

POWER OF PARENTS®

MIDDLE SCHOOL PARENT HANDBOOK

Talking With Your Middle Schooler
About Alcohol, Cannabis, and Other Drugs

Table of Contents

1	Introduction	3
2	Your Middle Schooler's World	5
3	What Style of Parent Are You?	9
4	Talking About Alcohol	14
5	Helping Youth Make Good Choices	31
6	Talking About Impaired Driving	38
7	Talking About Cannabis and Medications	42
8	Take Action	52

How To Use This Handbook

Because underage substance use poses special risks to young people, this handbook urges parents and caring adults to:

USE THE STRATEGIES

recommended to talk with your child about alcohol, cannabis, and other substances, even if they don't seem interested in experimenting.

MARK PASSAGES

that mean the most to you and commit to regularly using what you learn here.

PRACTICE AND PERFORM

the exercises and see what beneficial changes come about.

USE THE DISCUSSION TOPICS

suggested to have meaningful, frequent conversations with your teen.

Throughout this handbook, you will see the words “parent” and “child” used when referring to you, the caring adult, and the youth in your life you want to protect. However, MADD recognizes and cherishes all kinds of families; those made up of legal guardians, grandparents, aunts, uncles, or others who may be reading this to learn how to support youth. We honor and appreciate you for reading and helping us prevent underage substance use.

Acknowledgements

Mothers Against Drunk Driving® is grateful to Robert Turrisi, Ph.D., and his colleagues at The Pennsylvania State University for their partnership in this handbook. Dr. Turrisi has spent decades researching how parents can talk effectively with teens about alcohol and cannabis. This handbook draws from his work and from scientific knowledge in this field from all over the world.

Nationwide Insurance is the proud National Presenting Sponsor of *Power of Parents*. “As a company committed to protecting people, businesses, and futures with extraordinary care, there is no more important work that aligns with our values than keeping our roadways, families, and communities safe. Thank you for your commitment to preventing underage substance use and impaired driving. Nationwide is proud to stand with you on this lifesaving mission.”


1

Introduction

When children reach middle school, they enter a period of rapid growth and change—physically, emotionally, and socially. During this exciting time, parents face new challenges and opportunities to guide their children toward making healthy choices.

Research shows that many kids ages 11-14 are already being exposed to alcohol and cannabis, even if they aren't using these substances themselves. At this age, they begin forming their beliefs and expectations about them. While alcohol is commonplace in adult settings, it remains a serious risk for young people, leading to more accidents and deaths than all other illegal substances combined. Cannabis laws are also changing, creating confusion about its safety—especially for growing brains.

We created this handbook to help parents have meaningful conversations with their middle schoolers about alcohol, cannabis, and prescription medication misuse. Since every family is different, you may find certain sections more relevant than others, and that's okay. Use what works best for you and start the conversation now—it can make all the difference.



For young people, alcohol leads to more accidents and deaths than all other illegal substances combined.

A MESSAGE TO PARENTS FROM DR. TURRISI AND MADD

Research shows that kids who drink are a danger to themselves, their friends, and others. For over 30 years, 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 adult 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. Studies show that alcohol and cannabis 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 cannabis can destroy lives forever. **Unfortunately, most individuals who have problems with alcohol or cannabis took their first drink or used cannabis when they were very young, sometimes with their parents.**

As a parent you have the 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 cannabis. These conversations will have an impact on their physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development and could be lifesaving.

**As a parent
you have
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Breaking News: With support from the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, Dr. Robert Turrisi and a team of prominent scientists conducted a clinical trial to examine the effectiveness of MADD's Power of Parents handbook. 1100 families, representative of the U.S. population, participated in the trial. Dr. Turrisi and his team observed that when parents read the MADD handbook AND discussed its contents with their teens, their teens declined more rides with impaired drivers. It is important to mention that this was only the case when parents discussed almost all of the content of the MADD Power of Parents materials.

See the study for yourself in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

Your Middle Schooler's

Middle school is a time of big changes — socially, emotionally, and physically. As kids transition from elementary school to middle school, they face new challenges and experiences that can shape their choices and behaviors.

Challenges Your Child May Experience



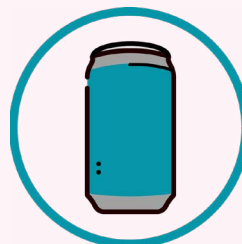
Their bodies are growing rapidly, sometimes at different rates from their peers, which can feel awkward.



They are figuring out friendships and learning how to fit in.



They have more responsibilities at school and at home.



They start encountering peer pressure and moral dilemmas, including decisions about risky behaviors like using alcohol and cannabis.



As middle schoolers experience rapid growth and new challenges, parents play a crucial role in providing guidance and reassurance. Several key factors—freedom and responsibility, physical changes, and short-term thinking—shape their decision-making during this time. The following graphic highlights how these areas influence their choices and how parents can offer the right support.

Freedom and Responsibility

Middle schoolers seek more independence but may not always think through the consequences.

They want to make their own choices but still need parental guidance and structure.

They need opportunities to make decisions with support and boundaries.

Physical Changes

Rapid growth can lead to awkwardness, clumsiness, and self-consciousness.

About one in five middle school students believe they are overweight or underweight.

Helping kids feel confident in their bodies can reduce pressure to engage in risky behaviors.

Short-Term Thinking

Decisions are often based on immediate emotions rather than long-term consequences.

They may prioritize fitting in over considering potential risks.

Asking open-ended questions, that start with how, what or why, can help them think ahead and develop critical decision-making skills.

Going Along with a Group

Middle schoolers often include their peers in their decision-making process. If their friends engage in a behavior, it can seem more acceptable. Your child may justify choices by saying, “but everyone is doing it.” This influence is powerful because middle schoolers see their friends as equals—they navigate social challenges together, rather than deferring to authority figures like parents or teachers.

Additionally, youth sometimes believe they should be excused for misbehavior if it was unplanned or if many people were involved. They might say, “We didn’t mean to drink; things just happened.” As a parent, you can help by setting clear expectations about your family’s rules and working with your child to create strategies for handling these situations before they arise.



Risky Business



LOADING...

Middle schoolers’ developing brains make them more prone to taking risks, including experimenting with alcohol and cannabis. They act impulsively and don’t always recognize the long-term consequences of their choices. Alcohol can seem particularly attractive to young people because it reduces social anxiety more than it does for adults. When they see peers drinking without immediate negative consequences, they may assume it’s no big deal.

One way to counteract this is by sharing the facts with your child. For example, many middle schoolers overestimate how many of their peers use alcohol or cannabis. As a parent, you can share that not everyone drinks alcohol or uses cannabis, helping correct misconceptions and reinforcing positive choices.

When it Comes to Alcohol and Cannabis

Middle schoolers may hear that alcohol or cannabis is risky, but their personal experiences — or what they can see around them — often influence them more than facts.

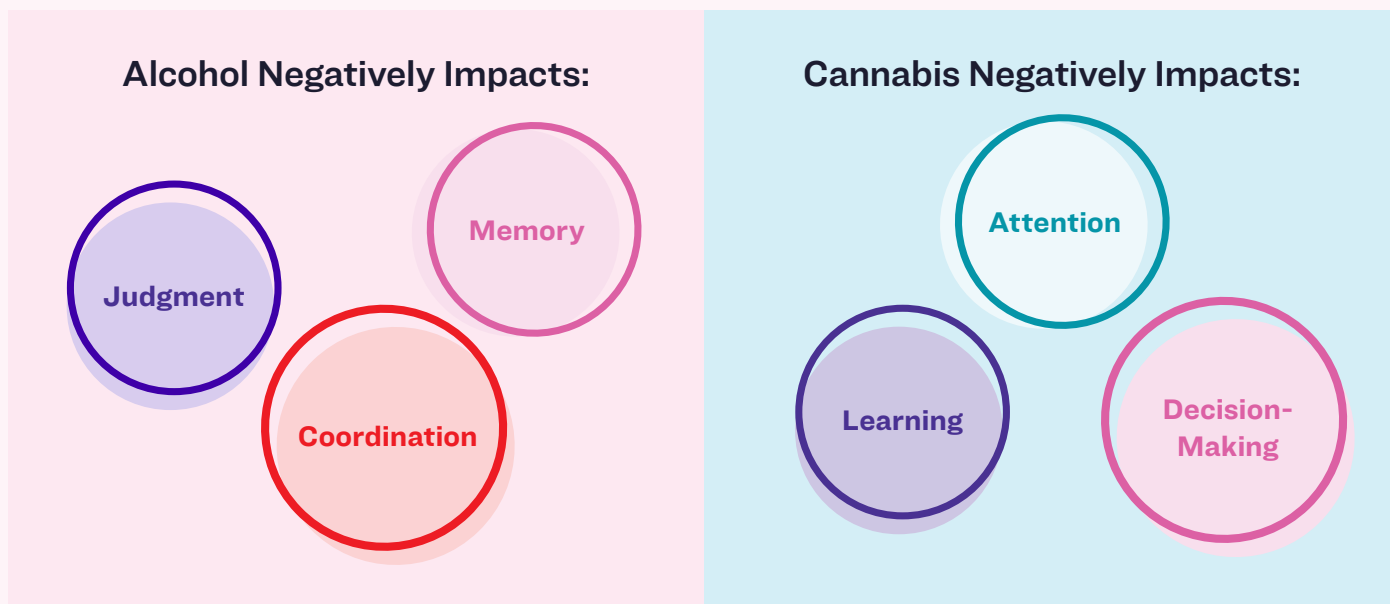
They might think, “my parents drink,” or “my older siblings use cannabis and nothing bad has happened to them.”

Talking openly about these substances, rather than assuming they already know, helps them develop a better understanding of the real risks involved. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), alcohol can impair judgment, coordination, and memory from the very first drink. Because their bodies

process alcohol differently than adults, middle schoolers may feel stronger effects with smaller amounts, increasing their risk for accidents and poor decision-making.

Cannabis, on the other hand, can interfere with brain development — impacting learning, attention, and decision-making. Regular use during adolescence has been linked to difficulties with problem solving and lower academic performance.

Since their bodies and brains are still developing, middle schoolers are more vulnerable to the harmful effects of these substances. This makes open, honest conversations even more essential.



The Bottom Line

Middle schoolers are beginning to seek independence, but they still look to parents, older siblings, and friends for guidance. Since youth often justify risky choices by saying “everyone is doing it,” parents can counteract this by sharing real statistics and reinforcing healthy behaviors.

Your role as a parent is to keep the conversation going. Even if your child doesn’t seem interested now, the messages you share now will help lay the foundation for healthy decision-making in the future.



AUTHORITARIAN

What Style of Parent Are You?

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

Authoritarian parents tend to use parental power to control their children.

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

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

3



OVERPROTECTIVE

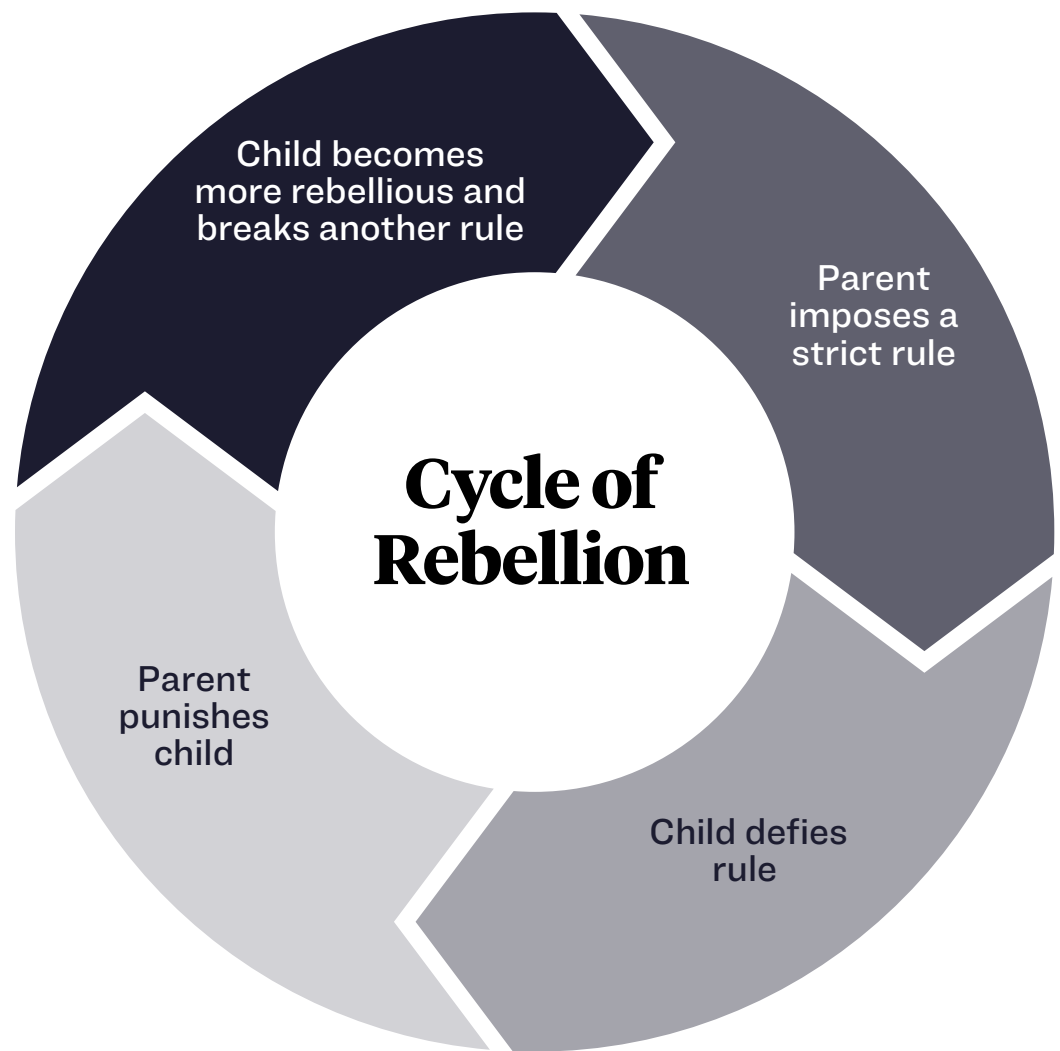
Overprotective parents shield their children from the harsh realities of life. Like authoritarian parents, they exert a lot of control over their children, but their method is different.

- Instead of using rules and threats, overprotective parents present themselves as allies.
- They see the world as a threat and express this fear to their children.

Once the child gets to their breaking point, feeling as if they could never satisfy their parent, they give up trying and the authoritarian parents lose their influence.

Research shows:

Kids who feel threatened by their parents may behave well when the threatening parent is nearby but act out when that parent is gone. Children of authoritarian parents are less likely to develop internalized values that equip them to make wise decisions.



- They rescue their children from dealing with any harsh reality. For example, instead of helping children understand difficult homework assignments, overprotective parents actually do the work for them. This leaves a child poorly prepared to deal with the realities of adult life.

Overprotected children lack experience and may panic in stressful situations. This could present an issue for a child who doesn't feel empowered to say no when offered alcohol or other substances, or they assume their parent is being "over the top" when they stress their fears about the dangers of underage substance use.

Research shows: *Youth with overprotective parents may struggle with decision-making and independence, making them more vulnerable to peer pressure and risky behaviors.*



PERMISSIVE

Permissive parents take a hands-off approach.

- They do not set expectations. Instead, they feel children should be independent.
- They permit their child to explore the world without “interfering.”
- They feel kids should be free to make mistakes and learn from them accordingly.

Permissive parents may not face as much rebellion as authoritarian or overprotective parents do. But permissive parents deprive their children of wise guidance in developing effective problem-solving skills.

In most instances, permissive parents do so to help their children. They think that by setting permissive rules their child will be more honest with them and will tell the truth about their alcohol or cannabis use.

Studies show that youth rarely tell their parents exactly how often and how much they use alcohol. They often will grossly under-report risky behaviors to their parents (including alcohol and cannabis use).

Breaking News: *Dr. Robert Turrisi and his team have interviewed and surveyed thousands of parents over the past 20 years, and while the majority do not allow their teens to drink alcohol, some parents still let their teens drink alcohol on special occasions, at family gatherings or during holidays, where they can be supervised. They think it teaches teens responsible drinking and/or it takes the mystery away and reduces the likelihood they will try it when parents are not around.*

There are numerous studies in recent years showing that when parents allow their teens to drink, even small amounts under their supervision, these teens, DO NOT drink responsibly when they are not with their parents. The opposite occurs. They drink more often, in larger amounts, and experience many more consequences than teens whose parents do not allow them to drink. Reviews of the scientific medical, health, and adolescent literatures in the U.S., Europe and Australia fail to find a single well-designed published study showing any health or safety benefits when parents allow their teens to drink or use cannabis regardless of whether in small amounts, on special occasions, or when done under the supervision of an adult.

Research shows:

Children of permissive style parents tend to drink more often and heavier, use cannabis and other drugs, and engage in other risky behaviors that can lead to serious consequences. They also report having parents who are less willing to talk with them and have poorer relationships with their parents as a result.

There Can Be **LEGAL RAMIFICATIONS**

To serving alcohol to your own child or other people's children. Learn more about Social Host laws in your state to make sure you are following the law.



POSITIVE

Positive parents focus on empowering their children to grow and learn.

- They take an active role in teaching their teen responsibility.
- They tend to use the “how, what, and why” question approach.
- They set clear expectations about teen behavior, such as waiting until age 21 before drinking alcohol.
- They set and enforce rules prohibiting drugs.
- They explain reasons behind their expectations and encourage teens to talk about any concerns.
- They set and enforce consequences when agreements are not met.

Positive parents know that their own age, knowledge, experience, and material resources give them an important role in guiding their children. They use that power to strengthen, protect, and help them grow into effective individuals.

Positive parenting can be challenging because parents gradually relinquish control and give kids more freedom and responsibility with each passing year. These parents respect a child's drive for independence yet maintain firm boundaries. Their philosophy is to build trust and teach skills that empower children to take increasing control of their life. Instead of threatening severe punishment for bad behavior, they discuss, set, and enforce clear consequences for breaking rules.

Research shows: *Youth with positive-style parents are less likely to drink, use cannabis, or ride with impaired drivers. They also have fewer problems in school and with the law and report better relationships with their parents, when compared to children of other parenting styles.*

PARENTS DO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Despite how it may feel sometimes, research shows that parents are an important influence on whether or not children choose to drink alcohol, use cannabis or other substances, or get into a car with someone who has been drinking alcohol or using other substances.

Youth do care about their parents' opinions, and our research proves it. Teens credit their parents with being the most important influence in their decision-making about alcohol.

Many studies show that authoritarian, overprotective, and permissive parenting can lead to negative outcomes, but it is never too late to adopt a new approach to parenting!

Two Parents, TWO — STYLES?

It's common for parents and partners to have different approaches to parenting. For example, one parent might be stricter and rule-focused (authoritarian), while the other is more protective and nurturing (overprotective). While these differences can sometimes create confusion for children, they can also present an opportunity to model teamwork and compromise.

Breaking News: Dr. Robert Turrisi's team observed that parental orientations towards alcohol consequences significantly influence the quantity and frequency of their teen's drinking and consequences. For example, if teens reported that their parents thought it was normal for them to experiment with alcohol (and experience hangovers), they drank alcohol more frequently and in greater amounts. They also experienced more problems resulting from their drinking.

4

Talking About Alcohol

As a parent, you play a critical role in preventing your child from using alcohol, and the key is having open, ongoing conversations. Research shows that parents who prepare for these discussions are far more effective in guiding their children's choices.

Alcohol is the most commonly misused substance in the U.S., yet many adults don't view it as dangerous. Adding to the confusion, other countries have lower legal drinking age laws,

making it seem less harmful. However, studies show that U.S. laws help reduce underage alcohol use and lower the lifetime risk of alcohol-related problems.

Even with these protections, some kids start drinking alcohol as early as middle school. Those who begin at a young age face a much higher risk of injury, risky behavior, and long-term alcohol dependence. That's why early and effective conversations matter.

The Dangers of Alcohol

Alcohol is a substance 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.

Sometimes parents hesitate to discuss the real dangers of alcohol and other substances with their pre-teens, fearing the topic may be too frightening or mature. However, the most effective way to protect children from these risks is to start the conversation early and have it often. Open, ongoing discussions equip them with the knowledge and confidence to make safe choices when faced with these substances in real life.



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

Face problems in school

Be at risk for physical or sexual assault

Abuse alcohol later in life

Drown or fall

Die in a vehicle crash

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 to talk.

When the time is right to start talking together, use **“how,” “what,” and “why” questions** to help your child work through different scenarios that could involve alcohol.

“There is something that I have been thinking about lately, and I was hoping we could talk about it for a few minutes. Is that okay?”

Questions that start with “how,” “what,” and “why” can encourage an exchange of ideas. They help 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.

Instead of telling them what to do or what is right or wrong, you might ask:

How would you handle an invitation to a party where there will be older kids?

What could you say?

Why do you think drinking alcohol, using cannabis, or taking other substances is dangerous?

By encouraging your child to think through these situations for themselves, you help them build the confidence and decision-making skills they need to navigate real-life challenges, safely.

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

“ I heard that one out of four 8th graders have tried alcohol. I was wondering...

“ If you were to guess, how many kids your age have had a drink with alcohol in it?

How do you think it has helped or harmed them?

“ What are the reasons those kids might have had for drinking alcohol?

What are some of the things they could have done instead?

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?

Breaking News: Dr. Robert Turrisi says parents often want to know the facts about middle schoolers rather than just “scare” stories. Here are a few important facts from the 2024 *Monitoring the Future* report:

- 5% of 8th graders reported using alcohol in the past 30 days.
- That number more than doubles when 8th graders are asked about their past 12-month alcohol use (increases to 13%).
- By 10th grade, the number doubles again! According to the report, 1 in 4 teens indicate they have consumed alcohol in the past year.

Here are several topics we recommend you discuss with your teen:

TOPIC:

The physical effects of alcohol on the body

HOW

How do you think drinking helps or hurts your body?

WHAT

What physical activities do you want to do in the future that drinking could hurt?

WHY

Why do you think some young people drink if they can get hurt?

TOPIC:

How drinking alcohol affects decisions

HOW

How do you think drinking affects choices young people make?

WHAT

What problems can happen when young people choose to drink?

WHY

Why do you think some young people drink if it can have a negative impact on their choices?

TOPIC

Drinking alcohol before 21

HOW

How does drinking before the age of 21 affect someone?

WHAT

What answers could kids give if they're pushed to drink before 21?

WHY

Why do you think some people would start drinking before 21?

Talking So Your Child Will Listen

The following strategies will help you communicate most effectively:

Listen.

Allow your child to speak without interruption. Sometimes it's good to paraphrase where you don't agree, or interpret back: "Let me see if I understand you. It sounds like you feel that..."

Choose a good time.

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 or has another place to be.

Communicate directly.

Open the conversation with a direct statement. "I'd like to talk to you about alcohol and other drugs. Is now a good time?"

Emphasize common goals.

Remind them that you are on their side. Emphasize common goals and use them as a basis for your guidance and suggestions, i.e. remind your child that you both want them to stay healthy and safe.

Avoid communication "stoppers."

These are single, sometimes threatening statements that shut down any response: "I better not catch you drinking."

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. Recognize that conflict is natural.

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 teens feel they must "defend" a position. If you find yourselves debating, try suggesting that you both approach matters from a different angle. Avoid statements that begin with "you" that make the other person feel attacked: "You did this..."

Reasons Middle Schoolers Respect

When you speak with your child 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 or they are unfamiliar with Zero Tolerance laws, which prohibit driving after drinking any amount of alcohol. Remind them that police do receive complaints about parties. When police arrive, they may arrest anyone who is suspected of underage substance use.

State clearly that you expect your child to obey the law. Discuss the potential consequences for breaking the law, such as, they could have their license revoked or face expensive legal fees. If a court date is scheduled, you may have to take time off from work and could lose pay.

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

REASON 2

Drinking Can Make You Sick or Pass Out

Alcohol irritates the lining of the digestive system. Drinking too much alcohol can make people vomit and feel bad for days (a condition known as a "hangover"). Other kids don't want to be around someone who is sick or passes out from too much drinking. Remind your child that alcohol sickness can happen suddenly and with little warning.

REASON 3

Drinking May Make You Vulnerable

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

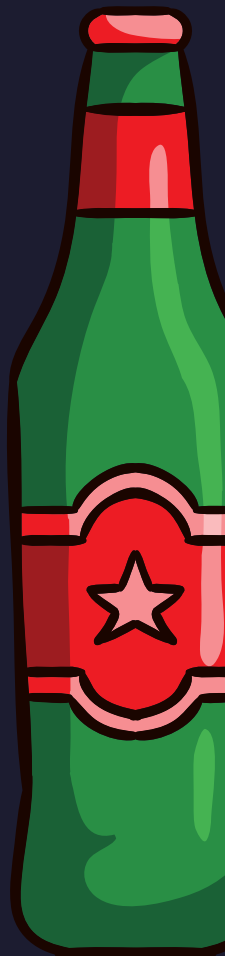
Your child probably trusts the people they are around, and you may trust them too, but alcohol can turn situations dangerous. 85% of women who have been sexually assaulted were assaulted by someone they knew.

REASON 4

Drinking Might Lead to Addiction

No one aspires to have an alcohol abuse problem. Yet most people believe they can control their drinking and will not become an alcoholic themselves.

Research clearly shows, however, that the younger a person starts drinking, the greater the chance they will develop alcohol problems later in life. Adults who started drinking at age 15 or 16 are five times more likely to be diagnosed with alcohol dependence as adults who started drinking after age 21.



Getting Your Child to Talk

After working on how to talk so your child will listen, the next challenge is getting them to open up. Many parents feel like their middle schooler's vocabulary is limited to phrases like, "I dunno," "whatever," or "not now"—maybe even accompanied by an eye roll.

Kids may respond this way when they're tired, distracted, or simply not in the mood. Sometimes, they worry a conversation will turn into a lecture, nagging, or that their parents just won't understand. The key is creating an environment where they feel comfortable sharing.

CLARIFY FACTS AND OPINIONS

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

ASK THEIR THOUGHTS AND LISTEN WITHOUT JUDGMENT

Hold back on criticism to encourage honest dialogue. Use well-timed silence; pausing can prompt your child to share more!

SEEK DISCUSSION, DON'T LECTURE

Share your own experiences to create a two-way dialogue.

RESPECT THEIR MOOD

Don't force conversations when they're not ready. Wait for a better moment and try again.

TALK DAILY ABOUT WHAT MATTERS TO THEM

Build trust through every day conversations.

KEEP IT BRIEF

Avoid long-winded statements. Short comments invite more engagement.

—TIMING IS EVERYTHING

When may be the best time to talk with your child about alcohol? Kids are often tired after a school day or sporting 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 their undivided attention.

AVOIDING POTHOLES

SOMETIMES YOUTH REACT NEGATIVELY WHEN PARENTS TRY TO DISCUSS SENSITIVE TOPICS.

Anger About Not Being Trusted

Some kids interpret a request to talk as a sign that you do not trust them. Reassure your child that you are not suspicious and are doing this to help them, not attack them.

Child: "Why don't you trust me?"

Parent: "I trust you. But this is a very important issue, and I think we need to make sure we're on the same page. To do that, we need to talk to each other."

Fear of Punishment

Children may fear you'll treat them harshly right from the start. Youth who fear punishment communicate less often with their parents.

Child: "Sure, talk with you and you won't let me go out. Forget it."

Parent: "I promise that I won't be that way. I will listen to you. I'll take what you say seriously. I'll be straight with you, and you be straight with me."

They Think They Already Know it All

Some children don't want to talk because they believe they already know everything there is to know about a topic. Don't let this objection stop you from trying to communicate.

Child: "I've heard it all before. We don't need to talk."

Parent: "You probably already know quite a bit. It would make me feel better if we talked it through. Besides, it would help me to better understand how things are different from when I was your age."

CAUTION!

Terrifying Your Teen Could Backfire

Be truthful with your teen 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 teen doesn’t see them happen immediately when someone they know drinks, they will assume you were wrong or exaggerating.

Fear of Getting a Lecture

Your child may be open to talking, but the last thing they want is a one-way lecture from parents about right and wrong.

Child: “I know what you will do if we talk. You’ll lecture me like you always do. You never listen.”

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

Parents can become overwhelmed, too. 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.

Recruiting other people to support your side of the argument.

Giving the silent treatment and then saying things are “fine.”

Comparing kids and asking “Why can’t you be more like your brother/sister?”

Bringing up the child’s past failures.

As the adult in the conversation, it’s important to manage your reactions while also holding space for your child’s emotions, too.

“Did You Drink WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG?”

Honesty is important and you should not lie to your child if you did drink underage. You could say: “Yes, I did, and I regret it. I want you to be better informed than I was at your age and make safer choices.”

Communicating Family Values

Many parents teach their children basic family values, such as honesty and responsibility, but don't always connect these values to real-world situations involving alcohol and other substances. They assume their child will naturally apply these principles when making decisions. That's a risky assumption. The adolescent brain is still developing, and young people don't always make the same logical connections that seem obvious to adults.

That's why it's critical to have open, direct conversations about alcohol, cannabis, and

other substances—reinforcing not just values but also clear expectations and rules. The best way to ensure these conversations happen regularly is by making them a natural part of family discussions. Holding routine family meetings can provide a structured way to talk about important topics, including peer pressure, risky situations, and family rules. Keeping the lines of communication open—starting early and continuing through the teen years—helps children feel supported, heard, and more willing to share their own thoughts and concerns.

Parent Tip: Even if your child says what you hope to hear (“I don't drink”), it's still important to talk together about alcohol. Discuss how they 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.

Make the following agreements with your child:

High Quality Agreements

A good agreement is clear and understood by all. But rules are broken when they only reflect the parent's wishes. Agreements work best within strong relationships built on mutual trust, respect, honesty, responsibility, and care for one another. Children who feel valued and respected in family discussions are more likely to take these agreements seriously.

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, not control, and increasing responsibilities will come with time. Framing rules in terms of care and guidance rather than punishment strengthens the foundation of trust between you and your child.

No drinking alcohol before age 21.

No other substance use.

No socializing in places where youth are drinking alcohol or using cannabis.

No riding in a car with a driver who has had any amount of alcohol or cannabis.

Enforcing Consequences

Be ready to follow through and enforce consequences if your teen violates a family agreement. Consequences are most effective when built on a foundation of trust and clear expectations. That's why establishing strong parent-child agreements BEFORE your child slips up is so important.

Make sure they understand...

How you expect them to behave based on your family's rules and values and WHY you take that position.

Your position on alcohol and other substances, impaired driving, and riding in a car with an impaired driver.

The consequences you will enforce if they break an agreement.

Emphasize to your child how quickly drinking can lead to dangerous results. That's why you take underage substance use so seriously and are committed to enforcing these consequences to keep them safe.



DO: Impose fair, clear consequences. Talk to them about the mistake and make a plan for next time. Be firm and consistent.



DON'T: Act out of anger or impose unfair punishments.

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 their privileges, like limiting screen time, sleepover privileges, or gaming time.

Consider This Scenario:

A child comes home from a friend's house and has clearly been drinking alcohol. 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 in a heated moment and may not even be possible to enforce.

Stay Calm

Another way the parent might respond would be to say, "I'm very disappointed with you. We agreed that there would be no drinking alcohol until you are 21. We will talk about this in the morning."

Talk Tomorrow

The next day, the parent might say, "As you know, you violated a very important family rule. Drinking alcohol is very dangerous for you. Therefore, as we agreed before, there will be serious consequences. For the next month, you will not be allowed to hang out with your friends outside of school or use your phone while you are at home. I hope that after the month has passed, we will both feel more confident in your ability to follow the rules of this family."

Set Consequences

Focus on Accountability

In this example, the consequences were previously established and are discussed after the parent's initial disappointment has subsided. This approach keeps the focus on accountability while reinforcing the trust and structure that help kids make better decisions in the future.

False Assumptions

Parents sometimes hesitate to impose rules against underage drinking or even to discuss drinking with their kids. Maybe they aren't sure where to start, or they assume their child is not at risk.

○ Parents Might Assume

It's too early. My kid is not interested in drinking.

● Read The Facts

According to data from a Monitoring the Future national survey, about 18% of kids try alcohol before graduating from 8th grade.

○ Parents Might Assume

My child's friends are good kids who do not drink alcohol.

● Read The Facts

About 11% of 8th graders have drunk alcohol in the past 30 days.

○ Parents Might Assume

At this point, my kid knows better.

● Read The Facts

Unfortunately, the reality is that many young people are uninformed about how dangerous a substance like alcohol can be.

○ Parents Might Assume

We have our kids involved in sports. This keeps them off the streets.

● Read The Facts

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.

○ Parents Might Assume

My child has learned about the negative effects of alcohol in school.

● Read The Facts

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.

Youth Make Assumptions, Too

Teens who binge 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."

Parent Tip: Keep conversations open and fact-based. Do: Acknowledge their feelings and explore facts together. Don't: Dismiss their thoughts or shut down the conversation.

YOUNG PEOPLE DRINK DIFFERENTLY

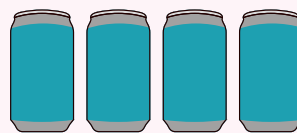
Middle school students may not consciously plan to drink, but they may take an opportunity to experiment. For example, they may be hanging out with friends at a home with an unlocked liquor cabinet and decide to open up a bottle because there are no parents around.

Young people tend to engage in intense drinking, called “binge” drinking. For boys, binge drinking means having at least 4 drinks within a 2-hour period. For girls, it means at least 3 drinks within

that time. Youth who chug alcohol and drink as much as they can— as fast as they can—risk dying from alcohol poisoning.

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

“Binge” Drinking



For males, binge drinking means having **≥ 4 DRINKS** within 2 hours.



For females, binge drinking means having **≥ 3 DRINKS** within 2 hours.

Signs Your Child May Be Struggling with Alcohol Use

Hidden bottles or alcohol missing from your home

Reliance on breath mints or mouthwash to mask the smell

Mood swings or secretiveness

Loss of interest in activities

Declining grades

Borrowing money frequently

If your child is struggling with alcohol use, you may notice some of the following signs. If you suspect your child is struggling, don't ignore the problem—address it with care and urgency.

Parent Tip: Approach the situation with calm concern and a willingness to help, not to punish. Setting clear expectations while allowing your child to take responsibility for their actions can lead to better outcomes.

Talk Soon

Lauren's Story

“Each time Lauren left our house with her dad’s car, he would say to her – ‘Lauren, don’t drink and drive’.

How many parents do that each time their child leaves the house in their family car?

Lauren’s response that night was – ‘Dad, I’m the designated driver tonight.’ – which is really silly because anyone under 21 shouldn’t be considered a designated driver since they aren’t supposed to drink. Young drivers are also inexperienced, so they should never be a designated driver anyways, even if they haven’t been drinking.

Additionally, Lauren’s father and I’s conversation should never have been ‘don’t’ drink and drive’; it should have been don’t drink underage because it’s illegal and dangerous.”



-Debbie Sausville reflecting on the tragic loss of her 16-year-old stepdaughter, who was killed in a single-vehicle, single-occupant crash after drinking underage at an unsupervised party.

Helping Your Child Make Good Choices

Many kids choose to drink because they assume everyone else is doing it and that it's an acceptable thing to do. However, studies show that 67% of teens are *not* drinking alcohol.

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



The Big Myth:

“Everybody is already doing it.”

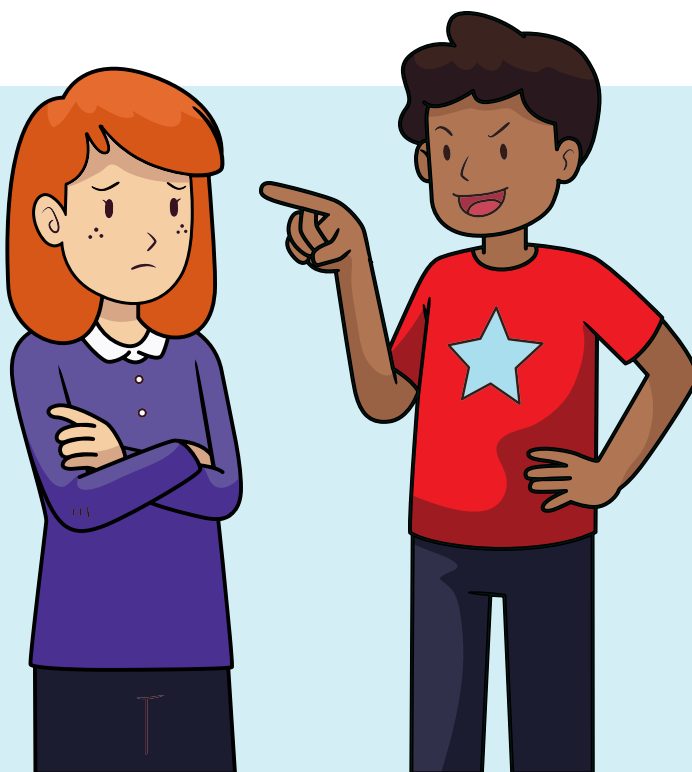
The Facts:

7 in 10 teens are NOT drinking alcohol.

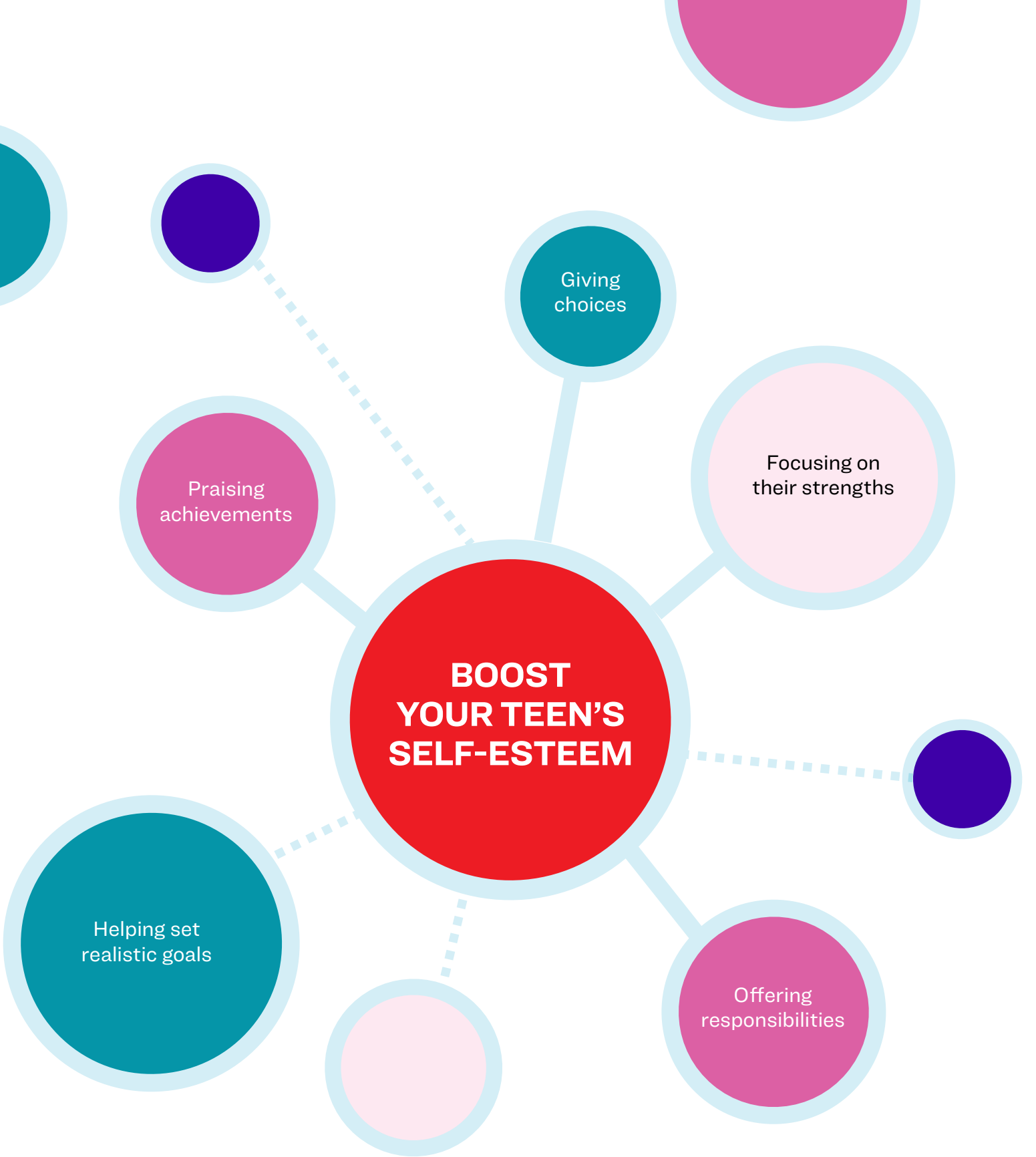
One of the most common reasons behind a young person's choice to use alcohol is that they think “everybody is doing it”. When in reality, almost 3 out of every 4 eighth graders have never had a drink. Middle school students often overestimate how many high school students are drinking or have tried alcohol.

Dealing with Peer Pressure

Sometimes youth face situations where they are pressured to do something they would rather not do. For example, a friend might push them to try a sip of alcohol when they don't want to. You can empower your child by talking to them about ways they can say no without feeling weird or left out. Talk with them about using **ACTIVE and PASSIVE refusal strategies** if they are offered alcohol or other substances.



Your child might be told:	Refusal Strategy:	Your teen could say:
“Come on, everyone has tried it.”	ACTIVE Take a stand	“No, I don’t do drugs.”
“If you won’t drink with us, then why are you hanging out with us?”	PASSIVE Make an excuse	“Sorry, I just have an early game tomorrow morning and need to be ready.”
“We drank once before, so what’s the problem now?”	ACTIVE Make a statement	“I know, and I’m not making that mistake again.”
“Come on, are you scared?”	PASSIVE Suggest an alternative	“No, but you’re going to be scared when we watch that new scary movie I was telling you about!”
“It’s the perfect chance with your parents out of town! It’s now or never.”	PASSIVE Change the subject	“Oh my gosh that reminds me—if I don’t water the plants my mom will be so mad! I have to go.”



Children and teens who have high self-esteem are better equipped to make smart choices, deal with peer pressure, and avoid underage drinking.

Good Problem Solving

Helping your child develop strong problem-solving skills is a critical part in preparing them for the challenges they will face in the future. By coaching them through the below theoretical scenario, your child will be more confident in making healthy, informed decisions when the time comes that they must make decisions on their own:

Start with a scenario: Your child is sleeping over at a friend’s house, and they overhear someone suggesting sneaking alcohol from the liquor cabinet.

Step 1

Notice the Problem

What’s the situation?

What are the potential risks?



Step 2

Identify Possible Actions

Go along with it.

Try to talk their friends out of it.

Call you to come home.



Step 3

Gather Information

What are the risks of underage drinking?

How might they feel if their friends pressure them?



Step 4

Examine and Decide

Which choice keeps them safe and aligns with their values?

What’s the best way to respond while not jeopardizing their friendships?



Step 5

Follow Through

Encourage them to follow through with their decision in the real world.

Reiterate your agreement to not use alcohol or other substances.



Strategies that Help a Child Succeed

Youth are less likely to drink alcohol when their parents:

Respect their concerns, even when maintaining boundaries.

Respect your child's urge for independence. However, it is still important to set clear rules against alcohol use and know where your children are.

Give calm guidance.

Offer clear-headed discussion and guidance about the choices they face that are important to their life path.

Phase in freedoms and challenges.

Gradually reduce parental control so children have more freedom and responsibility with each passing year.

Empower choices.

Encourage children to make their own choices, even relatively minor ones, such as picking a place for the family dinner, choosing a movie to go see, and so on. Sometimes choices can be framed by the parent in ways the child chooses between two desirable alternatives.

Get Behind 21

The research is clear — the 21-minimum drinking age law has saved thousands of lives and reduced underage alcohol use.

Many parents wonder if introducing their child to alcohol in a controlled setting will help them learn to drink responsibly. However, studies from both the U.S. and Europe consistently show the opposite: early exposure leads to increased binge drinking, not safer habits.

There is no research to support the idea that allowing children to sip or taste alcohol teaches responsible drinking. Instead, studies consistently show that early exposure is linked to more frequent and heavier drinking in high school and beyond.

The most effective approach is for parents to establish clear rules that alcohol is not permitted and to ensure their child knows to leave or contact a trusted adult if they find themselves in a situation where alcohol is present without supervision.

CONNECT

With Your Kids

Research shows: the more you connect with your kids, the more protected your kids are against alcohol and other drug use.

Have dinner together

Enjoy activities together

Talk to each other

Share feelings and concerns

Choosing Friends

Friendships are especially important to youth, and they typically spend more and more time with friends as they grow up. Parents need to know who their children are spending time with and what they are doing on a daily basis. You can also encourage your child to have healthy relationships by talking with them about the true meaning of friendship.



True friendship is not based on superficial things like money, looks, or popularity. Real friends don't peer pressure you to do things you don't want to do.



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 learn to prioritize making smart decisions about who they allow to influence them.

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

Even the smartest kid can choose a friend that leads them down a risky path. It's your job as the parent to empower your child to choose wisely when making friends. But what do you do when you notice your child hanging out with someone who may not be the best influence?

- **Don't ban a friend.**
Possibly the worst thing to do is forbid your child from seeing that friend. If you criticize a friend, your child will feel compelled to defend them 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 get to know them and share your family values.
- **Encourage more friends.**
Encourage your child to participate in hobbies or extracurriculars where they can meet other kids with appropriate values. Making more friends helps prevent influences by a single "bad" friend.
- **Help teens avoid high-risk group situations.**
The most dangerous situations for kids are unsupervised group activities and parties. It can be hard to stand up against a group. Teach them strategies to avoid peer pressure or unsafe situations.
- **Monitor social activities and supervise parties.**
Before your child attends a social event, contact the host child's parent to make sure that the party will be supervised by an adult and won't involve alcohol or other drugs.

FINDING ALTERNATIVES TO DRINKING

Some youth have “positive” reasons (from their perspective) for why they might choose to drink. Help your children think of other ways to achieve similar goals.

Rather than celebrating a championship win by drinking with friends...

Invite some friends over for a celebration party!

Rather than smoking a joint to blow off steam after studying for a big test...

Practice some self-care with a spa night at home.

Rather than drinking to fit in with new friends...

Suggest another activity or find friends with similar values.

O Talking About Impaired Driving

While impaired driving is *especially* dangerous for minors, it's important you reiterate to them that **no one should ever drive impaired**. There is no "safe" or "skilled" impaired driver, and they should never ride with anyone who has had *any* amount of a mind-altering substance.

Riding with an Impaired Driver

When talking about impaired driving, remember to:

Discuss the dangers of impaired driving, for drivers AND passengers.

Teach them how to identify signs of impairment.

Encourage alternatives: like calling a trusted adult for a ride.

Remind them there are no shortcuts to sobering up.

Stress that they need to call 911 in an emergency.

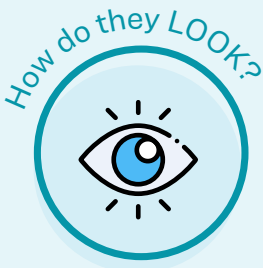
Research shows: Even kids that don't intend to ride with a driver who has been drinking or using substances may be "willing" in some circumstances. For example, they might be willing to get in the car if they feel responsible for helping a friend stay out of trouble or not get hurt. Someday your child may be faced with this decision, and it's important to set clear family rules.

How do you know if a driver is impaired?

In order for a person to make the decision to not get into the car with an impaired driver, they first need to know how to *identify* an impaired driver.

You may have noticed by now that we talk about the dangers of “impaired” driving, rather than just “drunk” driving. This is because as cannabis has legalized around the country, instances of drugged driving have skyrocketed. Many people still hold the belief that driving “high” is safe and acceptable. However, substances that are mind-altering greatly impact your brain’s ability to function normally. Driving is a complex task that involves a wide range of cognitive skills, multisensory perception, and motor abilities. This is why it’s dangerous, and often deadly, for **anyone of any age** to drive impaired.

So how can someone tell if their driver is impaired? Teach your child to be observant of the driver *before* they get into the car. Using their sense of sight, smell, and hearing, teens should ask themselves:



- Glossy eyes; bloodshot eyes; dilated pupils; can't keep eyes open
- Stumbling, can't walk straight
- Agitated energy; sweaty and alert, jittery
- Moving slowly; lethargic or drowsy

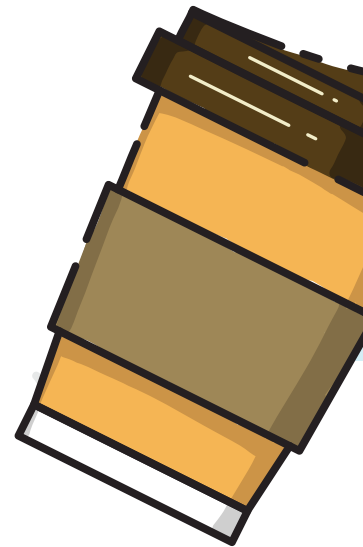


- Slurring their words
- Talking slowly, mumbling
- Talking quickly, rushing their words
- Talking louder than usual



- Strong, sharp smell - like alcohol
- Stinky, skunk smell - like cannabis
- Bad breath

Parent Tip: *Remind your child that just because a driver says they are okay to drive doesn't mean they are. Any amount of a mind-altering substance is impairing. If they are acting differently, they will drive differently. It's never worth rolling the dice.*

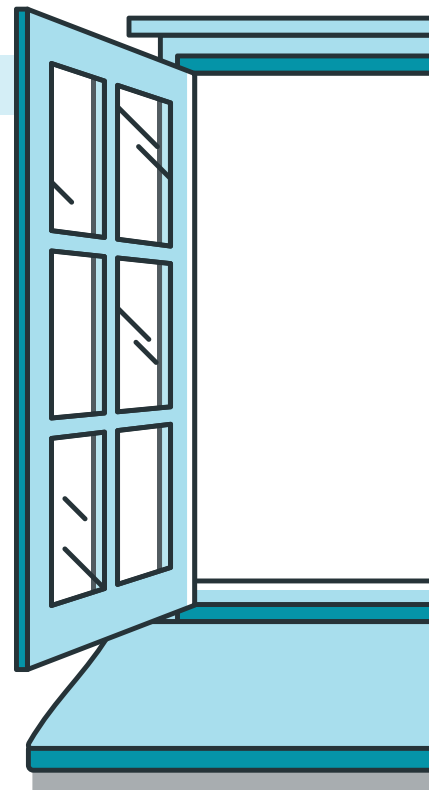


YOU CAN'T GET SOBER FASTER BY...



Exercising

Getting fresh air



The Myth of “Sobering Up”

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.

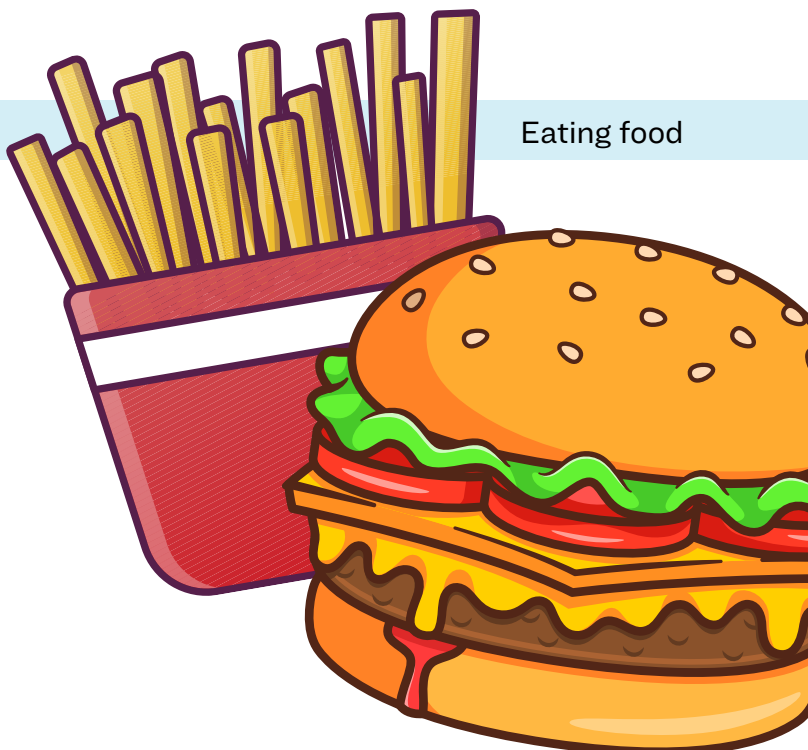
Drinking coffee



Taking a cold shower



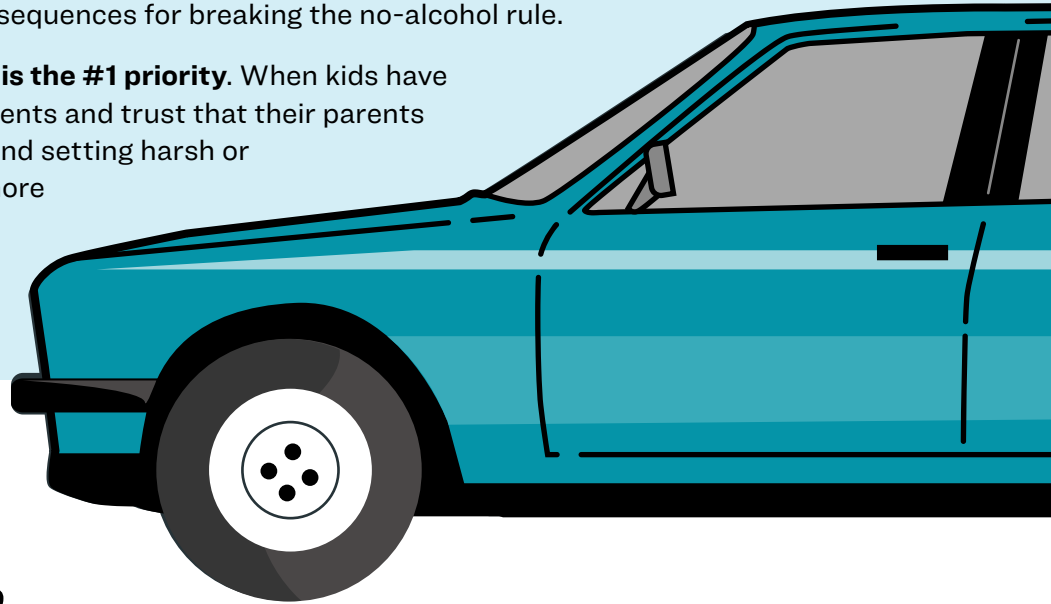
Eating food



Wrong Message?

Some parents worry that offering a ride home could send the wrong message and make kids believe it's 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 **their safety is the #1 priority**. When kids 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.



If your child calls you to pick them up because either they or someone else has been drinking:

1

Pick up your child and get them home safely. Don't get angry and stay calm on the way home.

2

If the established household rule has been broken, pick the soonest appropriate time to discuss consequences with your child. It may be best to wait until the next day.

3

Talk again about your family rules and enforce the agreed upon consequences. Remind them, you only want to keep them safe.

Talking About Cannabis and Medications

Many parents assume their middle schooler is too young to use cannabis, but it's the second most misused substance among youth after alcohol. Research from the National Institute on Drug Abuse shows:

1 in 9 Eighth Graders

Data shows about 1 in 9 eighth graders have admitted to using cannabis in the past year. By the end of middle school, that number jumps to 1 in 4.

Vaping

Vaping cannabis is on the rise. In 2024, 6% of eighth graders reported vaping cannabis. By 10th grade, the number doubled to 12%.

Poly-use

Mixing cannabis and alcohol is common. Reports show that between 1 in 5 to 1 in 8 middle schoolers use both substances together, increasing their risk of accidents, fights, and health or legal issues by 2-3 times.

Parents often underestimate how much and how often youth may use alcohol and cannabis. Even if your child doesn't seem interested, middle school is the right time to START conversations about the risks. Substance use increases significantly during this stage, making early discussions crucial.

How Cannabis Works in the Body

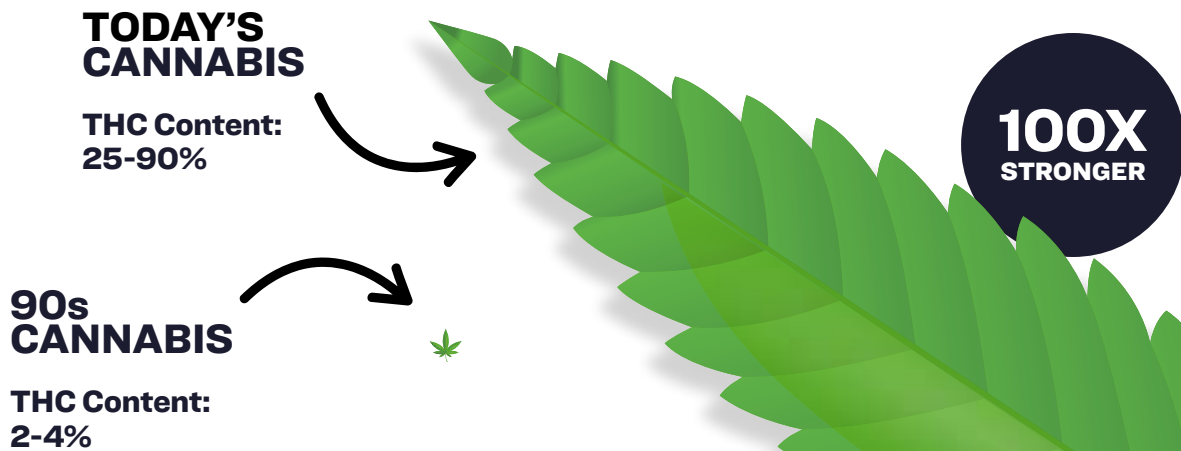
Cannabis contains a chemical called tetrahydrocannabinol, commonly known as THC. When THC enters the brain by smoking, vaping, or eating edibles (e.g., gummies or brownies), it influences chemical reactions that create positive feelings or a "high." While this is happening, cannabis is also altering normal communication inside the brain and between the brain and the rest of the body. These alterations can seriously affect movement and coordination, sensation, pain, emotions, judgment, decision-making, memory, and appetite.

Cannabis Yesterday and Today

Prior to 1990, the THC content in cannabis was around 2-4%. In 2023, in states where there are stores that legally sell cannabis to the public, the THC content ranges from 25-90%. This means that the THC content between cannabis used in 1990 and today can be over 100 times stronger.

Think of it this way—if the strength of alcohol in beer increased in the same manner, having one beer today would be equal to having over 20 beers in 1990! Because of strong regulation, however, beer potency has changed very little over time, so a beer today raises the same effects as a beer did back then.

Today's cannabis is not the same drug as what many parents might have experienced when they were young. The magnified strength in today's cannabis results in magnified effects.



This is why health professionals are reporting cannabis use resulting in increased rates of:

- Increased heart rates
- Bronchitis
- Cancer
- Anxiety and depression
- Sleep and fatigue
- Changes in brain function, leading to mental illness (specifically schizophrenia)
- Addiction

*Last, but not least, studies have shown that the effects of cannabis on brain function **cannot be reversed.***

Cannabis and Youth

Young people's brains continue to develop until their mid-20s. As a result, cannabis affects them differently than adults. As you read on page 8, research has shown youth who use cannabis are more likely to report decreases in brain volume, poorer attention, verbal skills, and self-regulatory behaviors.

Breaking News: Does vape use increase future cannabis use?

Researchers examined a nationally representative sample of 9,800 students ages 12-14 who never used cannabis and found that students who used vapes were significantly more likely to use cannabis one year later compared to students who did not use vapes. The study's findings show a strong association between vapes and cannabis use in middle school age youth.

ACTION STEP:

We recommend that parents use how, what, and why questions to engage their middle schoolers in conversation about how cannabis works in the body.

HOW, WHAT, WHY

- **How** do you think cannabis effects a young person's body or brain?
- **What** makes you think that?
- **What** could happen to someone after using cannabis that would concern you?
- **Why** do you think some people think cannabis is not dangerous?

Common Myths Youth Believe About Cannabis

Know The Real Facts.

○ MYTH

Cannabis is safe and not addictive.

● The Facts

Cannabis is currently the leading cause of addiction and dependence other than alcohol in the U.S. Studies show that cannabis accounts for over 50% of the 7 million people aged 12 or older dependent on or abusing a drug. Cannabis 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 cannabis a higher risk drug to use.

○ MYTH

Cannabis is safer than alcohol.

● The Facts

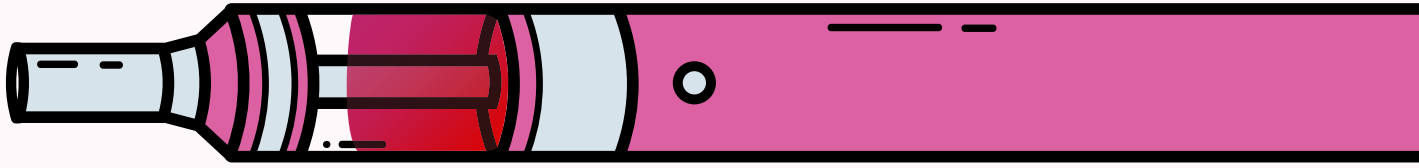
Both alcohol and cannabis are associated with significant problems. Comparing which is safer overlooks that there are serious risks associated with both drugs.

○ MYTH

Cannabis is a widely accepted medical treatment and is therefore safe to use.

● The Facts

While medicinal cannabis is legal in some states, it is only approved for specific conditions and requires certification from a qualified healthcare provider. Patients need prescriptions that specify how much, how often, and in what form it can be used. Medicinal cannabis is rarely prescribed to children. In these instances, the benefits of medicinal cannabis MUST outweigh the potential for damage to the developing brain.

**MYTH**

Cannabis makes you a better driver.

The Facts

Studies have shown that, of seriously injured drivers admitted to trauma centers, more than 1 out of 4 tested positive for cannabis. In another study of fatally injured drivers in a western state, over 1 in 10 tested positive for cannabis.

MYTH

All cannabis is legal.

The Facts

While some states have legalized cannabis for medicinal and recreational use, it remains illegal at the federal level and is classified as a Schedule I drug. Federal law still prohibits its possession, sale, and use, regardless of state laws. No state allows recreational cannabis use for individuals under 21.

MYTH

Cannabis helps you sleep.

The Facts

Youth who use cannabis report more trouble sleeping and staying asleep compared to their peers who do not use cannabis.

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 cannabis?” **Consider the following case study:**

Lindsey has a son who is in middle school. Her son is interested in sports and spending time with his friends. Like many parents, she has heard about the underage drinking that goes on at parties and is concerned. She has talked to her son about drinking and cannabis since he was in elementary school and continues to have regular times to have the “talk” now that he is in middle school. Lindsey makes an effort to stay aware of her son’s social circles, knowing who his friends are and where he spends his time. She believes he is not interested in alcohol or cannabis but has overheard some of her son’s friends talk about beer in the past.

Lindsey and her husband also model responsible behavior by drinking alcohol in moderation and not using cannabis. They recognize that their actions set an example for their son and want to reinforce a healthy, substance-free lifestyle.

Many of the steps Lindsey is taking—maintaining open communication, monitoring social influences, and setting a positive example—help lower the chances of her son using alcohol or cannabis. However, there are additional things she can do to further reduce the risk.

Research shows: *Parents who use medical and health research to talk with their children about alcohol and cannabis reduce their children’s likelihood of use.*

	What Parents Did Well	Impact on Child	Research Shows
Protective Factors	Started Conversations Early and Often	Talking about alcohol and cannabis since elementary school built a strong foundation for ongoing communication.	It is never too late for parents to talk to their children about alcohol and cannabis. High-quality parent-child communication lowers the risk of substance use, even in college-age kids.
	Stayed Aware of Social Circles	Keeping up with her son’s activities and friendships helps her recognize potential risks.	The higher the quality of parent-child communication, the less likely children are to combine alcohol and cannabis and experience negative consequences.
	Encouraged Healthy Activities	Her son’s involvement in sports provides structure, positive peer influences, and a natural alternative to risky behaviors.	Participation in extracurricular activities is a known protective factor against underage substance use.
	Modeled Responsible Behavior	Lindsey and her husband’s low alcohol use and no cannabis use set a positive example.	Studies show parental modeling is associated with children’s cannabis use—parents who model low or no use reduce their child’s risk.

Research shows: Early alcohol use is linked to a higher risk of using multiple substances together, leading to greater harm.

	What to Watch Out For	Impact on Child	Research Shows
Risk Factors	Peer pressure and exposure to alcohol or cannabis may increase as her son gets older.	Stronger social pressures can make it harder to say no.	Middle school is a critical time to reinforce expectations, as risk increases in high school. Regular check-ins help keep communication open.
	Allowing small amounts of alcohol at home may seem harmless but can backfire.	Kids allowed to drink at home are more likely to drink more often and in larger amounts when unsupervised.	Research indicates that even small amounts of alcohol given by parents increase the likelihood of underage alcohol use.
	Setting clear expectations about alcohol and cannabis helps reduce future risks.	Kids with clear, enforced rules about substance use are less likely to experiment.	Delaying alcohol use until 21 significantly reduces the risk of long-term substance-related issues.

Key Takeaways

Delay Alcohol Use:

Delaying alcohol use until after age 21 is crucial in reducing long-term risks, including combining substances. Allowing alcohol, on special occasions especially, can send the message that celebrations require alcohol.

Communication is Key:

Talking with your child consistently reduces the risk of substance misuse, even in high-pressure situations like parties.

Model Healthy, Responsible Behaviors:

Parents who drink less and avoid cannabis offer protective modeling that their children are likely to follow.

Did You Use Cannabis When You Were Young?

Like alcohol, parents differ in their experiences with cannabis 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:

“I know the data also shows that when parents think it is okay for their kids to drink or smoke once in a while, those kids drink/smoke more and have more problems in their lives.”

“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.”

“I do know now studies show the younger people are when they drink or smoke cannabis, the more likely they will have more frequent and more severe problems in their teens, 20s, and beyond.”

“There’s a lot more research about the harmful affects of cannabis now compared to back when I was young. With the information we have now, it would be irresponsible to not encourage you to make an informed decision. I want to protect you as best I can. So let’s talk about it.”



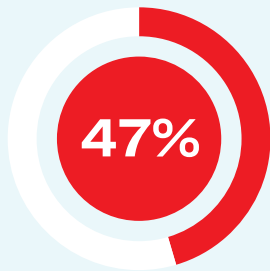
Medications

Out of concern for alcohol and other substances, you might overlook talking with your child about over-the-counter (OTC) medications and prescription drugs. However, there are many mind-altering drugs commonly kept in your medicine cabinet that can be accessible and enticing to youth.

Prescription drugs, when used properly under a doctor’s supervision, are generally safe. However, they can pose a threat when taken at the wrong

times, when not taken according to the correct dosage, and if taken by someone else. It can lead to abuse, addiction (for example, abusing prescription opioid pain relievers, like OxyContin and Vicodin, may lead to heroin use), and even death. Even OTC medications, like cough syrup and allergy medicines, are mind-altering and are therefore commonly abused. It is important to teach youth that medications taken properly come with benefits and may still have risks; but if taken improperly, can be dangerous.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) reports that :



Almost half of teens (47%)
Say it is easy to get prescription drugs from a parent’s medicine cabinet.



Nearly 1 in 4 teens (23%)
Report taking a prescription drug not prescribed to them by a doctor at least once in their lives.

Kids might try to abuse prescription drugs for a variety of reasons:

To get high

To lose weight

To feel better

To perform better in sports

To help concentrate or stay alert

To entertain themselves or try a daring behavior



There is no “good” reason for abusing medications. Your child needs to understand that abusing medications is not only incredibly dangerous, but it’s **illegal**.

Not only is medication misuse dangerous for a developing brain and body, but it is also responsible for impaired driving crashes and fatalities, too. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 64% of seriously and fatally injured drivers tested at five major trauma centers in 2020 had at least one impairing substance in their system, including opioids, cannabis, alcohol, stimulants, and anti-depressants.



As a parent, you can help keep your child safe from substance abuse by:

Securely store medications.

Knowing what is in your medicine cabinet, keeping medications in a locked, safe place, and properly disposing of them when you’re done using them.

Talking early, openly, and often.

Include OTC medications and prescription drugs in your conversations with your child and keep the lines of communication open.

Monitoring their activities.

Monitor their use of the internet for illegal online purchases, their social media pages, and any credit card purchases.

Teaching them how to identify signs of impairment.

Knowing how to spot signs of drug impairment, which often looks different than alcohol impairment, is a lifesaving skill.

Verbally sharing disapproval of medication abuse.

Kids may think taking prescription drugs are safer than other drugs because they are given by pharmacists or because you have them at home; it is important that they hear from you the risks associated and your disapproval of it.

Recognizing signs of abuse:

- Fatigue or insomnia and/or sudden mood changes including irritability, secretiveness, or personality shifts like lack of interest in a favorite hobby.
- Red or glazed eyes, and repeated health complaints.
- Decreased or obsessive interest in schoolwork.
- Missing prescription medicines from your medicine cabinet or additional filled prescriptions that you did not order.

Take Action

Key Takeaways



Before talking to your child, remember these key points:

- **Reiterate the law:** Remind your child that alcohol is illegal for those under 21.
- **Highlight the truth:** Most of their peers aren't drinking—so they're not alone in making healthy choices.
- **Explain the risks:** Alcohol and cannabis harm young brains, affecting judgment and decision-making.
- **Be clear on your rules:** Talk about your family's stance on alcohol and cannabis and agree on consequences.
- **Discuss motivations:** Talk about what might drive kids to drink alcohol or try other substances and share alternatives instead.
- **Brainstorm peer pressure solutions:** Help your child come up with ways to handle situations where alcohol, cannabis, or other substances are involved.

REMIND THEM:

"You matter, and we need to talk about how risky alcohol and cannabis are for young people."

"I care about you and your safety. That's why I need to know where you are."

"I love you and want you to have the best future possible—no drinking until 21 and never ride with an impaired driver."

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.

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 hold adults accountable when they host underage drinking parties.
- Limit new or renewed liquor licenses in your community.

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, urge officials to find out how they got the alcohol and hold those businesses or adults accountable.
- Identify and penalize retailers that illegally sell alcohol to youth.

3

INVOLVE EDUCATORS

- Contact schools in your area and ask what they're doing to prevent underage alcohol and other substance use. Suggest school assemblies and activities focused on underage substance use prevention at key points throughout the year, such as prom, homecoming, Red Ribbon Week, and spring break.

4

HOLD ADVERTISERS ACCOUNTABLE

- When you see alcohol or cannabis marketing that targets young people, complain in the comment section and report the post, asking to have that advertising removed.

Protect Your Teen. Support Lifesaving Change.

The mission of Mothers Against Drunk Driving® is to end drunk and drugged driving, support the victims of these violent crimes and prevent underage drinking and other drug use.

As parents, we do everything we can to keep our teens safe—but right now, drunk driving remains the deadliest threat on our roads. That's why MADD is leading the charge with the **HALT Drunk Driving Law**—a groundbreaking law that requires advanced technology in all new cars that will detect and stop drunk drivers. The next generation of vehicles can stop drunk drivers before they ever put your teen at risk.



Join MADD in the fight to end drunk driving for good. Learn more about the HALT Drunk Driving Law and how you can help drive change to protect your teen's future.

Take action today. Visit madd.org/halt

Final Remarks

Parents often wonder if their children are truly listening during crucial conversations, but the research is clear:

**PARENTS
DO MAKE A
DIFFERENCE**

The way you act, the boundaries you set, and the questions you ask all help to share your child's choices.

Studies show that asking children open-ended questions that start with how, what, and why encourages critical thinking and problem solving. This is the best way to open the lines of communication and improve the impact of these lifesaving conversations. It is never too late to start making a difference in your child's decisions around alcohol, cannabis, and other substances.

For additional tools to support you and your family, visit madd.org/powerofparents

**National Presenting
Sponsor**



**National Contributing
Partner**



National Supporting Partner



Preventing underage drinking requires a shared commitment, and MADD is grateful for General Motors' partnership with the *Power of Parents* program. With their support, we are equipping more families with the resources they need to have open and honest conversations about alcohol and other drugs and their risks.

MADD™ IMPAIRED DRIVING
ENDS HERE.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving® (MADD) is a national nonprofit leading the movement to end impaired driving for good. Since 1980, MADD has helped reduce drunk driving deaths in America by more than 40%, saved nearly 500,000 lives, and served nearly one million victims and survivors. The organization is committed to leading prevention efforts with young adults, collaborating with law enforcement to keep our roads safe from impaired

drivers, as well as advocating for stricter sentencing and stronger laws, including the HALT Drunk Driving Law that mandates anti-drunk driving technology in every new car. MADD continues to provide support services to victims and survivors of impaired driving at no charge through victim advocates and the 24-Hour Victim Help Line **1-877-MADD-HELP**. For more information or to donate, visit madd.org and follow MADD on social media.

madd.org/powerofparents | **877.ASK.MADD**

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