

Tough Talk: Talking to Your Kids About Your Addiction



Telling Kids the Truth

As a fire fighter or EMT, it's your job to help others. But when you need help for an alcohol or drug problem, asking for help doesn't come easy. And telling your kids you need help may seem downright impossible.

Many children of fire fighters idealize their parents as invincible heroes. The pressure to uphold this image and protect your children from the reality of your addiction may stem from a mixture of love, fear and shame.

If you have made the decision to get residential substance abuse treatment, it may be tempting to lie to your children about where you'll be. However, healthcare experts broadly agree that giving false information to your kids is a misguided approach that will likely backfire.

It's true that kids need different information depending on their age. But rather than assuming your kids are too young to understand, consider the following reasons why it's important they know where you are and why:

- **It's not their fault.** Because kids are not fully developed socially or cognitively, they tend to see the world from an egocentric perspective, i.e. things happen because of me, for me or about me. Without a clear explanation to the contrary, children could assume your addiction, your behavior or your need to leave home is somehow their fault.
- **Restore trust.** You are seeking residential treatment because your ability to function on the job or at home has become truly impaired. If you have been physically or emotionally unavailable because of your addiction, the time to restore trust with your children and build a better relationship for the future is now. Being dishonest will only erode that trust.
- **Make sense of addict behavior.** When bad things happen, understanding the why can help us cope. Children, especially, need to make sense of events in their world to feel secure. If a parent is struggling to get out of bed, behave appropriately or meet minimum work or childcare obligations, understanding the parent is sick can help a child make sense of what is going on.
- **Dispel rumors and clarify facts.** If your child is in middle or high school, chances are he or she has already heard, witnessed or learned about substance abuse through school, social media or friends. Sometimes the information that is circulated is sensationalized, not clinically based, dated or simply untrue. Older children may benefit from knowing the prognosis and facts of your specific substance use disorder, while appreciating no two addictions are the same.
- **Model the importance of asking for help.** Kids are smart. Even young children can detect subtle physical and emotional changes that accompany a parent's addiction. By not acknowledging to your child that you need help, you send the message that some problems are too shameful to ask for help and must be dealt with on their own. If your child was coping with a bad break-up, academic problems or bullying at school, would you want him or her to suffer alone or ask for help?
- **Accept responsibility.** As a fire fighter or paramedic, you may use substances to cope with unresolved post-traumatic stress. You may think your addiction is not your fault. Regardless of who or what drives your urge to use, it is your responsibility to deal with your addiction. Being honest with your loved ones and seeking professional help can teach your children an important life lesson to accept responsibility for their problems.





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If you or your child need support:

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