WORDS YOU CAN BORROW

Tell the truth. Keep the adult job with adults.

An example to adapt honestly:

“Dad’s drinking affected what happened today. You did not cause it. You can talk to me. Here is who will care for you tonight.”

Use words that fit what the child already knows. Do not promise recovery, safety, or your own availability unless you can follow through.

What I can truthfully explain:

A safe adult available today:

One promise I can keep:

A child can love someone and feel angry or scared. Make room for the feelings without asking the child to comfort the adult.

WHEN SOMEONE YOU LOVE IS STRUGGLING

Connection needs follow-through.

A clear explanation. A named helper. Checking back. These are practical steps adults can take for a child.

Progress is Progress LLC

Mile or a Millimeter

www.progresscounselingprograms.com

US SUPPORT

Medical emergency or suspected overdose: call 911.

Emotional distress or suicidal crisis: call or text 988.

Family support: SAMHSA.gov/families
Relationship safety: TheHotline.org

General adult education. Not medical, legal, or crisis services. Adapt plans to your circumstances and seek qualified help when needed.

SOURCES / FURTHER READING

NACoA / Talking with kids and teens

Head Start / Parental substance use

© 2026 Progress is Progress LLC

Adult family edition • Review 01 • October 2026

What do I tell the kids?

Honest words. A reliable adult.
A plan that takes care of the child.



Progress is Progress LLC

Mile or a Millimeter

01 / START WITH THE CHILD

Ask what they noticed.

Choose a calm, private moment when you can listen. Keep the first conversation short. You can return to it.

LISTEN FIRST

“What have you noticed?”
“What are you wondering about?”
Answer the question the child actually asked.

REMOVE THE BURDEN

Say plainly that the substance use is an adult problem. The child did not cause it and is not responsible for fixing or hiding it.

What the child may have noticed:

One question I can invite:

DO NOT MAKE THEM THE MONITOR

Do not ask a child to hide substances, check whether an adult is using, carry messages between adults, or keep an unsafe secret.

02 / ADAPT THE WORDS

Simple enough to understand.

These are examples, not a speech to deliver word for word. Be specific about the care available.

YOUNGER CHILD

“The drinking is an adult problem. It is not your fault. [Safe adult] is caring for you today.”

OLDER CHILD OR TEEN

“You do not have to monitor anyone. Let’s choose an adult you can reach when you need support.”

Words that fit this child:

Who will check back, and when?

It is okay to say, “I don’t know yet. I will tell you what I do know.”

03 / PUT CARE BEHIND THE WORDS

Make the next step concrete.

Make sure the helpers know the plan and are available.

A REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE

“If I cannot pick you up, Jordan will. Here’s how to reach them.”

The safe adult and contact:

A backup adult and contact:

A safe place or pickup plan:

FOLLOW THROUGH

Arrange sober care and transport. If a child is in immediate danger, seek emergency help. Do not leave safety to a child’s judgment alone.

When I will check in again:

Support I need to follow through:

For more support, connect the child with a qualified professional or trusted service.