

Mothers Against Drunk Driving

TALKING WITH YOUR
MIDDLE SCHOOLER
ABOUT ALCOHOL

POWER of
PARENTS

madd®



PARENT HANDBOOK

What's Inside

1	Introduction	4	5	Helping Your Teen Make Good Choices	33
	· PURPOSE OF THIS HANDBOOK	5		· DEALING WITH PEER PRESSURE	33
2	Your Middle Schooler's World	8		· FINDING ALTERNATIVES TO DRINKING	34
	· FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY	8		· CHOOSING FRIENDS	37
	· PHYSICAL CHANGES	9		· COULD YOUR CHILD HAVE A DRINKING PROBLEM?	40
	· IDENTITY AND SELF ESTEEM	10			
3	What Style Of Parent Are You?	13	6	Middle School Parents Talking About Marijuana	42
	· AUTHORITARIAN	13		· HOW MARIJUANA WORKS IN THE BODY	42
	· OVERPROTECTIVE	14		· HOW YOU CAN HELP YOUR MIDDLE SCHOOLER	45
	· PERMISSIVE RULE SETTING	14		· PARENTAL CONCERNS	46
	· POSITIVE	15		· FINAL THOUGHTS	47
4	Talking About Alcohol	16	7	Discussion Checklist	48
	· STARTING THE CONVERSATION	17		Promoting a Safer Community	49
	· AVOIDING ASSUMPTIONS	20	8	Resources	50
	· GETTING YOUR SON OR DAUGHTER TO TALK	21		Final Takeaways	51
	· DID YOU DRINK WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG	27			
	· TALKING SO YOUR CHILD WILL LISTEN	27			
	· AVOIDING POTHOLES	29			
	· STRATEGIES THAT HELP KIDS SUCCEED	30			
	· 5 REASONS THAT MIDDLE SCHOOL CHILDREN RESPECT	30			



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Introduction

When children reach the middle school years and early adolescence, they are entering a period of immense and rapid change. During this exciting period, parents face new challenges and rewards. Some of a child's changes are physical and easy to see. Other changes, such as how the child thinks, feels, communicates, and interacts with peers, are less noticeable.

We created this handbook to help parents talk to children ages 11-14 about alcohol.

During this phase, parents have a single goal: keeping their kids safe and healthy while helping them grow into independent, well-adjusted young adults.

From research we know that many kids ages 11-14 or even earlier are being exposed to alcohol. Even if kids this age don't drink or use marijuana, it's the time in their lives when they are setting their expectations about

alcohol and marijuana. However, to parents alcohol may seem so common and familiar that they may forget or not consider how risky it is for young people in these early stages of development. However, the fact remains: alcohol is always a dangerous drug when in the hands of underage drinkers. Alcohol is responsible for more young peoples' serious accidents and deaths than all other illegal drugs combined.

Marijuana is increasingly becoming legal in the US and people are either assuming it must be safe or has health benefits. Many of the perceived health benefits have not been adequately tested by medical and health researchers. It is important for parents to be able to have meaningful conversations based on the research with their middle schoolers. These materials are designed to help parents.



PURPOSE OF THIS HANDBOOK

By reading this handbook and following its recommendations, you can substantially reduce the chance that your son or daughter will drink before the age of 21 or use marijuana. As you go through the handbook, you may relate to some sections better than others. This is okay because we completely understand and respect that not all families are the same. We strongly encourage you to review the entire handbook. Based on research with thousands of families all over the country, it contains information that will be helpful to you and your family.



A MESSAGE TO PARENTS FROM DR. TURRISI

Research shows that kids who drink are a danger to themselves, their friends, and others. For 20 years, hundreds of high quality clinical studies in the United States and Europe have shown that the sooner kids drink, the more severe the problems they face in the short and long term

Science shows that a child's brain works differently from grown up brains. It is important to realize that no matter how mature kids act they are not simply small versions of adults. Kids' brains are still in a critical period of development well into their 20's. Alcohol and marijuana interferes with how brains and bodies grow.

As medical health professionals, we have seen countless times how a single night of underage drinking or using marijuana can destroy lives forever. Unfortunately, most kids who have problems with alcohol or marijuana took their first drink or used marijuana when they were very young, sometimes with their parents.

As a parent you have power to equip your child to make smarter, safer choices and to help prevent tragedies. We urge you to read this handbook and talk with your middle school-aged child to help shape the choices they make regarding alcohol and marijuana. These conversations will have an impact on their physical and emotional development and could be life-saving.



Talk Soon

“My daughter Olivia didn’t wake up one day desiring to be an alcoholic and addict and lose her life at 21. That came about from the friends and choices she made.

Olivia took her first drink around age 13. Looking back, there were signs. Her friends changed in middle school; her diaries talk about how badly she wanted to fit in. I once dropped her off at a friend’s house and when I returned, she was so intoxicated with alcohol poisoning that we went straight to the emergency room.

Drinking caused Olivia to lose her virginity just before the 8th grade to a high school senior. Then she was so ashamed she drank more and tried to take her own life. Counseling helped for a while, but if she took one drink, she just couldn’t stop.

Olivia was a repeat offender, she got arrested, did drugs, wrecked a car, and became involved in an abusive relationship. Despite all the bad things, she still graduated early from high school with wonderful grades. When she wasn’t under the influence, she was sweet and charming and funny.

At age 21, Olivia called and asked for help. We got her wait-listed at an in-patient treatment program; she was supposed to call daily to check for an opening. But Olivia stopped calling, thinking she could handle it herself. Three months later, she drove drunk, hit an embankment, and died the next day.

Later I learned that the parents one of Olivia’s closest middle school friends allowed kids to drink at home as long as no one was driving. I had no idea, I trusted other parents and put my head in the sand, I never wanted to believe that my daughter had a drinking problem or was less than perfect.

Losing Olivia changed our family forever. The simplest things you take for granted become a monumental event, like setting the kitchen table, just holding that extra plate in your hand. I share her story because if one person chooses not to go down that same path, then Olivia’s life and death have purpose. That gives me comfort.”

Mother of daughter who died at 21

Your Middle Schooler's World

As you are aware, many changes are going on throughout your child's life. Among the biggest change is the transition from elementary to middle school. Kids age 11 to 14 may face many new situations and challenges:

- Maturing bodies that grow at different rates, leading to social awkwardness.
- The dilemma of who to become friends with and how to fit in.
- More responsibilities and demands at school and around the house.
- Moral dilemmas about risky behaviors and substance use.

During this period of rapid change and growth, adults can provide support and understanding that help build a stronger relationship.

FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

When kids reach middle school, it is normal for them to seek more freedoms. They want to feel in control and capable of handling any situation—even when they are not. Kids need to learn that all new freedoms come with responsibility. As parents, we can offer age-appropriate choices and guidance to help them develop safely.

During this period of rapid physical growth and change, a child's hands, feet and arms can grow quickly. Many youth feel awkward and "gawky."

Kids whose bodies mature slowly are often seen as less socially developed and less attractive and popular.

Mistakenly, about one in five middle school students believe they are overweight or underweight. These are some obstacles to developing healthy self-esteem.

TIP

Positive, shared family activities help protect kids against risky peer influences.

For example, kids like looking at pictures of parents and siblings when they were young. Viewing family photos together can strengthen relationships and show how everyone goes through similar changes.

These informal conversations also help keep the lines of communication open. By talking with kids often, the transition is easier when you need to discuss more difficult topics.

PHYSICAL CHANGES

Parents can reassure their son or daughter that body changes are natural and that within a few years, everyone will grow into their bodies. Kids who are satisfied with their bodies tend to have higher self-esteem. Self-esteem can help kids resist alcohol and other substances.

Thinking

The middle school child's brain focuses on what's happening right now.

That's why middle school kids make decisions based on immediate emotions. They care about "How I feel right now" and social concerns like "My friends will give me a hard time and I will be left out."

At this age, a child can have trouble understanding how actions today can lead to consequences in the future; this part of the brain literally has not yet developed.

When It Comes to Alcohol and Marijuana

Kids may hear that drinking is risky, but their own experience has greater impact on their choices. They may think, "My parents drink and nothing bad has ever happened."

Do not assume that facts or statistics will convince your child to avoid alcohol or marijuana

Your role is to help them use information to start developing rational thinking skills. It is important to have clear family rules about what to do if they are at someone's home, adults are not supervising, and alcohol becomes present.

Results from many studies indicate kids drink more often and heavier when alcohol is made available to them. The best practice to the have your son or daughter understand that they are to leave or call a trusted adult for a ride if this happens.

TIP

Use questions that start with *how*, *what*, and *why*. You might ask "*How* would you handle an invitation to a party with alcohol? *What* would you say? *Why* do you think drinking is dangerous at your age?" Help them practice thinking through the pros and cons of different alternatives

The Bottom Line

Adults may hold beliefs and have thoughts that simply do not exist for younger individuals. Help your middle schooler develop better critical thinking skills by talking together about the consequences of alcohol use, even if he or she shows little interest.

The part of the brain that controls what are considered to be “executive functions” (for example being less emotional and more reasoned, using judgment, planning, and critical thinking) is right at a critical stage of development that is not quite finished until the early 20s.

IDENTITY AND SELF ESTEEM

During the middle school years, kids feel pressure to fit in and establish an identity that’s “free” of their parents.

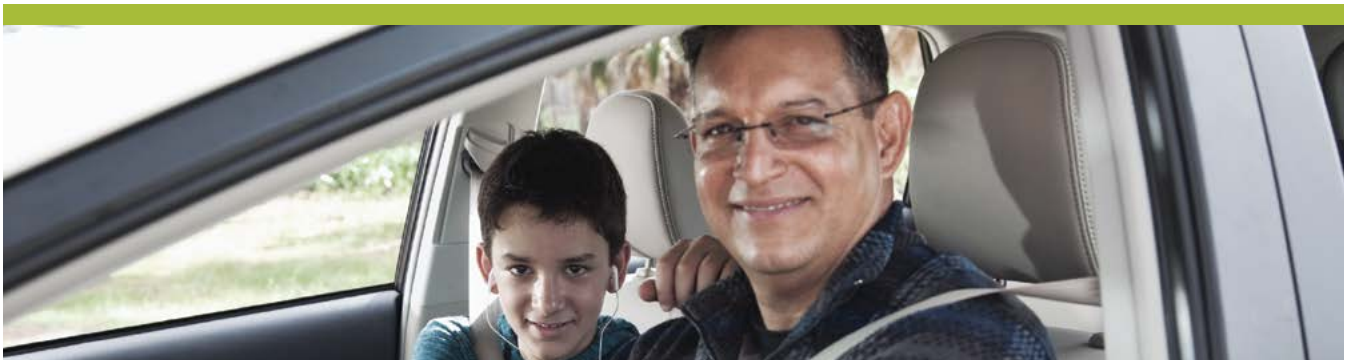
They are beginning to strive for independence. For support, they form close ties with friends of the same age. When faced with new situations, middle school kids often look to friends and older siblings for examples of how to behave. Older siblings, cousins, and friends can be models of positive behavior. However, if your child starts doing everything a friend says, for example, this may be problematic, particularly if that individual is engaging in negative behavior.

Middle school students need close friends. They also need to be able to express their own beliefs and preferences to these friends. This type of self-expression goes hand-in-hand with strong self-esteem, which also boosts problem solving and social adjustment.

Understanding self-esteem

Which of these factors contributes to developing self-esteem?

- Unconditional love
- Success at tasks such as athletics, music lessons, or dancing



-
- Being popular and “fitting in”
 - Being able to cope with negative feedback and to overcome adversity and problems

When handled properly, negative and positive experiences both can help build self-esteem.

All these factors play a role in developing self-esteem, but the last may be most important. By teaching kids how to cope with stressful events and solve problems, we help them develop valuable, lifelong skills that boost self-esteem.

8 Tips:

It's important for your child to gain your approval, so try to praise more than criticize.

1. Praise often.

Praise behavior you want to encourage. Catch your child doing things right. For example: “Nice job! You earned an ‘A’ on your homework!”

2. Give choices.

Where possible, allow your child to make decisions for himself or herself, especially for small choices like choosing between games or clothing. Try to let your child be his or her own person.

3. Provide responsibilities.

Kids who have regular duties around the house know they are helping out. They learn to see themselves as a useful and important part of the family unit. Chores such as washing the dishes, folding laundry, feeding a pet, or taking out the trash help your child to understand responsibilities and have an active role in the family.

4. Enforce rules in private.

If possible, do not punish your child in public, especially in front of his or her friends. This leads to humiliation and lowers self-esteem. Wait until a private moment to discuss an issue such as forgotten homework or chores.

5. Praise effort.

Let your son or daughter know that they don't always have to “win” or be perfect. Don't deny that winning feels good, but take pride in the process of activity rather than the outcome.

6. Set realistic goals.

When too much is expected of a child, failure and low self-esteem follow. Be realistic about your own expectations and help your child to be realistic.

7. Don't compare.

There will always be others who do better or worse than your child. Teach your child to value his or her individuality. Talk about what is special and unique about them. Highlight and encourage the activities in which they are successful and enjoy participating.

8. Take concerns seriously.

Sometimes a child may tell you about something that upsets him or her. You may not understand the importance of the concern, but you can support self-esteem by respecting and listening to their concerns.

Instead of saying "it's just a game." when your son or daughter gets upset about losing a game, you can say " I know you are disappointed. I am proud of how hard you tried."

Going Along With a Group

Kids include others in their moral reasoning. If their peers do something, it makes the behavior seem more okay. Your son or daughter may justify decisions by saying, "but everyone is doing it." Youth often believe they should be excused for misbehavior if it was unplanned or if they are one of many. They may say, "We did not mean to drink; things just happened; kids make mistakes." This is where you as a parent can play a big role, by communicating with them about what the family rules are and working with them to form plans if these situations arise.

TIP

Remember to use questions that start with *how*, *what*, and *why*. You might ask "*How* would you handle a situation where your friends want to drink alcohol? *What* would you say to them? *Why* do you think drinking is dangerous for them and you at your age? *What* could you do differently?" Parents can help kids practice thinking through the pros and cons of different alternatives.

Also, as a parent, you can share facts and provide alternate information to things that your child perceives are prevalent. For example, not everyone drinks alcohol and you can share that with your child to inform and educate them of this fact.

Risky Business

Because adolescents' brains are still developing, adolescents take more risks with alcohol. They act impulsively and don't recognize that their actions, such as drinking, have consequences.

Alcohol is especially attractive to young people because it reduces their social anxiety more than it does for adults.

What Style Of Parent Are You?

Parents rely on certain strategies for raising their middle school children. Do any of the parenting styles below seem familiar to you?

AUTHORITARIAN

Authoritarian parents tend to use parental power for control:

- Children must do what they are told or else face serious consequences.
- Parents are unconcerned if kids understand the reasons behind rules. Parents don't tolerate being asked for explanations.
- Parents use threats and punishment to keep their kids in line.

Two Parents Two Styles?

Sometimes parents have different styles. For example, one parent might be authoritarian while the other is overprotective. This can create even more confusion for the child as he or she attempts to meet the expectations of both parents.

Research shows that kids who feel threatened by their parents may behave well when the threatening parent is nearby, but act out when the threatening parent is gone. These kids have difficulty behaving properly without external control. They are less likely to develop internalized values that equip them to make wise decisions.

By focusing on obedience, authoritarian parents lose their ability to influence their son or daughter through reasoned discussion or to help them develop good thinking skills.

If parents impose very strict rules, kids often defy them. Then parents give more punishments and kids rebel more. It can become a vicious cycle. Angry kids may finally say: "I don't care how you punish me. You can't control me. Take away whatever you want. Lock me up. Kick me out. It doesn't matter because I will still do what I want." At this point, authoritarian parents lose much of their influence.

Research shows: Compared with all young people who drink illegally, children of authoritarian style parents tend to consume the most dangerously high levels of alcohol.

OVERPROTECTIVE

Overprotective parents shield their kids from the harsh realities of life. Like authoritarian parents, they exert a lot of control, but their method is different.

Instead of using rules and threats, overprotective parents present themselves as allies. They see the world as a threat and express their fearfulness. Then they rescue their son or daughter from dealing with any harsh reality.

Q - Do different parenting styles work better for different kids?

A - Research shows that positive parenting is the only parenting style that's consistently linked with kids who make better decisions

For example, instead of helping their child understand difficult homework assignments, overprotective parents might actually do the work for them. This leaves the child poorly prepared for the realities of adult life.

Having no experience in handling challenging situations, these kids may panic in stressful situations.

PERMISSIVE RULE SETTING

Parents who have permissive rule setting use a hands-off approach. They:

- Do not set expectations. Instead, they believe their son or daughter should be independent.

- Permit kids to explore the world without “interfering.”
- Feel kids should be free to make mistakes and learn from them accordingly.

Permissive rule setting parents may not face as much rebellion as authoritarian or overprotective parents do. However, overly permissive rule setting parents deprive their child of wise guidance in developing effective problem-solving skills.

A child of permissive rule setting parents can come to feel neglected and believe that their parents have little interest in what they do. This, in turn, can lead to resentment.

Research shows: when they drink illegally, kids of permissive rule setting style parents tend to have significantly higher than average blood alcohol levels compared to other underage drinkers.

Parents do make a difference

Despite how you may feel sometimes, research shows that parents are the number one influence on whether or not a child chooses to drink alcohol.

POSITIVE

Positive parents focus on empowering their middle school child to grow and learn. They:

- Take an active role in teaching responsibility.
- Set clear expectations about behavior, such as waiting until age 21 before drinking alcohol.
- Explain reasons behind their expectations and encourage their son or daughter to talk about any concerns.
- Set and enforce consequences before agreements are not met.

Positive parents know that their own age, knowledge, experience, and material resources give them more power than their child. Positive parents use that power to strengthen and protect their child and help them grow into effective individuals.

Positive parenting can be difficult, because parents gradually give up control and allow kids more freedom and responsibility with each passing year. These parents respect a child's drive for independence, yet maintain legitimate limits. They build trust and teach skills that empower kids to take increasing control of their lives.

Instead of enforcing severe punishment for bad behavior only after the fact, positive parents discuss and set clear consequences for breaking rules before any instances, then enforce them if need be. They encourage their son and daughter to talk about problems and to build problem-solving skills.

Positive parenting is generally the most effective parenting style.

Research shows: when a child of positive style parents does drink illegally, they tend to consume significantly less alcohol than a child of other parenting styles.

Parents Do Make a Difference

Despite how you may feel sometimes, research shows that parents are an important influence on whether or not their son or daughter chooses to drink alcohol.

Kids do care about their parents' opinions. They tend to respond well to a positive parenting style. In contrast, many studies show that authoritarian, overprotective, and permissive parenting can lead to negative outcomes. The strategies recommended in this handbook are compatible with the positive parenting style.

For more information on how parenting styles can influence teen or kids drinking, visit MADD at madd.org/powerofparents.

The Bottom Line

Positive parenting strategies can help empower a middle school student to avoid underage drinking.

Talking About Alcohol

As a parent, you can play a critical role in preventing your child from using alcohol. The key is having high-quality conversations. Keep in mind, research shows that parents who read these materials first and then have conversations with their child are far more effective.



Know The Facts

Alcohol is the most misused drug in our society. Many adults do not even consider alcohol to be a drug. What adds to the confusion is that other countries have different laws that allow drinking at an earlier age than in the United States.

The data from numerous and well conducted studies indicate that, because of our laws, American children get drunk far less often and have lower lifetime risks of alcohol problems compared to most other countries in the world. Still, even with good laws, some kids start drinking alcohol as early as 6th or 7th grade. Even those that do not set their future expectations for alcohol at this young age.

Young people who drink have a much greater risk of getting injured or dying. Research shows that the earlier that they begin; the more likely they are to have life-long alcohol problems.

STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Communication is most effective when all participants have a feeling of connection and collaboration. The best way to achieve this is by asking for permission. For example, you might say, “There is something that I have been hearing about lately in the news and I was hoping we could talk about it for a few minutes. Is that okay?”

When the time is right to start talking together, use “**how**,” “**what**,” and “**why**” questions to help your son or daughter work through different scenarios that could involve alcohol. These are different than yes-or-no questions like “do you know anyone who drinks?”

Questions that start with “**how**,” “**what**,” and “**why**” can encourage an exchange of ideas. They help middle school children practice rational thinking about pros and cons of different alternatives. Open-ended questions allow kids to develop thinking skills that help them resist in-the-moment emotions

How Alcohol Effects Us

Alcohol is a drug that depresses the entire body. From the first drink, alcohol begins to impair judgment, coordination, and reaction time.

As higher levels of alcohol reach the brain, physical processes slow down, including breathing and heart rate. Too much alcohol makes breathing and heart rate drop to dangerously low levels—or even stop.

Kids who drink alcohol before age 21 are more likely to:

- Face problems in school
- Get assaulted
- Abuse alcohol later in life
- Drown or fall
- Die in a car crash

Here are some strong ways to start a dialogue around alcohol:

- I heard on the news that one out of four 8th graders have tried alcohol. I was wondering...
- If you were to guess, how many kids your age do you think have had a drink with alcohol in it?
- How do you think it has helped them? Hurt them?
- What are the reasons those kids might have had for drinking?
- What are some of the things they could have done instead?
- Why do you think they did that?
- Why do you think they did not drink?

Negative reactions from a parent can shut down communication and make it difficult to help a child solve problems and deal with difficult situations. Negative parental reactions include:

- Letting off steam in an angry outburst
- Giving the silent treatment and then saying “things are fine”
- Bringing up the child’s past failures
- Recruiting other people to support your side of the argument
- Comparing kids and asking, “Why can’t you be more like your brother/sister?”

You can also personalize the questions:

- If you were in their situation, how might you act?
- How do you think it would affect you?
- What are some of the things you could have done instead?
- Why is that?



TIP

Here are several topics that we recommend you discuss with your child:

TOPIC	HOW	WHAT	WHY
The effect of drinking on the body / physically	<i>'How' do you think drinking helps or hurts the body?</i>	<i>'What' physical activities do you want to do in the future that drinking could hurt?</i>	<i>'Why' do you think some young people drink if they can get hurt?</i>
How drinking affects decisions/ choices	<i>'How' do you think drinking affects choices young people make?</i>	<i>'What' problems can happen when young people choose to drink?</i>	<i>'Why' do you think some young people drink if it can have a negative impact on their choices?</i>
Drinking before 21	<i>'How' does drinking before the age of 21 affect someone?</i>	<i>'What' answers could kids give if they are pushed to drink before 21?</i>	<i>'Why' do you think some people would start drinking before 21?</i>

Remember: Try to keep your cool and not get angry if you hear things that you do not like.

AVOIDING ASSUMPTIONS

Parents sometimes hesitate to impose rules against underage drinking or even to discuss drinking with their kids. Maybe they are embarrassed or assume their son or daughter is not at risk.

Are You Making That Assumption?	Read The Real Facts:
<i>It's too early. My son or daughter is not interested in drinking</i>	<i>According to data from a Monitoring the Future national survey, about 27% of kids try alcohol before graduating from 8th grade.</i>
<i>My child's friends are good kids who do not drink alcohol</i>	<i>About 9% of 8th graders have drunk alcohol in the past 30 days.</i>
<i>My son or daughter has learned about the negative effects of alcohol in school</i>	<i>Although most kids do learn about alcohol in their health classes, research shows that many important issues never get covered. School programs alone are not enough to stop youth from drinking.</i>
<i>At this point, my son or daughter should know better</i>	<i>Unfortunately, the reality is that many young people are uninformed about how powerful a drug alcohol can be.</i>
<i>We have our kids involved in sports. This keeps them off the streets.</i>	<i>Research shows that involvement in sports shifts from being protective when children are very young to a high risk factor as they get older. Do not assume that because your kids participate in sports or other organized activities that they will not be exposed to pressures to drink alcohol.</i>

When may be the best time to talk with your child about alcohol? Kids are often tired after a school day or athletic event, and that may not be the best time to start a conversation.

Think about your child's schedule and how you can create a time where you will have his or her undivided attention. Perhaps take him or her out to a quiet dinner or someplace where you can comfortably start a "one-on-one" conversation.

GETTING YOUR SON OR DAUGHTER TO TALK

Parents can be frustrated by their inability to get their middle school child to talk at length on any issue. They swear that their son or daughter has a vocabulary of "Okay, Mom," "I dunno," "Whatever," "If you want," and "Not now" when it comes to parental conversation. "Eye rolls" from the child may also punctuate these statements.

Kids may respond this way when they are busy, tired, or simply not in the mood for talking. Perhaps they fear getting another lecture or that the parent will start nagging again. Kids may feel the parent just doesn't understand them.

Parents need to respect how their child may feel and not force communication at a bad time. Let the matter drop and bring it up later. Try to pick a time when your child will be open to talking.

Talk every day about things that matter to your son or daughter. Ask questions and seek understanding. This makes conversation flow more easily when it's time to discuss "heavier" topics, such as alcohol.

Seek discussion; don't lecture! Share your own experiences and opinions and how they have changed over the years. As you are willing to open-up and share experiences, so will your son or daughter.

Keep distinctions between facts and opinions. Say things like, "My opinion is ... This opinion is based on these facts and observations."

Ask your son or daughter what he or she thinks. Listen and try to understand without being defensive.

Suspend your critical judgment while you listen attentively. This is probably the single most important aspect of good communication.

People like to talk about themselves and their opinions. People like to explore logic and details. They do not like to be told what to think!

Keep comments short. Remember, you don't have to say everything that comes to mind. Kids tend to tune out when parents make big, sweeping comments like "kids getting drunk is terrible." Well-chosen silence can actually encourage your child to talk more and engage more in the conversation.

Middle School Students Make Assumptions, Too
Kids who drink say:

- They don't believe drinking makes you sick or has bad effects.
- They are bored and there is nothing else to do but drink.
- They expect drinking to have benefits, such as improved socializing.
- "It can't be that bad if everyone is doing it," and "my friends won't think I'm cool if I don't drink."

Talk with your child to correct his or her mistaken assumptions about alcohol. Reinforce the proven fact that the majority of kids are NOT drinking.

Young People Drink Differently

Middle school students may not consciously plan to drink, but they may take an opportunity to experiment. For example, they may be hanging out with friends at a home with an unlocked liquor cabinet, and decide to open up a bottle because there are no parents around.

Young people tend to engage in intense drinking, called "binge" drinking. For boys, binge drinking means having at least 5 drinks within a 2-hour period. For girls, it means at least 4 drinks within that time.

Unfortunately, over the past two weeks:

- 11% of 8th graders have consumed alcohol to the point of being drunk
- 4% of 8th graders have engaged in binge drinking

Kids who chug alcohol and drink as much as they can— as fast as they can—risk dying from alcohol poisoning. Consider these quotes:

"A girl I know got so drunk that she dropped her cellphone down the toilet. She told her parents it was stolen."

"He took a bunch of beers out of his dad's refrigerator and started showing off how much he could drink. After 6 beers, he passed out."

These accounts sound shocking, but your son, daughter, or someone they know may have experienced something like this.

The earlier kids start drinking, the more likely they are to eventually become dependent on alcohol and to drive drunk.

According to recent data:

- 1 in 37 students in the 8th grade got drunk, in the past month
- 1 in 5 8th graders binge drank in the past two weeks

Binge Drinking is Bad News

Binge drinkers are more likely to be:

- pushed, hit or attacked
- confronted with unwanted sexual advances
- sexually assaulted
- seriously injured

Binge drinkers are also more likely to drive drunk, ride with a drunk driver, have their property damaged, have unprotected sex, and get exposed to sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV.

TIP

Even if your child says what you hope to hear (“I don’t drink”), it’s still important to talk together about alcohol.

Ask questions, listen without defensiveness, and expand your child’s thinking. Discuss how he or she might handle or avoid risky situations that could come up.

Your child may not admit to drinking yet, but you can still set no-alcohol rules and monitor their friends and activities. Talk together about alcohol to help prevent your child from drinking.

Knowing the Facts as You Communicate Your Family’s Values

Families take different approaches to alcohol use. Some parents permit their child to drink a controlled amount of alcohol under supervision on holidays or at family functions. Other parents don’t permit any alcohol at all before a child reaches the age of 21.

We have met parents who teach basic family values, like honesty and responsibility, but never discuss alcohol directly with their kids. They assume that their son or daughter will know how to apply family values to alcohol. That’s a risky assumption.

Pre-adolescents and adolescents’ brains are still developing and as a result they do not always make connections that are obvious to adults. You will empower your child to meet the challenges of growing up if you clearly discuss your expectations about alcohol, keep communication lines open, and set clear rules and consequences while monitoring their friends and activities.

We have met parents who teach basic family values, like honesty and responsibility, but never discuss alcohol directly with their kids.

As you decide what to do in your own home, consider research findings from the United States and Europe:

- Kids who believe their parents approve of them drinking alcohol are more likely to drink outside the home.
- Kids who are given alcohol at home are more likely to drink alcohol when they are away from their parents. They also get drunk more often at early ages.
- There is no research showing that drinking alcohol at an early age teaches kids about alcohol or protects them from getting drunk later on.
- If providing alcohol to kids was in some way beneficial, then doctors, teachers, and health experts would recommend it, but they don't.

Discuss your position on alcohol with your son or daughter. Talk about:

- How drinking affects the body both physically and psychologically
- How drinking only one time can have harmful effects
- Reasons why some kids drink and others do not drink
- Constructive ways of having fun that do not involve drinking

- Why you are concerned about drinking before 21
- The consequences for violating your rules about not drinking before 21 and why your family has these rules

GET INFORMED!

Visit madd.org/powerofparents for more resources and information.

Middle school children are young and still learning about behaving responsibly. You can help your child find many other ways to practice responsible behavior besides drinking alcohol.

As a parent, don't feel the pressure to give in and let your child drink before the age of 21.

Also keep in mind: there can be legal ramifications to serving alcohol to your own child or other people's children. In some states, parents may be able serve their own children alcohol, though this is not recommended.

Adults, however, are never permitted to serve alcohol to other people's children. What's more, it is illegal for young people under 21 to purchase or possess alcohol.

Enforcing Consequences

As a parent, be ready to follow through and enforce consequences if your child violates a family agreement.

Do

- Impose a consequence if your teen violates an agreement.
- Impose consequences consistently.
- Be very clear about no underage drinking.

Don't

- Base your actions on anger.
- Impose a consequence arbitrarily, in the heat of the moment.

Here are examples:

A child comes home and has clearly been drinking. The parent is angry and says, “You’re grounded indefinitely. When you’re not in school, you will be at home.” This consequence is set arbitrarily during an angry moment and may not even be possible to enforce.

Another parent might respond by saying, “I’m very disappointed with the choices you made. We will talk about this in the morning.”

The next day, the parent might say, “You violated a very important family rule. Drinking is very dangerous at your age. Therefore, as we agreed before, there will be serious consequences. For the next month, you will not be allowed to play with friends after school or use your cell phone when you are at home. During the next 30 days you can work on building the trust we have lost by making better choices.

Emphasize to your child how quickly drinking can lead to dangerous results. That’s why you take underage drinking so seriously.



Does The Penalty Fit?

It's best for consequences to match the "crime." Small violations of family rules deserve mild punishment; serious violations deserve tougher penalties.

For example, you could consider curbing privileges, like limiting phone rights or computer access. Evaluate the situation, and as a parent, set an appropriate consequence.

Keep in mind that kids are different, so a restriction that worked for one child may not be appropriate for another.

We suggest you speak in advance with your child to agree on penalties before a rule is actually broken. Then everyone understands the family rules and consequences.

High Quality Agreements

A good agreement is clear and understood by all. However, parents and kids often make agreements only to have the child break them. Instead of being a true agreement, the agreement really imposes what the parent wants.

At times, you may have to ask for an agreement based on respect for your authority. In those cases, emphasize that your purpose is to protect and your intent is to eventually give freedom.

Agreements are most likely to be honored when they are made in the context of high-quality relationships. High quality relationships are built on mutual trust, where both participants are confident that the other will be honest, responsible, and caring.

High quality relationships are characterized by:

- Respect for one another
- Empathy and understanding
- Knowledge of each other
- Mutual trust
- Concern for one another

MADD Urges You To Make The Following Agreements With Your Pre-Teen:

- No drinking alcohol before age 21
- No socializing in places where kids are drinking
- No riding in a car with a driver who has had any amount of alcohol

DID YOU DRINK WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG?

Your son or daughter will probably ask if you ever drank when you were young. This may create a dilemma for parents. If you drank and say “no,” you are being dishonest. If you say “yes,” your child will think you are hypocritical to expect different behavior from them.

Honesty is important and you should not lie to your child. Parents use different approaches to answer this question:

Making the topic off limits.

Some parents establish a “ground rule” at the start of their discussion: they will talk about everything else, but will not answer questions about their own use of drugs or alcohol when they were young. The parent believes that their own behavior as a youth is not relevant to the child’s current use of alcohol. This strategy works in some families, but not in others. Kids usually become convinced that their parents are hiding something and resent that their parents won’t talk about it.

Admitting mistakes and emphasizing negative outcomes.

Other parents admit they drank, but focus on how it was a mistake. They use their own experience to discuss negative outcomes, such as how drinking led to an embarrassing moment or dangerous situation. They stress that because the parent behaved foolishly and was lucky enough to escape serious consequences does not mean that the child will have the same outcome

Here is an example of how you might handle this question:

“I did have a drink when I was younger. However, we did not know as much as we know now about the risks of alcohol. If I had known then, I would have done things differently. This is why I am talking to you about it. I want you to be safe, healthy, and happy.”

TALKING SO YOUR CHILD WILL LISTEN

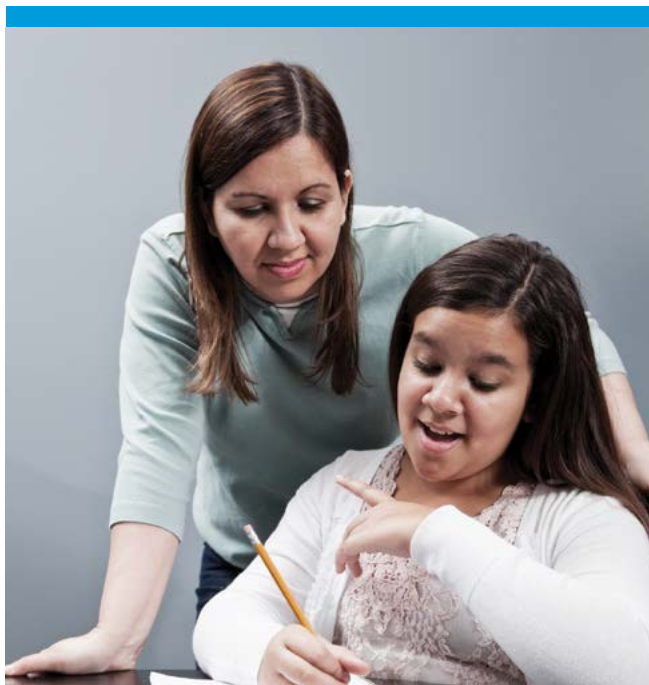
The following strategies will help you communicate most effectively:

Listen.

Allow your child to speak without interruption. Listen to what he or she says. Sometimes it is good to paraphrase. “Let me see if I understand you. It sounds like you feel that...” With paraphrasing, you don’t agree or disagree, you interpret.

Speak with respect and appreciation.

Your child still values your approval. Whenever you can, express your respect and admiration (for example, “I admire what you have done and how you are coping”). Everyone wants to be respected and is more willing to talk to people who respect them. Tell your son or daughter you are proud of them for being able to handle tough situations



Choose a good time. Choose the best time to bring up and discuss problems. Don't do it when the other person is rushed or has a commitment elsewhere. Wait until you both can have a relaxed, calm discussion.

You might take your child to lunch or out for some ice cream where you could both sit down to talk and listen to one another.

Most kids say their parents are the leading influence on their decisions about drinking.

Communicate directly.

Pick a time to speak when you can have each other's undivided attention. Don't discuss important things

when one of you is absorbed in another activity, such as reading the newspaper, watching television, or texting.

Emphasize common goals.

Remind your child that you are on their side. Emphasize common goals, and use the shared goals as a basis for your guidance and suggestions. (For example, remind your child that you both want him or her to stay healthy and safe.)

Avoid communication "stoppers."

These are single statements that shut down any response. They are often threatening, such as "I better not catch you drinking or else."

Recognize conflict is natural.

We are not identical to one another. We all have different beliefs and values; therefore disagreement is a natural thing. We can use conflict as an opportunity to grow and learn about each other.

Agree to step away.

Agree to temporarily stop talking if things don't go well. Wait until both individuals can talk in a calm, direct fashion.

Use appropriate body language.

How you position yourself physically while you talk can send important messages about your attitudes or express something you are not trying to convey. Don't look away or slouch down. Nod your head in agreement.

Avoid debate.

Sometimes a child feels he or she must "defend" a position. Then the conversation turns into a mini-debate. If you find yourself debating, try suggesting that you

both approach matters from a different angle. Also, avoid statements that begin with “you” (“You did this...”). They make the other person feel attacked.

AVOIDING POTHOLES

Sometimes kids react badly when parents try to discuss sensitive topics. Here are ways to address their concerns. Adapt them to your child’s personality as appropriate.

Fear of getting a lecture. Your child may be open to talking, but the last thing they want is a one-way lecture. Studies show that kids who come from homes where parents are perceived to lecture too much actually drink more.

Keep It Constructive

Do your best to keep communication channels open. Most of all, be constructive in your responses, not defensive or angry.

Child: “I know what you will do if we talk. You’ll lecture me like you always do. Then if I say something you will interrupt me.”

Parent: “You’re right. This time I won’t lecture. I will listen to what you think.”

Anger about not being trusted.

Some kids interpret a request to talk as a sign that you do not trust them or think they are too young to know better. Reassure your son or daughter that you are not suspicious and are doing this to help them, not attack them. Studies show that kids who feel they can trust their parents, and are trusted by them, are less likely to drink.

Emphasize These Themes:

- CARING about your child
- Wanting to UNDERSTAND your child
- Wanting to HELP your child
- RESPECTING your child’s privacy and desire to be independent

Fear of punishment.

Your son or daughter may fear you’ll treat them harshly right from the start. Kids who fear punishment communicate less often with their parents. Studies show these kids tend to initiate drinking, drink more often, and are more likely to experience alcohol-related consequences.

To reduce fear, the parent could say:

“I promise that I will listen to you and I’ll take what you say seriously. I’ll be straight with you and you be straight with me.”

He/she thinks they already know it all.

Some kids don't want to talk because they believe they already know everything there is to know about a topic. Your child may think they know everything, but they often do not. Don't let this objection stop you from trying to communicate.

In this situation, the parent might say: "You probably already know quite a bit. But I will feel better if we talk. Besides, you can help me understand how things are different from when I was your age."

Studies show that when children feel they can trust their parents and are trusted by them, they are less likely to drink.

STRATEGIES THAT HELP KIDS SUCCEED

Middle school children are less likely to drink alcohol when their parents:

Respect their concerns, even when maintaining limits.

Kids want increasing control, for example by choosing what to wear or activities to participate in after school. Even while setting clear rules against alcohol use and monitoring where middle school children are, parents can respect their concerns and keep communication channels open.

Give calm guidance.

Offer clear-headed discussion and guidance about choices important to their life path.

Empower choices.

Allowing a child to make choices, even relatively minor ones such as picking a place for the family dinner or choosing a movie to go see, is empowering for them. Sometimes the parent can frame the choices in ways that the child is choosing between two desirable alternatives.

Phase in freedoms and challenges.

Gradually reduce parental control so kids have more freedom and responsibility with each passing year—yet maintain limits against underage drinking.

5 REASONS THAT MIDDLE SCHOOL CHILDREN RESPECT

When you speak with your son or daughter about avoiding alcohol, emphasize the following reasons:

Reason 1: Underage drinking is illegal.

Most kids know it is illegal to drink under the age of 21. Still, they may assume they won't get caught. Remind them that police do receive complaints about parties. When police arrive, they may arrest all who have been drinking underage.

State clearly that you expect your child to obey the law. Discuss the potential consequences for breaking the law such as losing one's cell phone, computer privileges, etc The child, you, and your family could be publicly embarrassed, since these arrests are routinely reported in newspapers. If a court date is scheduled, you may

have to take time off from work and could lose pay, face fines, and incur other costs.

Kids rarely consider all the legal or financial consequences. Discussing the implications of an arrest can help deter underage drinking.

Reason 2: Drinking can make you sick, pass out, or die.

Drinking too much alcohol can make people vomit. This is actually a sign of alcohol that can have fatal effects if not treated immediately. Remind your child that alcohol sickness can happen suddenly and with little warning.

Reason 3: Drinking can lead to assault.

Kids who are drinking are more vulnerable to dangerous situations and often can't escape the threat of rape or assault.

Your child probably trusts the people around him or her, and you may trust them too, but alcohol can turn situations dangerous. Sixty-five percent of sexual assault victims say they knew their attacker.

Research clearly shows that the younger a person starts drinking, the greater the chance they will develop alcohol problems later in life.

Reason 4: Drinking can lead to an early death

Heavy drinking can damage the liver, kidneys, brain, and heart, all with serious long-term consequences.

CAUTION: Terrifying your teen could backfire

Be truthful with your child about risks, but avoid overly harsh scare tactics. Too much scary information can make people “turn off” and not pay as much attention.

Plus, if you paint a horrific picture of the consequences and your child doesn't see them happen immediately when someone they know drinks, they will assume you were wrong or exaggerating. Be realistic with the risks you discuss with your pre-teen.

However, even one night of heavy drinking can have life- changing results, including unprotected sex (which may lead to pregnancy or a sexually transmitted disease, such as HIV), death from alcohol poisoning or choking on vomit, or fatal car crashes.

Reason 5: Drinking might lead to being an alcoholic.

Most kids have negative images of alcoholics, and most do not want to become alcoholics. Yet they believe they can control their drinking and will not become alcoholics.

Research clearly shows, however, that the younger a person starts drinking, the greater the chance they will develop alcohol problems later in life. More than 40 percent of the individuals who begin drinking at or before age 13 will develop alcohol abuse or dependence in later life.

The Bottom Line

The best approach is to discuss negative consequences in a straightforward and honest manner.

Coffee Doesn't Work!

After you drink, the liver removes alcohol from your body and bloodstream. This process takes time and cannot be sped up. As a result, there is no proven way to make a person sober quicker.

You can't get sober faster by:

- Drinking coffee
- Exercising
- Eating food
- Getting fresh air
- Taking a cold shower

Remind your teen: Never get in a car with a driver who is trying to sober up. Coffee and other methods just don't work.



Helping Kids Make Good Choices

The biggest reason why kids drink is peer pressure. Your child might encounter peer pressure through:

- A direct suggestion to drink alcohol
- Peers who accept and encourage risky behavior
- Over-estimation of how many other kids do it

TIP

Talk with your child how friends and adults they respect might react if they knew he or she had been drinking. Helping your child consider how others might feel can have important influences on their choices.

You can't completely protect your child from peer pressure, but by teaching them to make good choices and by supervising and monitoring activities, you can help shield your son or daughter from the most dangerous situations.

DEALING WITH PEER PRESSURE

Sometimes, kids face situations where they are pressured to do something they would rather not do. For example, a friend might push your child to have a drink when your son or daughter doesn't want to.

Your child might be told:

- Come on, everyone has tried it.
- If you won't drink with us, then why are you hanging out with us?
- It's part of growing up
- My parents aren't home, so no one will know.
- We drank once before, so what's the problem now?
- You'll have an incredible time if you do.
- Come on, take a drink. It will get you in the mood.
- You've been working too hard. You deserve to party.

Get Behind 21

Numerous studies show the 21 drinking age law has reduced underage drinking and saved thousands of lives.

Research in the U.S. and Europe has never shown any benefit to drinking at a younger age or that teens could be safely "taught" to drink. On the contrary, they show that attempting to teach teens to drink results in increased binge drinking.

THE BIG MYTH: "Everybody is Already Doing It"

Research shows that not everyone participates in risky behaviors. In fact, almost three out of every four 8th graders have never had a drink.

Kids need ways to resist this pressure. You can suggest they use simple "one-liners" that remove the pressure without making a big scene or issue about it. For example, your child could respond simply:

- "It's just not for me; it's not what I want."
- "I don't drink."
- "No thanks."
- Your child might also consider:
- Offering an alternative, like "I'd rather have soda."
- Making an excuse, like "I have a test to study for tomorrow" or "My family is waiting for me, and I've got to go."
- Having an explanation, like "I really just don't like the taste."
- Changing the subject.

Encourage your child to think of short, yet effective, responses. By deciding on "one-liners" beforehand, he or she will be prepared for an uncomfortable situation that might arise.

TIP

Middle school students often overestimate how many high school students are drinking or have tried alcohol.

FINDING ALTERNATIVES TO DRINKING

Some kids give the reasons below for why they might choose to drink. Help them to think of other ways to achieve similar goals.

Positive reason: To Celebrate

Some middle school students believe that drinking is a grown up way to celebrate a special occasion.

Alternatives: Encourage your child to find other ways to celebrate positively. Options might be:

- Shopping for something special (e.g., clothes, music, sporting goods).
- Having an outing, such as dinner, that would include a few special friends.
- Offering to have friends over for a supervised party (without alcohol).

Parent-Child Connections Help Your Child Stay Safe!

Research shows that the more you connect with your kids...

- by having dinner together
- by talking together
- by enjoying activities
- by sharing feelings and concerns

...the more protected they are against alcohol and other drug use.

Positive reason: To Lower Stress

Some kids believe alcohol helps reduce worries.

Alternatives:

Remind your son or daughter that a problem does not go away because you drink (and, in fact, it may become worse). Help him or her find productive ways to confront problems directly, rather than avoid them.

Positive reason: To Express Feelings and Reduce Inhibitions

Some kids believe that alcohol helps make it easier to express feelings or talk with members of the opposite sex.

Alternatives:

Acknowledge how difficult certain social situations are. But remind your child that while alcohol might make him or her feel less shy, drinking actually clouds judgment.

In addition, alcohol often confuses communication and leads to unwanted sexual advances, disagreements, and sometimes fights.

Positive reason: To Go Along with Friends

Your son or daughter may feel pressured to drink in certain situations. This pressure can be direct, like if someone hands him or her a beer at a party, or it can be indirect, like when he or she wants to be part of a group that experiments with alcohol.

Alternatives:

Parents can try to influence who their kids pick for friends, but parents cannot choose their kids' friends. Instead, help your child understand the dynamics of peer pressure and how important it is to be his or her own person. Also, help your son or daughter plan how to react to situations where they could get pressured to drink, such as a friend bringing alcohol to a party.

Positive reason: To Fit In

Even when peer pressure is not obvious, kids may feel that without drinking, they won't be seen as a true part of the group.

Alternatives:

Emphasize to your child that “war stories”—like who drank the most shots, who blacked out, and who had the worst hangover—only highlight the dangers of drinking (and also can be tall tales from their peers). Encourage your child to focus on their own values and to overlook boasting about drinking and drunkenness.

Positive reason: To Lift Mood

Many kids believe that alcohol will help them get in a better mood.

Alternatives:

Reassure your child that it is normal to feel sad and stressed at times. Explain that it's possible to improve their mood without alcohol or other drugs. Exercise is an excellent way to help improve mood.

Also note to your son or daughter that any “buzz” from alcohol is accompanied by extreme mood lows as well.

Positive reason: To Experiment or Entertain Themselves

Sometimes when kids get bored, they consider experimenting with alcohol as a means of entertaining themselves.

Alternatives:

Encourage your child to get involved in sports, hobbies, music, dance, games, reading, and school clubs. He or she could volunteer with organizations associated with causes they care about, such as protecting the environment, preventing underage drinking, or promoting literacy.

Kids often go to parties for entertainment. Since drinking can occur at parties, it's a good idea to monitor and set limits about the kinds of parties your child attends (and set a rule about leaving a party where alcohol is served). Suggest ways they can enjoy themselves without alcohol.

Keep Track of Your Middle School Student

Ask your child where he or she is going to be, and agree on a plan.

Have them check in periodically through the day and keep you informed.

Limit contact with friends who strongly pressure your child to drink or engage in other dangerous behaviors.

Make sure all activities with high-risk friends are in adult supervised and structured settings with no alcohol.

Call the adults at the home where your child is going to see if they need help as a way of monitoring.

CHOOSING FRIENDS

Friendships are very important to kids, and they typically spend more and more time with friends. Parents need to know who their kids are spending time with and what they are doing on a daily basis. You can help her or him avoid risky choices by monitoring his or her activities. You can also encourage your son or daughter to have healthy friendships.

Talk with your child about the true meaning of friendship. True friendship is not based on superficial things like money, looks, popularity, or being with someone who is “cool.”

True friendship is based on mutual respect, caring, understanding, trust, and concern. Real friends want to keep their friends safe and well.

When you discuss the meaning of friendship together, you'll help your child think about choices.

Teach Good Problem Solving

Help your child practice these problem-solving skills:

- Notice a problem.
- Identify possible actions that might solve the problem.
- Gather information about the pros and cons of each possible action.
- Carefully examine the pros and cons, and select one option that seems best.
- Carry through on the decision.



Do you worry that your child hangs around with the wrong crowd?

Monitor social activities and supervise parties. Middle school students are not mature enough yet to take full responsibility for themselves throughout the day. By keeping tabs on your child, you can help him or her avoid dangerous, high-risk situations. Before a child's social event, ask your child for the hosting parents' phone number. Then contact the host's parents to make sure that there will be adult supervision and the event won't involve alcohol or other dangerous behaviors. Making this a regular habit will send a clear message about the importance of safe and health environments.

Don't ban a friend.

If your child has a friend you disapprove of, possibly the worst thing to do is forbid them from seeing each other. Kids value their friendships highly and defend friends strongly. If you directly attack a friend, your son or daughter will feel compelled to defend the friend and explain all of the "good" features of the friendship. A better strategy is to include the friend you disapprove of in some family activities. Then you get a chance to know the friend and share your family values.

Encourage more friends.

Encourage your son or daughter to participate in after-school programs, religious functions, or community centers where they can meet other youth with appropriate values. Making more friends helps prevent undue influence by a single "bad" friend.

Help your child avoid high-risk group situations.

The most dangerous situations are unsupervised group activities and parties. Kids find it especially tough to stand up against peers pushing them to do something illegal, like drink alcohol. That's why it's so important to monitor your child's activities and make sure he or she avoids these high-risk settings. Also, discuss ways your son or daughter can resist peer pressure, to prepare for dangerous situations that might arise.

TIP

Use a Code Word for Safety

Kids find it hard to resist peer pressure, especially in a group.

They're too young to jump in a car and drive away from risky situations that include alcohol, so prepare them with an emergency code-word.

Choose and practice a code word that your child can text you or phone you to get a ride home, no questions asked.

No Riding with an Impaired Driver

Someday your child may be faced with deciding whether or not to ride in a car with an individual who has been drinking. Emphasize that getting in a car with any impaired driver is extremely dangerous.

Set a clear family rule: No riding with any driver under the age of 21 who has had any amount of alcohol.

Discuss with your child the danger of riding with anyone who may have had too much to drink. Help them make a plan in case he or she experiences an unsafe situation. Talk about alternatives, such as calling a parent or trusted adult for a ride home.

Remind your child that drinking coffee or other techniques for “sobering up” don’t actually work. He or she should not rely on these techniques to make a friend a safe and non-drinking driver.

Kids who don’t consider all the consequences are more likely to ride with someone who has been drinking. Since kids pay most attention to short-term consequences, parents need to set clear no-alcohol use rules and enforce consequences.

Wrong Message?

Some parents worry that offering a child who has been drinking a ride home could send the wrong message and make kids believe it is okay to drink alcohol. Even if you offer a ride home, you can still enforce previously established consequences for breaking the no-alcohol rule.

Assure your child that safety is the first priority. When adolescents have good communication with their parents and trust that their parents won’t overreact (by getting angry and setting harsh or unknown punishments), they are more likely to call home for help. The most important thing is to ensure your child gets home safely.

Encourage your child to call you for a safe ride home. If you get that phone call:

- Pick up your child and get him or her home safely. Be calm and not angry on the way home.
 - If the established household rule has been broken, pick the soonest appropriate time to discuss consequences together. It may be best to wait until the next day.
 - Talk again about the rules and consequences. You only want to keep him or her safe from harm
- They are more sluggish and passive than usual, and don't care as much about former interests or appearance
 - They are unusually aggressive or rebellious
 - They're hanging around with different friends and is more secretive than usual
 - They're struggling with grades or skipping school
 - They're borrowing money more often
 - They're acting drunk and intoxicated, stumbling or moving awkwardly, slurring speech and have a dull, unfocused look or bloodshot eyes.

COULD YOUR CHILD HAVE A DRINKING PROBLEM?

Here are some signs that your child may have a problem with alcohol:

- Alcohol is missing from bottles or cans in your home
- You've discovered alcohol hidden in their backpack or room
- They're using breath mints or mouthwash heavily— these may be an attempt to mask the odor of alcohol

These signs suggest your child may have a drinking problem.

If you think your son or daughter might have a drinking problem, do not turn your back on the problem.

Do:

- Discuss the problem calmly with your son or daughter.
- Explain that you are concerned and willing to help.
- Stay awake when your child stays out late, when possible, and show you are interested in what they are doing.
- Seek professional help to handle this situation.

Don't:

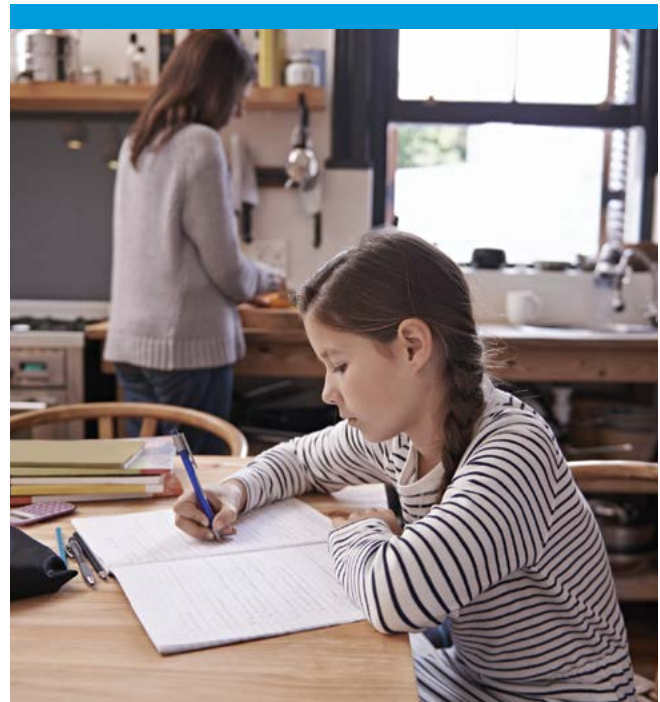
- Take over your child's responsibilities. Instead, provide him or her with the means to take responsibility for himself or herself.
- Argue with your son or daughter if she or he is drunk.
- Make excuses or cover up for your son or daughter.

When a “good” child suddenly starts acting badly or self-destructively, such as by drinking alcohol, it can be a sign of abuse.

We urge you to talk promptly to a professional about your concerns.

NEED MORE HELP?

If your child is drinking, review the resources for help at the back of this handbook.



Middle School Parents Talking About Marijuana

Many parents think their middle school child is too young to use marijuana. Next to alcohol, marijuana is the most misused drug among youth. According to published studies funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (universally considered by medical professionals and clinicians as the most reliable and accurate source of information available):

Approximately 1 in 7 middle school 8th graders have used marijuana in their lifetimes. Although this number seems very high considering how young these children are, the number more than doubles to 1-3 by the time these children complete middle school.

When recent marijuana use is examined, the numbers are not encouraging. 1 in 8 middle school 8th graders report using marijuana in the past month and 8th grade marijuana use has gone up over 85% in the last 2 years!

Data on middle schoolers who combine alcohol use with marijuana use on the same occasions to enhance the effects of these drugs are not readily available as they are for older youth, but experts think it ranges between 1 in 5 to 1 in 8 based on reports of eighth-grader binge drinking and marijuana use. This is extremely concerning considering that individuals who combine these drugs experience 2-3 times more accidents, fights, health and legal problems than by using either substance alone.

ACTION STEP: Medical and behavioral scientists have shown in numerous studies over the past decade that individuals, young and old, tend to underestimate how much and how often youth use alcohol and marijuana. We provide the statistics to help parents understand

that despite outward appearances, children they know and see regularly are likely to be using alcohol and marijuana. We ask that you do not fall into the trap of thinking their child or friends' children are too young or that they are not interested. Middle school is not too early for parents to engage in meaningful conversations about the risks of alcohol and marijuana use. It is ideal because it is the time when the rates of use begin and dramatically increase.

HOW MARIJUANA WORKS IN THE BODY

For starters, parents knowing how marijuana works in the body can be one part of a meaningful conversation. Marijuana contains a chemical called tetrahydrocannabinol, commonly known as THC. When THC enters the brain by smoking or vaping marijuana or eating edible marijuana (e.g., candy or brownie), it influences chemical reactions that create positive feelings or a "high". While this is happening, marijuana is also altering normal communication inside the brain and between the brain and the rest of the body. These alterations can seriously effect movement and coordination., sensation, pain, emotions, judgment, decision-making, memory, and appetite.

Marijuana Today and Yesterday

Prior to 1990, the THC content in marijuana used to be around 2-4%. In 2017, in states where there are stores that legally sell marijuana to the public, the THC content has increased to approximately 28%. This means that the THC content between marijuana used in 1990 and now is around 14 times stronger.

If the strength of alcohol in beer increased in the same manner, having one beer today would be equal to having between 14 beers in 1990.

Marijuana oils that tend to be vaped have much higher concentrations of THC (usually around 95%). These are more than a 100 times stronger potency than the marijuana of 1990s.

What this all mean is that today's marijuana is not the same drug as what many parents might have experienced when they were young. The added strength in today's marijuana results in extremely different effects on the body than it did years ago.

This is why health professionals are reporting greater occurrences of marijuana use resulting in increased heart rate and bronchitis; cancer; anxiety, and sleep and fatigue. Regular or frequent use can also result in changes in brain function, mental illness (depression, schizophrenia), and addiction. ***Yes, today's marijuana is highly addictive!***

Marijuana, Youth and the Brain

Young peoples' brains continue to develop until their mid-20s. Changes in the brain in middle school effect changes in the body (growth in height, weight, and body maturation), emotion (being better able to regulate feelings and moods), and thinking (being able to make better decisions and problem solving). Marijuana effects the brain differently for middle schoolers than adults because of their brain is not fully developed. Research has shown teens who use marijuana are more likely to report decreases in brain volume, poorer attention, verbal skills, and self-regulatory behaviors.

Studies have also shown that the effects of marijuana on brain function cannot be reversed.

ACTION STEP: We recommend that parents use ***how***, ***what***, and ***why*** questions to engage their middle schoolers in conversation about how marijuana's works in the body. Here are some examples:

How do you think marijuana effects a young person's body or brain?

What makes you think that?

What could happen to a middle school person after using marijuana that would concern you?

Why do you think some people think marijuana is not dangerous?

IT IS IMPORTANT TO KNOW WHAT IS TRUE AND UNTRUE.

Here are common things that teens believe about Marijuana that are not true	
Myth	Fact
<i>Marijuana is safe and you cannot get addicted to marijuana</i>	<i>Marijuana is currently the leading cause of addiction and dependence other than alcohol in the U.S. Studies show that marijuana accounts for over 50% of the 7 million people aged 12 or older dependent on or abusing a drug . Marijuana is much stronger today than in the past. There is no way to determine a safe dosage (e.g., some vaping, a few bites of a brownie). There are also many different strains with different effects. This makes marijuana a higher risk drug to use.</i>
<i>Marijuana is safer than alcohol</i>	<i>Both alcohol and marijuana are associated with significant problems. Comparing which is safer overlooks that there are serious risks associated with both drugs.</i>
<i>Marijuana has medicinal value</i>	<i>While marijuana is legal for medicinal purposes in some states, this is not the case in all states. In the states where it is legal for medicinal purposes, patients need to be under the care and supervision of a physician for specific diseases and ailments. Patients also need prescriptions that specify how much, how often, and in what form it can be used. Marijuana for medicinal purposes often contain other compounds or ingredients to help specific disorders. Lastly, marijuana is rarely prescribed for children for medicinal purposes.</i>

HOW YOU CAN HELP YOUR MIDDLE SCHOOLER

A common question we hear from parents is, “What can I do to help reduce the risk of my child using marijuana?” Below is a case study of a mother that many parents can relate to.

A case study

Lindsey has a son who is a middle student. Her son is interested in sports and spending time with his friends. Lindsey has heard about the drinking that goes on at parties and is concerned like many parents. Lindsey has talked to her son about drinking and marijuana since he was in elementary school and continues to have regular times to have the “talk” now that he is in middle school. She thinks her son is not interested in alcohol or marijuana, but has heard about parties with children his age where there was alcohol and marijuana.

The research shows there are many things that Lindsey does that will reduce the chances of her son using alcohol or Marijuana.

1. Research has shown that when parents use medical and health research to talk with their children about drinking and marijuana, the less likely they are to use them.
ACTION STEP: It is very important for parents to have regular conversations to find out **what** their middle schoolers know about alcohol and marijuana, **why** they think the way they do, and **how** they will act if someone they know is using alcohol or marijuana, or trying to encourage them to use alcohol or marijuana.

2. Studies show parental modeling is associated with children’s marijuana use. Lindsey and her husband’s low use of alcohol and no marijuana use are protective and lower their son’s risk.
3. Studies show that it is never too late for parents to talk with their children about drinking and marijuana. The higher quality is of parent communicate, the less likely their college-aged children are to drink and use marijuana in combination and experience consequences. Lindsey’s checking in and continued conversations are protective and lower his risk.

Turn to the next page for more things that Lindsey can do.

The research also shows there are additional things that Lindsey can do to reduce the odds of her son experiencing consequences.

1. Studies show that when parents allow their high 1. Studies show that when parents allow their children to have a small glass of wine or a beer on “special occasions”, they are likely to drink more often and in greater amounts when they are not with their parents and use marijuana. Unfortunately, the studies also indicated that the harm from letting their children drink even a little could not be changed by better parent communication, modeling, or monitoring. The impact on risk was the same no matter how good the parents were at communicating or how mature the children seemed to be.
2. These same studies show that allowing the use of alcohol on these special occasions is also related to combining alcohol and marijuana (and experiencing consequences). When Lindsey and her husband allow their son to drink on special occasions, **they may have unknowingly increased his risk** of combining alcohol and marijuana and experiencing consequences
3. Research shows that use of alcohol before the age of 21 is a risk factor for alcohol and marijuana consequences. **One way for Lindsey to change her son’s risk** is to no longer allow him to drink during special occasions until he turns 21.

PARENTAL CONCERNS

Lindsey did not realize the impact of allowing her son to drink on special occasions. Like most parents, Lindsey thought that by allowing him to have a small glass of wine or a beer on “special occasions”, like families do in many European countries, she was teaching him adult values and moderation. Studies show this is not the case. In the U.S., there are fewer youth who experience problems associated with alcohol compared to European countries where the drinking age is lower than 21.

ACTION STEP: Parents should not assume that their children will know their rules and values about underage drinking or marijuana use. They need to be very specific about **what** the rules are, **how** these rules are helpful to their children, and **why** they are important. Research has shown that parents who take the time to communicate about the rules and their reasons are more likely to have children who follow the rules.



Did you use marijuana when you were young?

Like alcohol, parents differ in their experiences with marijuana when they were young. There are many different ways parents approach answering this question. Here are some examples of how to respond to this type of question:

"If I knew what I know now, I would have made a lot of decisions differently, including not trying something at a party when I was younger that I might later regret."

After this, you could add...

"I do know now that the data from studies show that the younger people are when they drink or smoke marijuana, the more likely they will have more frequent and more severe problems in their teens, 20s, and beyond."

I also know that the data also show that when parents think it is okay for their teens to drink or use marijuana once in a while, those teens drink and use marijuana more and have more problems in their lives."

Being that there is more scientific information now than when I was your age, the more important thing is not what I did years ago, but right now how I can help you from being in a situation where you could do something that hurts you or someone else. Why do you think would be a good thing to do? How do you think that would work?"

FINAL THOUGHTS

Parents also often wonder about whether their children are listening and whether their conversations are making a difference. Studies repeatedly show that parents do make a difference with how they act, what they do and do not allow their children to do, how they listen and ask questions, and whether they tell their children what to do vs. asking them questions that allow the children to work through solutions to problems. Studies show that asking children questions that start with **how**, **what**, and **why** are the best ways to open the lines of communication or improve the impact of those conversations (such as, "How would you handle an invitation to go to a party where others are drinking and smoking marijuana? What are things you could do instead? Why might that work or not work?").

All the things you do make a difference and it is never too late to start making that difference in your child's life.

Discussion Checklist

Remember to cover these points when you talk about alcohol with your middle school student:

1. **Emphasize** that drinking is illegal for everyone younger than age 21 and for very good reasons.
2. **Let your child know** that most of their peers are NOT drinking.
3. **Talk** about how drinking affects the brain, and how it is especially damaging to young brains. Kids need to know how drinking will affect them and that a person who is drinking is not a good judge of how impaired they are.
4. **Explain** your own position concerning your child's drinking. Discuss your family's rules about alcohol and agree on the consequences for breaking the rules.
5. **Talk** about what sometimes motivates kids to drink, and discuss alternatives for achieving those goals.
6. **Discuss** reasons for NOT drinking and the many bad consequences that can result from drinking.
7. **Help** your child brainstorm ways to resist negative peer pressure. Reinforce that you want to help your son or daughter find constructive alternatives to drinking.

Tell Your Middle School Child

- "I care about you and want you to stay safe. That's why I need to know where you are."
- "You matter so much to me; that's why we need to talk about how risky alcohol is for young people."
- "I love you and want you to have the brightest future possible. That's why there's no drinking until you turn 21."

Have the conversation about alcohol today.

Promoting A Safer Community

Even one parent can influence policy makers and enforcement agencies and help assure a safe and healthy environment. MADD urges you to get involved by taking the steps below.

Step 1: ***Support strong laws.***

Tell lawmakers that you support the 21 minimum drinking age and want to cut off kids' ability to obtain alcohol. Encourage programs that:

- Require registration and tracking of beer kegs.
- Support social host laws that penalize adults who host underage drinking parties.
- Limit new or renewed liquor licenses in your community.
- Support 21 minimum age purchase laws.

Step 2: ***Push for strong enforcement.***

Ask police officials and judges to actively enforce "zero tolerance" laws and programs that fight underage drinking. For example:

- After an underage drinker has a traffic crash, officials should find out how they got the alcohol and hold those parties accountable.
- Identify and penalize retailers that illegally sell alcohol to youth.
- Support sanctions against youth who attempt to purchase alcohol or who use fake IDs to purchase alcohol.

Step 3: ***Involve educators.***

Contact schools in your area and ask what they're doing to prevent underage drinking. Encourage educators and parent groups to plan school assemblies and activities focused on underage drinking prevention at key points throughout the year, such as Red Ribbon Week, Homecoming, Spring Break, and Prom. Consider providing this handbook to all of the parents in the school.

Step 4: ***Hold advertisers accountable.***

When you see alcohol marketing that targets young people, complain and push to have that advertising removed.

For more information, visit madd.org/powerofparents.
and madd.org/powerofyouth.

Get Behind 21

Numerous studies show the 21 drinking age law has reduced underage drinking and saved thousands of lives.

Resources

MOTHERS AGAINST DRUNK DRIVING

madd.org/powerofparents

madd.org/powerofyouth

powerofyouth.com

ADULT CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS

adultchildren.org

CASAColumbia FAMILY DAY

casafamilyday.org

CENTER FOR SUBSTANCE ABUSE PREVENTION

prevention.samhsa.gov

CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION

cdc.gov/alcohol

HIGHER EDUCATION CENTER FOR ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUG PREVENTION

edc.org/hec

NATIONAL CLEARINGHOUSE FOR ALCOHOL AND DRUG INFORMATION

health.org

NATIONAL COUNCIL ON ALCOHOLISM AND DRUG DEPENDENCE

ncadd.org

NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON ALCOHOL ABUSE AND ALCOHOLISM

niaaa.nih.gov

PENN STATE UNIVERSITY/DR. TURRISI

bbh.hhdev.psu.edu/lab/prcprohealth

RESEARCH SOCIETY ON ALCOHOLISM

rsoa.org

SAFE AND DRUG-FREE SCHOOLS

ed.gov/offices/oese/sdfs

SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES ADMINISTRATION

samhsa.gov

NATIONAL PRESENTING SPONSOR NATIONWIDE

makesafehappen.com



Final Takeaways

Parenting is the process of empowering your child to become an effectively functioning and happy adult.

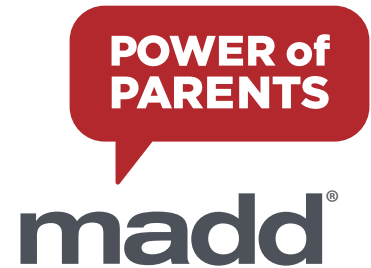
To Help Keep Your Child Safe:

- Begin talking together specifically about alcohol and marijuana.
- Listen to your child's concerns respectfully, and use positive parenting techniques.
- Set clear no-alcohol/marijuana use rules, and agree on appropriate consequences for breaking these rules.
- Enforce consequences when the rules are broken.
- Discuss short-term and long-term risks of underage alcohol use.
- Help your child plan how to deal with social pressure to drink alcohol.
- Keep track of where your child is, and with whom, on a regular basis.
- Teach your child: no riding in a car with someone who has been drinking or using.
- Make sure your child is in a monitored, alcohol-free environment.
- Support school and community policies that keep alcohol and marijuana away from underage youth.
- Support the 21 Minimum Drinking Age law.



PowerTalk 21®

April 21st is the national day to talk
with your kids about alcohol.



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NATIONAL PROGRAM PARTNERS



Founded by a mother whose daughter was killed by a drunk driver, Mothers Against Drunk Driving® (MADD) is the nation's premier nonprofit working to protect families from drunk driving, drugged driving and underage drinking. MADD is creating a future of No More Victims® through it's Campaign to Eliminate Drunk Driving®, supporting law enforcement, ignition interlocks for all offenders and advanced vehicle technology. PowerTalk 21® is the national day for parents to talk with their middle and high schoolers about alcohol, using the proven strategies of Power of Parents® to reduce underage drinking. As one of the largest victim services organizations, MADD supports victims of drunk and drugged driving and underage drinking at no charge through local MADD victim advocates and at our 24-Hour Victim Help Line, **1-877-MADD- HELP**. Learn more at madd.org or by calling **1-877-ASK-MADD**.

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