this approach recognizes that they may not be ready or are unable to get help for a variety of reasons.

Using the Information Sandwich

The Information Sandwich can be very helpful when discussing a subject like harm reduction.

The **top layer** of the sandwich invites your child to have a conversation with you. For example, you might say, *“Hey, I heard some interesting information today and would like to share it with you. Is now a good time?”* If your child agrees, you can continue. If they say *“no,”* either drop it for the time being or ask if there is a better time to have the conversation.

The **middle layer** of the sandwich is the “meat” of what you want to say. In this case, you will use it to make a safety request related to their substance use.

Here is an example of the “meat” centered around harm reduction: *“I know sometimes you use heroin alone, which means you could overdose, and no one would be able to help you. There’s a free phone app that can alert*

anyone you choose if there is a problem. It's called the Brave app. There's also a free service called Never Use Alone. I'd like you to use the app or the service when you are alone."

The **bottom layer** of the sandwich seeks feedback on what you said. How did your child receive it? For example, you could ask, *"What do you think about that?"*

Always remember to choose an appropriate time to start the conversation so that you can have your child's full attention. It is also best to have the conversation in person or via phone or Facetime, which will encourage conversation more than texting.

Your child may respond to you in a positive way and agree to try what you have suggested. If they do, be sure to tell them you appreciate their willingness to take this step and that you are here to support them in doing it.

If your child does not agree with what you have suggested, listen to what they have to say and try to understand why they don't want to do it. You might propose that they take smaller steps towards your suggestion:

- Would they be willing to think about it?
- Would they be willing to try it for a couple of weeks just to see how it goes?
- What would they be willing to do to be safer?

If they are not willing to do anything, take heart – there will always be another opportunity to raise the issue. You may consider suggesting a different way to reduce risks as there are many actions to consider. Something as simple as giving them Narcan (naloxone) to use in the event of an overdose can save a life.

Your child might comment that you must approve of their substance use because of your suggestion(s). You can respond that you are not in favor of their use and while you wish they would cut back or stop entirely, you want them to be alive and safe. This is about reducing risks, not approving substance use.

Articles addressing topics pertaining to harm reduction can be found on Partnership to End Addiction's resource hub: <https://drugfree.org/harm-reduction-resource-center/>