



HERREN PROJECT

# How to Talk to Your Middle Schooler About Substances

It is more important than ever to talk about substance use with our children. Often times parents put off the topic of discussion until after their child is of high school age. While it is still beneficial to discuss substance use with teenage children, it is often too late.

Middle schoolers often use substances for the first time in social situations with substances that are easy to access like vape products, marijuana, and alcohol. Peer pressure is most often the cause, which can start much earlier than we would like to think. Continued use is often a result of reduced self-esteem, a desire to fit in, and an underdeveloped brain that isn't yet able to understand consequences or lessen the risk.

This is why it is important that we start these discussions early. Starting early can help them understand the risks associated with use before they begin to believe they are indestructible.



## Tips on How to Start the Discussion

### **Prepare for the Conversation**

You don't need to know a lot about each substance to start the conversation. In fact, they may already know more than you from classwork and their peers. That's okay. You can ask them questions about what they know and/or you can do some research together. Be prepared to answer difficult questions about your own substance use. It is alright to be honest and own your past or current use of substances. If that makes you uncomfortable, you can explain that adults get to make their own choices and they will someday get to make those choices too. Either path is fine. You decide where your comfort level lies. Your comfort in discussing these topics will set the tone for theirs.

### **Be Aware**

Be aware that your middle schooler may not want to discuss these topics and may become uncomfortable when you bring them up. Let them know it's okay to be uncomfortable, but that doesn't mean the conversation stops. Using real life examples is the best way to promote understanding. These conversations should be on-going.

### **Recognize any Substance Use Disorder**

Recognize any substance use disorder in your family. It is really important your child know that this is a disease with a tendency to run in families and they may be genetically predisposed. This will help them be as informed as possible if and when they need to make a choice about their own use.

### **Set Clear Rules and Expectations**

Set clear rules and expectations when it comes to substance use. A few examples of rules used by many families are:

- No vaping or smoking
- No alcohol use
- No using drugs
- No riding in cars driven by someone under the influence of substances
- Be home at a set hour

Give a clear consequence for breaking the rules. The best consequences are the loss of a privilege directly related to the offense.

## **Discuss the WHY Behind Substance Use**

Most people focus on the substance use as the problem without realizing its actually a symptom of something else. When choices are made that are out of line with who they are or want to be, such as the use of substances when they said they would never use, one can become depressed and anxious as a result. Let your middle schooler know that peer pressure is real and it's difficult to navigate, even for adults sometimes. Ask them if they've experienced it and how they handled it in the past.

## **Teach Them Strategies to Say NO**

Come up with ideas for what they can say if they are asked to use a substance and are having a difficult time saying no. For example, many families tell their kids that they may be subject to a drug test at any point while in their home. This is less to punish and more to give their child an out with their friends. If they're pressured, they can say, "No I can't, my parents drug test", making it easier to say no.

## **Be Real**

Don't expect your kids to be perfect. Understand this is a really hard time in your child's life to navigate. Let them know its normal to be curious. Their peers may make it appear like substances are safe and fun. Talk about the long-term dangers of substance use. Let them know the longer they wait, the less chance they have of becoming addicted. Educate them on the fact the brain is not fully developed until around 25 years old. Therefore the earlier they try a substance, the less developed their brain will be, which could increase the chances of developing substance use disorder in the future.

## **Be Open**

Listen to what your child has to say, even if you don't like what you hear. Let them know that no matter what, they are loved, and you are there to listen and help. It doesn't mean there won't be consequences for some choices they make, but their safety is always your top priority. Almost any mistake can be overcome with honesty.

## **Celebrate Your Middle Schooler's Successes**

It may be frightening the first time he or she reports declining an invitation to use. Try not to react to the fear but focus more on how proud you are of their choice. It may seem like they don't care much about your opinion, but they care more than they let on. Children care what their parents think.



## What Should I Do if My Child Breaks One of the Family Rules Around Substance Use?

No matter how good a parent we might be, it is still fairly likely that your child is going to break one of the family rules. Pushing against boundaries is part of growing up, and adolescence is generally when we struggle with this the most. Understand that although substance use is not normal, pushing against our boundaries is. Try not to overreact.

### **Try Not to React in Anger**

If you need to take some space before having a discussion, that's fine. Be honest and tell your child you are upset and need some time to think before you talk about what happened. It's actually beneficial to let your middle schooler sit in their anxiety for a bit.

### **Ask Questions**

When you are ready, sit beside them and ask them why? As Chris Herren often asks students, "Why do you need to change yourself on a Friday or Saturday night to be around kids you have known your whole life?"

- Ask WHY?
- How do you feel about yourself right now?
- Is what you're feeling worth the choice to have broken the rule?
- How would you feel if the rest of the community were to find out?
- Is this who you want to be?

### **Listen**

Listen to their answer, even if it makes you uncomfortable. Make sure you tell them you still love them and nothing they do will ever change that. Your child may not admit to using the substance or breaking the rule. Don't force it. You can still have the discussion by stating the facts and talking about the situation.

## **Try Not to Punish**

Your child is struggling to navigate a difficult world. A parent's first reaction is usually to take something away. Natural consequences are much more effective than punishment. Consequences work best if they are directly related to the decision that was made. In other words, make the punishment fit the crime.

*Example:* Your middle schooler is caught vaping, so you take their cell phone away. It is a punishment simply to punish. On the other hand, your child received vaping products by texting their seller from their phone. The loss of the cell phone would be more of a natural consequence. The loss of your trust and your disappointment are also both natural consequences.

## **Be Compassionate and Understanding**

It's important to come from a place of compassion and understanding. They most likely already feel awful about themselves. Adding to those feelings will only reduce their self-esteem.

## **Give Them the Opportunity to Earn Back Your Trust**

Make it known to your child that although they have lost your trust, they can earn it back. Making positive choices and following the family rules going forward will work towards that goal.



## Warning Signs of Substance Use

Most middle schoolers will start to experience normal mood swings and may even start to pull away a bit from you. This can be frightening for some parents, but for the most part know that this is normal behavior for this age group. Chances are this is what you are experiencing with your child right now. However, if you notice a more significant change in behavior there may be more going on.

### **Warning Signs:**

- Sleeping more than usual
- Losing interest in experiences they once enjoyed
- Pulling away from old friends and creating a new friend group
- Becoming increasingly angry or aggressive
- Appearing significantly depressed or despondent
- Sudden weight loss
- Frequent nose bleeds
- Red and/or watery eyes
- Having the shakes or tremors



## What Do I Do if I Think My Child Has a Problem with Substances?

If you discover your child is using a dangerous substance or feel they may have a bigger problem than you originally thought, consult a professional immediately. Herren Project offers consultations with a licensed clinician to help lead you in a positive direction.

You may also want to find a therapist in your area that specializes in adolescent emotional health. You will benefit from having a professional to help guide your family, in addition to your child having professional support. A trusted adult, other than yourself, for your child to talk with can be valuable even outside of substance use. Our children are often afraid to tell us the things they aren't proud of in fear of disappointing us. Many teenagers feel more comfortable discussing their issues with someone they do not know. Providing them with another trusted adult is more beneficial than them finding a peer that might not steer them in a positive direction.