

Healthy and Drug-Free

Middle school is an exciting time. Your child is becoming familiar with a new world of classes and peers and growing into a young adolescent. But it is also a time of increased risk, since she may be exposed to alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.

The good news? You can have great influence over your tween's choices. Consider these ways to help her avoid risky behaviors.



Keep stress at bay

Young people sometimes turn to alcohol or other drugs when they are overwhelmed. So if your middle grader knows how to cope with stress, she'll be less likely to use substances as an escape.



Being on top of her schedule will go a long way toward helping her feel in control. Encourage your child to write her commitments and assignments in a planner, and remind her of upcoming appointments to add. Also, have her create routines for morning, after school, and bedtime to make life more predictable and her days easier to manage. For example, each evening she could put her backpack by the door and set out clothes and breakfast foods for the next morning.

Teach coping skills by sharing ways *you* cope with stress. You might say, "I've had a tough day. I think I'll take a bath to unwind." Ask what makes her feel relaxed (perhaps reading or drawing). Suggest that she do those activities each day to stay calm.

Watch for warning signs

Symptoms of drug use can be similar to typical tween behaviors, so watch for whether they continue longer than normal or if two or more are happening together. Here are common warning signs:

- Withdrawing from family, friends, and activities
- Significant drop in grades
- Unusually tired or overly energized
- Unexplained nausea or vomiting
- Red or flushed face, skin irritations, or bruises
- Frequent nosebleeds or runny nose
- Spots around the mouth
- Increased use of eyedrops (to reduce redness)
- Sudden use of air fresheners or incense (to mask drug, cigarette, or alcohol odor)
- Unusual activity with money (frequently asking for money, selling items, stealing money)



If you suspect your child is using drugs, check with his teachers and school counselor. Ask your youngster directly—let him know you care about his safety and want to get him help. If he denies using drugs but symptoms continue, take him to the doctor. You can also call the Partnership for Drug-Free Kids helpline (855-378-4373).



Find healthy activities

Pursuing wholesome activities will fill your tween's free time when he might otherwise get into trouble. They can also help him meet adults and peers who are good influences and give him a chance to develop new skills. In turn, those skills may boost his self-esteem and prevent drug use.

Have your middle grader check the school office or website for extracurricular offerings and look into community center programs, too. He could also consider volunteering for a cause (say, collecting books for a children's hospital). Encourage him to chat with friends to see what they do after school—he may want to join a club or play a sport with a buddy.

Keep communication lines open

Talking regularly with your middle schooler about drugs and alcohol is one of the best ways to keep her from experimenting. Start by asking what she knows about these substances. Make it clear she's not allowed to try them. Point out that using mind-altering drugs at her age is especially harmful because her brain and body are still growing. Also, focus on risks that will matter to her like getting kicked off her sports team, losing friends, or embarrassing herself. If she has questions, answer them if you can, or tell her you'll find out the facts.

Then, discuss ways for her to turn down alcohol or drugs. She might simply say, "No, thanks" and walk away. Or she could try humor. ("I like my brain the way it is.") Another idea is to use school or activities as an excuse. ("I have a test tomorrow" or "I can't risk my swim coach finding out.") *Note:* Make sure she knows she can contact you for a ride or help getting out of an uncomfortable situation.



Drugs: Be in the know

Depending on where you live, some of these drugs may be more popular than others. Ask school officials or local police what they see most often, and read online handbooks like drugfree.org/drug-guide.

Alcohol. Kids who start drinking at younger ages have a much greater chance of becoming addicted. Keep an eye on alcohol if you have it at home (for instance, checking the level in liquor bottles). Better yet, lock it up.

Nicotine. While smoking is on the decline among young people, e-cigarettes are gaining in popularity. They may help adults wean themselves off of regular cigarettes, but using e-cigs to inhale nicotine-based vapor can get young people hooked.

Marijuana. Surveys show that many adolescents don't see "weed" as risky anymore—especially since it's legal for adults in some states. Explain that marijuana carries special dangers for adolescent brains. In addition to being illegal for children, it can damage attention and memory, making it harder for kids to learn.



Inhalants. Ordinary household products like shoe polish, glue, and spray paint can be inhaled or sniffed to get high. Your child might not realize they present serious hazards, including liver, lung, kidney, and brain damage, heart attacks, and even death.

Over-the-counter and prescription drugs. Some kids use cough syrup, painkillers, tranquilizers, antidepressants, sleeping pills, or stimulants (such as ADHD medicines), thinking they aren't as dangerous as "regular" drugs. However, they are habit-forming and harmful—and even deadly—if not used as directed. Lock them in cabinets, and dispose of unneeded medications immediately.

Heroin. The use of heroin is increasing rapidly—and so are deaths from overdoses on this dangerous drug. Because some heroin users are first addicted to prescription opioids, dispense one dose at a time if they're prescribed for your tween, and keep them away from her otherwise.

Middle Years