

2023

# LET'S START TALKING

A PARENT'S TOOLKIT FOR UNDERSTANDING  
SUBSTANCE USE THROUGH THE MIDDLE  
SCHOOL YEARS IN THE TRI-COUNTY REGION:  
MONTEREY, SAN BENITO, SANTA CRUZ

LET'S  
TALK.

## WHAT'S INSIDE

2

The Changes That Are Coming

8

The Load They Carry

17

Parenting To Support Our Middle Schoolers

28

Uppers, Downers, All-Arounders

40

Finding Support

## GROWING UP IN THE TRI-COUNTY REGION

According to local data, middle school youth growing up in Monterey, San Benito and Santa Cruz counties have easy access and opportunity to use drugs and alcohol. While middle school use is still relatively low, exposure to drugs is occurring at younger ages. As parents and caregivers, we have an important role in helping our pre-teens and teens navigate the challenges of their middle school years and beyond. Where do we start? Know the facts, communicate openly, and listen to what our kids have to say. Keep reading to learn more.

**BETWEEN GRADES 7 AND 9, THE NUMBER OF TRI-COUNTY KIDS WHO HAVE USED SUBSTANCES TO GET HIGH INCREASES BY**

**186%**

**34%**

**OF TRI-COUNTY 7TH GRADERS PERCEIVE ONLY SLIGHT OR NO HARM TO DAILY MARIJUANA USE**

**32%**

**OF TRI-COUNTY 7TH GRADERS SAY THAT IT IS FAIRLY EASY OR VERY EASY TO ACCESS ALCOHOL**

# DEAR READER,

## THIS PARENTING THING IS HARD.

By parenting, we mean anyone who is caring for a middle schooler. You may indeed be a parent, or you may be a grandparent, a foster parent, a step-parent, a concerned neighbor or a community leader. Whatever your title, you are a caretaker, and so this book is for you.

It seems like only yesterday that you dropped your little one off for their first day of kindergarten, doesn't it? And now you're facing the big world of middle school. This is when our kids make the leap into adolescence. This is when our kids learn about all the things we may wish we could delay. Here in the Tri-County region that spans Santa Cruz, Monterey and San Benito Counties, substance use, including alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, looms large as a significant challenge for youth and families trying to navigate the preteen and teen years, and the threat is getting worse. **In fact, between 2017 and 2021, the number of fentanyl deaths in the Tri-County region across all age groups increased 10-fold.** Whether you call your home the ocean, the redwoods, the mountains or farmland, it's time to acknowledge that this is an issue that our young people are grappling with, and they need our help. This is when things get real.

But wait! Middle school can also be a time of excitement, growth, new interests and emerging friendships.

There is no single right way to address the transition to middle school and the changes that come with these years. As much as we'd like to hand over a roadmap with all the answers, every child and family, every school and community, cultural norms and attitudes are too different to offer a precise blueprint. Our Tri-County region is diverse, and our cultural and social norms and expectations are diverse too.

But here's what we do have: we have a unified commitment to healthy and thriving kids. We have creative, energetic, resilient kids who are working hard at the task of figuring out who they are and who they want to be in this world. We have solid research on how to help preteens navigate the complexities of adolescence and substance use. We have best practices that can be adjusted to meet the needs of individual families, and networks of neighbors and friends. And we have our own intuitive wisdom as parents and caregivers, our own knowledge of our children in all of their uniqueness, and our love for and dedication to our kids.

"Let's Start Talking" is a toolkit for parents, centered around the idea that with a lot of solid science and a lot of heart, we can support our children as they navigate the tough stuff. There is opportunity in middle school. This is when we can lay foundations that help steer through whatever challenges and celebrations are to come. This book is a starting point for those foundations and it will help guide you from the preteen through the teen years.

**SO LET'S START TALKING.**

# The Changes That Are Coming

Perhaps your kids' changes have already started, or maybe you've heard stories about them, but during the early teen years, our kids' bodies, brains and social environments change at a dizzying rate. Some families note a sudden change during a certain grade level, as if one day they have a sweet, innocent child, and then a switch is flipped into turbulence. You may not be there yet, but whenever it happens, we know that much of this rollercoaster is a very normal part of human development, and a very normal way that kids differentiate themselves as individuals during a period of seeking independence.

## Puberty

Puberty can be rough. Sometimes we associate puberty with "raging hormones" that promise to wreak havoc on our households. But puberty is a lot more complex than that. If we understand what puberty is all about, then we gain more insight into why our kids are the way they are. Although we will be talking about bodies that have been assigned male or female sex at birth in this section, we recognize a wide diversity in human physiology and also in gender identity.

### Raging Hormones

When we talk humorously about "raging hormones" or when we say things like "they're just hormonal" to explain mood swings, we are in some ways underappreciating one of the most powerful forces in our bodies. Hormones are not a minor inconvenience of the adolescent years. Hormones are the boss. These chemical messengers get carried through the bloodstream to organs and tissues to make them do their jobs the way they're supposed to.

GENERALLY  
PUBERTY BEGINS  
BETWEEN THESE AGES:

**10-14 yrs**

IN GIRLS

**12-16 yrs**

IN BOYS

So when one part of the brain starts secreting a hormone that tells all the other hormones that it's time to get moving, we are off and away on the puberty path, and it is a big deal. We all know the basics of the physical changes that come next: the body odor that wasn't there before or the hair in new places, menstruation and development of sex organs. But the changes don't stop there.

### Emotional Impacts of Puberty

Emotions become intense. Your child may be angry and not know why. They might be more sensitive and get more easily upset than usual. Puberty also brings on, or collides with, a lot of other changes to cognition and development. So this emotional person in your charge is also experiencing a newfound self-consciousness over their body changes, a fear about what is happening in a society that doesn't openly talk about it, a comparison of self to others that is heightened by social media, and new romantic attractions. It's a lot.

## 7TH GRADE WAS A CATEGORICAL SHIFT THAT NO ONE SAW COMING.

MIDDLE SCHOOL PARENT

### Puberty and Risk

The timing of puberty ranges from person to person, with girls generally starting puberty between the ages of 10 and 14, and boys between 12 and 16. But for both boys and girls, early puberty is associated with a stronger potential for risky behaviors and experiences later in the teen years, including depression, substance use, and risky sexual behavior. This is especially true for girls. For boys there is some evidence that later development may promote certain health behaviors, but in general, the research supports that early pubertal development may increase riskier behaviors.

For our nonbinary and transgender youth, puberty in general, whenever it starts, can be a time of confusion as the body develops in a way that does not match the person's internal identity. This may be an important time to reach out to your pediatrician and to mental health professionals for support. For more information on gender identity and adolescent development, check out the website at [amaze.org](http://amaze.org) or [thetrevorproject.org](http://thetrevorproject.org) for youth and adult resources, or reach out to: The Diversity Center in Santa Cruz, The LGBTQ+ Resource Center of San Benito County, and The Epicenter in Monterey.

### Some Tips on Navigating Puberty

It can feel like a dramatic shift when your kid starts “acting like a teenager.” And what do we mean by “acting like a teenager?” Generally, this phrase makes us think of defiance, moodiness, secrecy, separation from parents, and obsession with what friends think. But these characterizations all miss the parts of “acting like a teenager” that are creative, insightful, driven towards independence and understanding of identity, funny, and deeply feeling. The way that we respond when our middle schoolers exhibit the first set of characteristics just may help us see through to that second set more easily.

**No young person ever appreciated puberty jokes in which they were the focus,** and yet generation after generation continues to treat a sensitive subject with humor at its youth’s expense. Whether parents do this to make themselves feel less awkward, or to address the elephant in the room without really addressing it, jokes at your child’s expense are harmful. An occasional preteen may initiate humor on the subject and that is a pathway to communication that you should follow, but never in a way that mocks or belittles.

**Speaking of belittling, don’t dismiss your child’s puberty process as unimportant.** To your kid, these changes may be overwhelming and stressful, and in the eyes of an early teen, this is all-encompassing. Remember that they don’t have the ability that you have to see past this. What’s right in front of them is everything in their world.

**Even if they seem irrational or overly sensitive, feelings are feelings,** and it’s not for us to invalidate or question them. In fact, validating feelings and empathizing with feelings, even through the wild swings, can help your child feel heard and seen.

**You’re still their parent, and you are still in charge.** While we should validate our child’s feelings, we should not validate meanness or insensitivity to other people—although the middle of an upset is probably not the right time to point this out. Wait until emotions settle before you have that conversation.

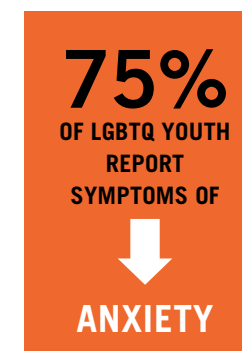
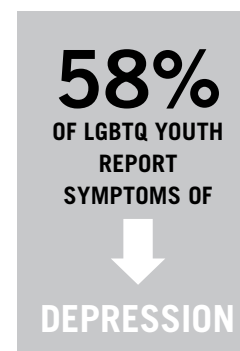
**Teach and model healthy coping skills.** If we are going to ask our children to work through BIG emotions in a thoughtful way, then we have to help them understand what that means. We should ask ourselves how we, as parents, respond when we are sad or angry. Do we yell and slam doors? Do we pour a drink? Or do we instead take time for ourselves to feel the feelings, calm down, recover, and set a new course? Do we take a run or go for a walk outside? Call a friend to talk? We have a role in helping our youth identify what tools they have for coping with these feelings, and in modeling those tools as well.

**Be proactive in your acceptance of your child.** This is the time when our kids are investigating their own identities and also developing attractions to other people. It’s a vulnerable time to feel misunderstood—or to feel as though who you are or who you are attracted to is somehow wrong. We know that our LGBTQ kids experience even more challenges during puberty due to social expectations and norms that directly or indirectly invalidate their identity and experience. As a parent, you have tremendous power to ease your child’s path by sending proactive messages of acceptance. Being proactive means letting your child know that you love them and support them if they do identify as LGBTQ. It means using inclusive language when asking if they have a crush on anyone. It means correcting the grandparents when they ask your daughter if there is a “special boy” at school, and suggesting they use “special person” instead. It means educating your child about gender identity and letting them know that you accept whoever they are in this world.

**While we aren’t all comfortable nor experts in puberty education,** you can provide resources to your child so that they can get the information they need about what they are going through. There are many excellent books out there written for adolescents that are honest and accurate.

**Don’t take it personally.** Conflicts may escalate and you may not feel in good standing with your child at all. Generally, this is normal and our job is to help them through it all, not to take offense.

### LGBTQ YOUTH: MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH RISKS



## BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

The adolescent brain isn't fully developed until about age 25 and that impacts the way our kids think and act. The part of the brain that is still growing is the prefrontal cortex, and it has a big job once it's fully developed. It manages reasoning and decision making, planning, and impulse control. So your middle school child is unlikely to fully embody these qualities, and may need a little help and understanding along the way.

### WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE BRAIN

The part of the brain that is not fully developed is in charge of self-regulation and reasoning. Especially in stressful moments, the brain relies on what fully works, which is the part that knows impulse, emotion, fear and even aggression.

The brain also hasn't quite mastered an understanding of risk and consequence.

The adolescent brain is going through a period of rapid development where it can learn and expand at an impressive rate.

The adolescent brain receives positive affirmation for risk taking.

### OPPORTUNITIES

Some brain scientists suggest that because adolescents act with feeling more than thinking, this emotional rollercoaster actually may help them connect more to other people and develop empathy, as well as steer towards experiences that have positive memories.

These are skills that we can help our kids practice! We can help them think through scenarios and consequences, and explore the potential outcomes of various decisions. These are muscles we can help them flex and grow.

New skills, hobbies, and knowledge are quickly learned.

Risk taking can be a way to learn and grow. Supported risk-taking can actually foster independence and greater decision making skills.

### RISKS

This includes mood swings, emotional responses, impulsive actions and interpersonal conflict.

Our understanding of risk and consequence is what keeps us from taking risks that are too big. Without this judgment, we are more likely to get into trouble, with substances or other risky decisions like getting into a car with a drunk driver.

The brain "learns" substances too, meaning that it responds to substances more intensely than adults. This can lead to swifter and more efficient addiction. In fact, the earlier a person starts using substances, the more likely they are to get addicted.

Substance use carries high risks. The part of the brain that loves the thrill is also reading that thrill as a reward. And we all want more rewards. This is the path to addiction.

## Shifting Relationships

### Parents vs. Peers

Once upon a time, it probably felt like you were the primary person in your kid's life. In middle school, peers grow in importance. It can seem like we no longer matter, but the research tells us otherwise: parent communication, values, time and engagement continue to be essential in our child's lives.

### Changing Friend Circles

Often, our kids have had the same friends from when they were young, and as adults, we have known the same group of parents. But in middle school, friend groups often change. Your kid may be talking about friends you've never heard of with parents you have never met. This can feel as if you are suddenly an outsider in your own child's world. What's more, although this change in friend network is quite common, it can also cause disruptions in academics, emotions, as well as social relationships.

## AS A PARENT IT WAS REALLY HARD TO ENGAGE IN MIDDLE SCHOOL AND TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO STAY ENGAGED.

### MIDDLE SCHOOL PARENT

### Independence Through Conflict

One of the key tasks of the adolescent years is answering the question: Who Am I? Our children are figuring out who they are and in the process, they are pulling away more from their attachment to us. This is all a part of a normal developmental process that will ultimately help form the independence and self-assurance that we hope for in our children as they grow into adults. But in the meantime, that process can disrupt the parent/child relationship that you've previously known, with new levels of conflict and detachment.

### School Changes

Middle school can feel different than elementary school. It is (often) bigger, with more people, and there are greater responsibilities and more independence expected of middle schoolers. There may be more sports, clubs and interests to explore. This can feel overwhelming or exciting, scary or fun, challenging or interesting, or all of those things at the same time. For parents, there can be changes too. They may feel less involved than they were in elementary school or that their access to the school community has been diminished.

# The Load They Carry: Mental Health

## Our Preteens Are Dealing With A Lot

A lot of what they're dealing with is just what we all had to deal with. Like we did, our kids face social pressures of being accepted, academic expectations, the "who am I" question, trying on new identities in the process, decisions on what to wear to the school dance, and all of the other big decisions of adolescence. Take a moment and think back to that time. What did you worry about? What missteps did you make? What turned out okay in the end? Would you have done anything differently? We've all been there. Your middle schooler is there now too.

### But Wait...

There are a few more issues they're facing that we didn't have to deal with in quite the same way. Young people live in the ever-present shadow of social media. They are a generation exposed to an unfathomable amount of constantly accessible, unfiltered information that can be solemn and disturbing. They have active shooter drills in school. Their already sensitive psyches and self-images are now measured against social media's influencers. Some children have immigrated to this country to make their homes in our Tri-County region, at times with unknown traumas and untold stories that shape their everyday lives. Inequities and gaps between the haves and have nots are far wider than a generation ago. Our children have endured a pandemic and the fundamental disruption of life that accompanied COVID-19. Substances are more accessible and more dangerous than ever, with higher levels of THC in cannabis, higher levels of nicotine in vape products, and fentanyl lacing causing overdoses of young people in their communities.

So while as parents and grandparents and caretakers we do remember what it's like to be a preteen, and a lot of that still holds true, there is also a whole new world of pressures, anxieties, and complexities that our young people are dealing with now.

## Risk and Protection

We know what puts young people at risk for substance use, and what can help protect against substance use. But just because someone has experienced any of these risk factors does not mean that they will use substances. Risk factors are an increase in risk, but risk can be balanced out by protective factors and resilience. Here are just a handful of factors.

### A HANDFUL OF RISK FACTORS

- Mental health issues
- Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD/ADHD)
- Trauma
- Bullying
- Friends that use drugs, tobacco or alcohol
- Accessibility of substances
- Family rejection of LGBTQ+ identity
- Experiences or perceptions of racial discrimination
- Family substance use
- Community attitudes and norms

### A HANDFUL OF PROTECTIVE FACTORS

- Parental monitoring
- Positive self-image
- Parental involvement
- Community and school norms and behavioral expectations
- Positive coping and self-regulation skills
- Positive and healthy peer relationships
- School and community connectedness
- Sense of belonging

## Social Influence: Risk and Protection

It's no secret that peer influence is a hallmark of the middle school years. Peer pressure and social norms are incredibly powerful at this stage, and it follows that our kids' social relationships can tip the scales toward risk or protection. Here's what we know:

- Peer influence is one of the most closely related risk factors to substance use.
- Both peer selection and peer norming are important. Selection is how our kids choose to socialize with other kids, and norming is how they shape each other's behaviors over time.
- According to research, peer pressure to smoke cigarettes is actually higher in middle school than in high school.
- Having friends who smoke or drink, or an invitation from a friend to smoke or drink, is a primary contributor to adolescent drinking and smoking behaviors.
- Having a friend who discourages substance use can influence a preteen to not use or even to stop using.
- Having non-substance using peers is associated with not using substances.

### What We Can Do

**Know their friends:** Right when our middle schoolers' friends are changing, it becomes really important to know those friends. Find ways to get to know them, whether that is by saying hello at school pick-up, or inviting them over to the house. Your preteen may not be thrilled about this, and that's okay. You can explain that we all earn our independence, and this is simply one step on the way to doing that.

**Reach out to the parents:** While there are fewer opportunities to meet other parents when our kids are in middle school than there were in elementary school, it's so important to do so. It may feel awkward for you and awkward for your kid, but this is one of the essential protective steps to take on your child's path toward greater independence. Get a phone number and touch base with the parents of new friends, especially before they spend time at one another's homes.

**Ask the tough questions:** It's never easy to ask another adult about their values and behaviors, but there are critical safety questions about parental oversight during hang outs such as alcohol access through an open liquor cabinet, house rules on cannabis use, and about gun storage. If you have ever had to ask another parent about their house rules, it can feel a little awkward. Try being the parent who sets the trend by sharing information first about your own house rules when you host: "I want to let you know that

no substances or guns are accessible to kids in our house." You can also use this booklet as an excuse to have the conversation: "This feels a little strange for me but I was just reading about how important it is to have these conversations..."

**Find ways for kids and parents to spend time together:** This is a smart and fun strategy for fostering protection within your kids' peer group. When you spend time "all together", you are creating an entire social network around these families. Kids get to know other supportive adults who they can turn to, and they also know that there are other adults who have an eye on them.

**I PLEAD, AS PARENTS, TEACHERS, MENTORS,  
TO PAY ATTENTION, TO KNOW WHERE THEY  
ARE, WHO THEY ARE WITH. TO SET BOUNDARIES  
BECAUSE NO MATTER WHAT THEY SAY THEY  
LIKELY DON'T YET HAVE THEM. TO FIGHT FOR  
THEM AND WITH THEM. TO NOT BE NAÏVE AS  
TO THE FRIGHTENING CHOICES THEY HAVE AT  
THEIR FINGERTIPS. TO WATCH FOR THEIR SAD-  
NESS OR PAIN. TO LISTEN TO THE THINGS THEY  
AREN'T SAYING. I COULDN'T STOP THE TRAIN MY  
XANDER FOUND HIMSELF ON BUT IF ONE YOUNG  
LIFE CAN BE CHANGED THEN HIS LEGACY IS  
WORTH EVERYTHING.**

PARENT OF TEEN WHO DIED OF A FENTANYL POISONING

**Help our kids stretch their brains:** Their brains are still working on understanding risk and consequence, decision making and judgment, but the key is that they are working on it, and they will benefit from our help. This means that you have a role in helping them think through scenarios that may happen, before they happen. What would happen if a good friend started vaping? How would you feel? What would happen if your friends tried alcohol at a slumber party? What would happen if you drank alcohol?

**Help your kid seek out opportunities to engage with like-minded peers:** Participation in leadership activities, creative hobbies, sports or volunteering are all opportunities for our kids to meet other youth who are building skills, learning about leadership, participating actively in group dynamics, and giving back. When a group of students are involved in positive youth development together, that peer network is protective. Help your middle schooler identify their interests or try out new interests, starting with groups and clubs offered during lunch and after school.

## Something is Happening in Our Counties

We can count ourselves among the lucky ones to live in this Tri-County region. With beautiful natural surroundings, easy access to outdoor play, and a strong sense of community, it's no wonder that our counties rank among the healthiest in California.

But something is happening in our counties. Over the past ten years, the rate of overdose Emergency Department visits for 10-14 year olds climbed by 17% in Monterey County, 87% in San Benito County and over 100% in Santa Cruz County. In all three counties, the rate of alcohol and drug use reported by 7th graders progressively increased by grade 9 and 11. For our entire Tri-County population, drug-related deaths have significantly increased in the last decade, with fentanyl poisoning and overdoses increasing exponentially.

There's no one answer to what fuels teen substance use, and no one solution. But we do know some of the factors that may contribute to teen use in our counties:

**Access:** It's no secret (at least not to teens) that it's easy to get substances, whether from the local retailer, at a house party, or online. We know that teen substance use is a community issue, and that community access leads to higher rates of use.

**Visibility:** While most of us raise our children with educational messages that deter teen drug use, the messages that teens actually receive are far more confusing. The visibility of substances, through community events, dispensaries, on-demand media streams and social media, advertisements for cannabis delivery, and even adult use, shape the way teens view drugs.

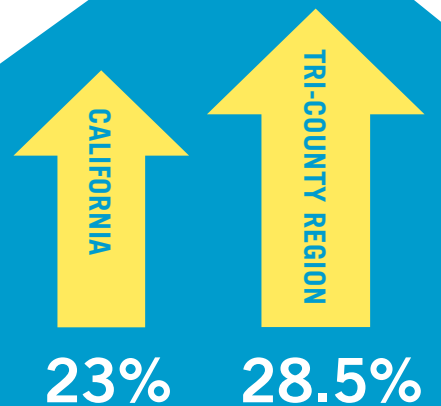
**Underlying Mental And Emotional Challenges:** People of all ages are faced with higher rates of anxiety and depression, and trying to cope with life's challenges. Experiences of trauma, loss, or high degrees of stress, without adequate social and emotional support, are a primary reason why people use substances, including teenagers.

**Community Culture:** We are three counties, connected by our geographic location, our appreciation for our natural surroundings and our community, but unique in our demographics and our cultures. Part of helping our kids navigate substance use is to start talking about how our community cultures may be contributing to norms and behaviors around drug use.

For example, do you live in a community with an open drug culture where alcohol and drugs are highly visible or glorified? Are the presence of dispensaries and 4/20 celebrations potentially sending mixed messages to youth about their own potential use? Or do you live in a community that just doesn't talk about it and believes that overdose deaths happen somewhere else? Does the silence and secrecy contribute to the problem, leaving our kids to quietly figure it all out on their own? Do you live in a community where there is, quite honestly, just nothing to do, leaving our youth bored and searching for stimulation that they find in substances?

Let's start talking about community culture and get curious about how it may be impacting drug use among young people.

PERCENTAGE OF 11TH GRADERS REPORTING SUBSTANCE USE OF ANY TYPE IN THE PAST MONTH:





SUICIDE CAN BE A PAINFUL AND EMOTIONAL TOPIC, BUT TALKING ABOUT SUICIDE WILL NOT CAUSE SOMEONE TO TAKE THEIR LIFE. IN FACT, TALKING ABOUT SUICIDE OPENLY INCREASES HOPE AND DECREASES ANXIETY.

**NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE:  
TEXT OR CALL 988**

## Suicide: Breaking the Silence

Although Let's Start Talking is primarily a resource for substance use prevention, many of the challenges that emerge during this period are related. Preteens experiencing suicidal thoughts or behaviors may resort to drugs and alcohol to escape from emotional or psychological pain. This can lead to an increase in depression, a loss of inhibition, and possible impulsivity that heightens suicide risk. The importance of building relationships, communication, and support networks to help prevent suicide is indeed essential to the Let's Start Talking mission.

Suicide is a complex health issue and can be treated in the same way other health issues are addressed—by understanding the facts, knowing the signs, identifying risk and protective factors, and creating a plan to stay safe and supported. For many youth, considerations of suicide may last for only a limited period. While the topic of suicide can feel overwhelming, suicide can be prevented.

### SOME SIGNS MAY INCLUDE:

- Acting withdrawn, feeling lonely, or expressing thoughts of being a burden
- Talking or writing about suicide
- Changes in sleep pattern or appearance
- Bullying or being bullied
- Joking about suicide
- Humiliation
- Lack of acceptance for gender or sexual identity
- For information on the signs, visit [www.suicideispreventable.org](http://www.suicideispreventable.org)

### RISK FACTORS

- Depression or other mental health issues
- Substance use or change in substance use patterns
- Feeling hopeless
- Previous suicide attempt(s)
- Isolation from friends, peers and family

### PROTECTIVE FACTORS

- Developing social connectedness
- Seeking treatment for mental health issues before they escalate
- Building healthy coping skills and adapting to change
- Getting sleep
- Celebrating rituals and traditions
- Spending time with friends, family and supportive adults
- Engaging in pleasurable activities—hiking, music, meditation, art

**Start talking:** When we see changes in someone's words, actions and feelings, that can give us the opening to start talking and to listen in an open, non-judgmental way.

**Stay calm:** Middle schoolers are sensitive to our reactions and may stop talking to spare our feelings. Some calm responses include: "I'm sorry you're in this much pain. We are in this together," or "Thank you for telling me how you are feeling. You must be really hurting inside. Seeking help can make things better."

**Get support:** There are a number of resources available for parents and caregivers. Talk with your child's pediatrician. Connect with the middle school counselors. If there is someone you are concerned about, please contact the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention ([www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org)) for more information. You can make sure your child knows there is help available by having this free, confidential and 24/7 number on hand—National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: text or call 988.

# SPOTLIGHT ON 2023

## THE 2020'S HAVE BEEN ROUGH.

In March 2020, COVID changed our lives in ways we could not have prepared for. Although school is back in session, the persistent stress and trauma carried by so many of us during COVID continues to shape the way our children see and experience their world.

The Centers for Disease Control recently sounded the alarm on the state of teen mental health. In particular, they noted that adolescent girls are experiencing “record levels “of depression, sadness, suicide risk and violence. This report also confirmed the ongoing distress experienced by our LGBTQ+ teens who are at a higher risk for depression and for attempting suicide.

And then there is all the other big stuff. The past year has rattled our nation with school shootings. As parents, we grieve for the losses and search for the words to explain the inexplicable to our own children. With easy access to information, 24/7 streaming services, and social media as a major influence in their lives and the easy access to information, our kids see and hear almost all of what adults see and hear. Locally, we have faced fires, floods and evacuations. Our kids, like us, feel the instability and vigilance of these times.

We know that mental health and substance use are connected, and as we have all searched for ways to cope, adults and teens alike have turned to alcohol and drugs. But we have also turned to the support of friends and family, to creating structure and rituals, to finding time for play with our children and our friends again. So yes—the 2020's have been rough, and more challenges likely still lie ahead. But as a community, we can work to rebuild safety and stability for our kids. That is the work before us now.

**IT MAY SEEM EASIER TO GET HIGH OR ESCAPE STRESS BY SMOKING. IT MAKES SENSE. PEOPLE SEE THIS AS SOMETHING THAT THEY CAN CONTROL, A DECISION THEY CAN MAKE, IN A TIME FULL OF WHACK UNCERTAINTIES.**

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

# Parenting to Support Our Middle Schoolers

All of this may feel like we are heading into an inevitable storm with dangers lurking everywhere! This isn't the case though. We certainly are heading into a period of rapid development and likely emotional turbulence, and there's bound to be some tough days and perhaps even tears in store for both kid and parent. But the most compelling shelter from the storm, supported by the research and by the experience of parents just like you who have made it through, is that we can start easing the path for our youth with a focus on relationship and communication, coupled with teaching our children boundaries, resilience and coping. We know there is no one right way to parent, and the choices any one of us makes about how to raise our kids are our own. The following pages offer some recommendations by professionals who have dedicated their research to figuring out how we can do right by our preteens, teens and our families.

## Parents Matter

It may seem like what you think no longer matters, especially compared to your child's peers. What we know, however is that this just isn't true. While your preteen's peer network and their acceptance is more important than ever, parents can still have the greatest impact. Here are a few ways:

**Role modeling:** We have been communicating with our kids about substance use and mental health since they were young, often without even realizing it. Our own actions and attitudes have told them a story. Now may be the time to reflect upon what you have already communicated about coping with stressors and about alcohol and drug use. Are these the messages that you wanted to communicate? If they are, then keep reinforcing those messages through conversations that your preteen is now old enough to have. If you suspect your kid is going by a story that isn't the one you want for them, then now is the time to start writing a different one.

**Monitoring:** This refers to the rules we set for our kids, how we know where they are and what they're up to, and how we respond when our kids break the rules. When parents are aware of their kids' activities, and are communicating that awareness to their preteens, they are less likely to use substances. Monitoring may look different in each family. It could mean knowing where

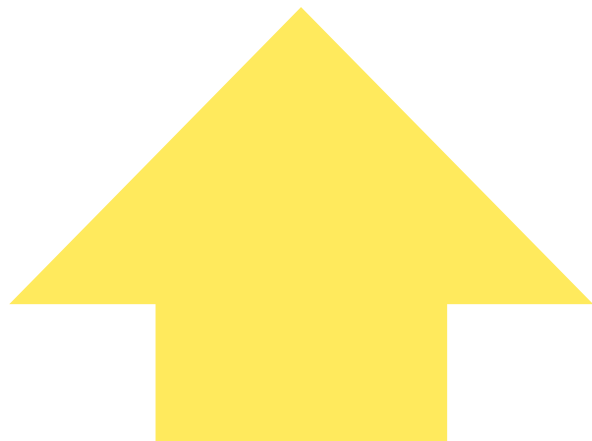
and when your child is going, having them call when they arrive at or leave a place, or getting to know their friends' parents. Each family will decide for themselves how and to what extent monitoring takes place, but the key ingredients are clear rules, accountability, and communication.

**Involvement:** Remember how your child's eyes would light up when you agreed to play super heroes with them or read them their favorite book while they got to sit on your lap? While the "play" certainly looks different now, and the response may not be as enthusiastic as it once was, that involvement and engagement is still deeply important. Even if your preteen is sending you messages that say they don't want anything to do with you (a closed bedroom door, a roll of the eyes when we ask "how was your day?", or a straightforward "stay out of my life!"), the reality is that our preteens still crave knowing that we care. They still make sense of the world through their attachment to us.

**It may look different:** As we talk about the importance of parental presence, we also acknowledge the reality of diverse lived experiences for families living in our Tri-County region. Many parents and caregivers work full-time, hold multiple jobs or care for aging or sick family members. We have community members who are faced with food insecurity, rent that can't be paid this month, or who live trauma-impacted lives. Adult monitoring and involvement is essential, but it looks different for different households. Some families may rely on neighbors or grandparents to support raising their kids. Some families may seek support from school programs. We don't necessarily have the ability to be present in the ways we always want, but we can strive to build community around our kids to help keep them safe.

## TRY NOT TO TAKE IT PERSONALLY. GIVE YOUR KID SOME BREATHING SPACE. BE CLEAR YOUR LOVE IS UNCONDITIONAL. AND GET AND STAY CONNECTED.

TIPS FROM A TEEN



### TRY ON SOME OF THESE IDEAS:

- Attend parent meetings and events at the middle school—and let your child know that you are going.
- Notice when they are having a tough day, without trying to fix it or demanding to know why. Offer something like, "It seems like it's been a tough day, and I'm sorry. I'm here if you want to talk or just have some ice cream quietly together."
- Create family rituals and communicate that they are important, such as family mealtimes.
- If your child has a close circle of friends, create opportunities for other preteens and their parents to have fun together.
- Support and show interest in your child as they find their own interests, whether that is a sport or an artistic talent or volunteering.
- Don't be discouraged if they seem to ignore you. They may be annoyed by you, but they also may have heard that you care, which is a feeling that will last far longer than the annoyance.
- Know your kids' friends and their parents. With good friends, try creating a parent pact that establishes parenting values and rules across families. If your child is spending time with a new friend, require that you touch base with that friend's parent to introduce yourself.
- Allow your child independent time with friends but require regular check-ins.
- If your child spends time with friends away from adult supervision, establish this rule: you need to know where, when, and with whom. If any one of these facts change at any time, you get notified.
- Ensure that there is accountability if the rules are broken. Your child is figuring out independence and that's an important task for them. It is one that parents get to support by lending their trust. But if trust is broken, then independence gets scaled back.
- Continue to learn. You can use the resources offered by middle schools and high schools and community organizations or attend discussions or simply talk with other parents to remain curious about the parenting process and how we can best support our preteens.

## Bonding With Boundaries

As our kids get older, a whole new way of relating to one another grows. Suddenly, they can have interesting conversations, they can take on new responsibilities, and in some ways they may start to seem like . . . well, like a friend. At the same time, many of the impulses of early adolescence are pulling them away from us. This can feel at times, for parents, like a deep loss. What happened to my baby who wanted to spend time with me? In this situation, it's really easy to go a route that keeps our kids close, which is the way of friendship. This can feel like a win! You may find your preteen to be more honest, communicative, and kinder to you at first.

But here's the problem: in order to keep the jovial feelings of friendship going, we also have to maintain the fun and the lack of conflict, and this means that we have to let go of rules, expectations, and accountability. In the long run, research clearly shows that these are the structures that set kids up for successful adulthoods and for long term positive attachment to their parents. When we look at parenting styles, those deemed most successful in supporting preteens through the challenges of this developmental period are the ones that exhibit warmth, positive regard, and trust, but that also establish clear boundaries and consequences. So how do we maintain that balance?

### TRY THESE IDEAS:

#### Hear Them Out

Listen when your preteen or teen asks permission to do something, even if your first impulse is "no." When we let our kids know that we will always hear their case, it gives them the opportunity to think through the issues and to have a conversation with you. Your answer may still be "no" but there is now space to talk about alternatives.

#### Explain the Rules

Explain why you have certain rules. Because you care. Because your job as a parent is to make sure your kid explores independence safely. Because you are concerned about the potential consequences without the rules.

## Communication

It's all about communication, and we've been talking about this one all along. Here are some more ideas to try:

**Talk early and often:** Start talking about decision making and values early on and at an appropriate developmental level, and make it an ongoing conversation. If you haven't started yet, start now.

**And listen:** Ask questions and create space for your child's voice, rather than lecturing. "So what do you think about what happened at school last week?"

**Take advantage of times for conversations:** Car rides offer the potential for high quality time together. Your child can't get away, but also doesn't have to look at you.

Watching television together can provide teachable moments and conversation starters. "So what did you think about the party scene? Did that look realistic to you?"

Local occurrences, even if they are tragic, are opportunities for discussion. Our kids are seeing them, feeling them, and need to be guided through them.

**Communicate your values:** Don't assume they know what you think and believe. Research shows that parental attitudes towards substances have an impact on whether or not our kids use substances. For example, do you believe that drinking and using cannabis in moderation is perfectly fine once someone is of legal age and knows how to moderate their use? Are you someone who believes that alcohol or other legal drug use should be saved for social times? Do you think that mind-altering substances should not be used at all? Whatever your belief is, identify it and share it.

You can have a Zero Tolerance Policy and also let your middle schooler know that you will be there to help them if they break that policy. Sound like a contradiction? When it seems like the right time for your family, which may be now for some families and not until 8th grade or later for others, try something like: "In this household, it is not okay to use substances when you're underage. But I want you to know that this is our value because we care first and foremost about your safety and your health. So if you ever break this rule and you need our help to get you out of a tricky situation, then I need you to know that we will support you and help you and love you through that."

**Take a moment:** Before communicating about a difficult situation, take a moment to recognize and convey the right emotion. Quite often, as parents, we show up angry when the real feelings are fear, worry, disappointment, protectiveness and love. Your child will respond better to your real emotions than the anger.

## Gatherings

Parties are generally not a huge issue in middle school, but it's not too soon to start talking about safety during peer gatherings when adults may not be present.

**Be cautious with sleepovers:** Do you know and trust the parents? Will they be home? Do the parents share your rules on substance use?

**Exit plan:** Talk to your preteen about having an "exit plan." If they ever get into a situation that feels unsafe with substances, what is their plan? Can you be counted on in an emergency to help your child exit safely without anger? Will your family create a safe word or code that lets you know when your preteen needs to be removed from an unsafe or uncomfortable situation?

**Educate your middle schooler:** About the Good Samaritan Law and about warning signs of alcohol poisoning or drug overdose. If your child calls an ambulance or law enforcement to protect someone's health or their life, then they receive legal protection. Let your kids know that they have a moral duty to do what is right to protect other people in dangerous situations.

## It Takes a Village

As we grapple with the balance between monitoring our kids and allowing them to explore independence, it really does take a village to support our children as they move through their preteens and into their teens. We know that adults can help keep children safe, and that means that helping our kids navigate substance use through middle and high school years requires a community of concerned and supportive adults. Try reaching out to the parents of your child's friends, or attending parent meetings or workshops at school to create a network.

## TO A MIDDLE SCHOOLER, FROM A TEEN WHO HAS BEEN THERE,

MIDDLE SCHOOL IS A BIG LEARNING EXPERIENCE. YOU LEARN ADVANCED MATH, HOW THE GENES IN OUR BODIES MAKE US UNIQUE, AND HOW WORLD WAR II IMPACTED OUR MODERN WORLD. MIDDLE SCHOOL ALSO COMES WITH THE MEAN GIRLS, THE BOYS WHO WILL MESS WITH YOU AND THE KIDS WHO ARE "LEARNING" NEW THINGS BUT IN ALL THE WRONG WAYS. I WAS INTRODUCED TO VAPING IN 7TH GRADE BECAUSE MY OLDER FRIENDS WERE DOING IT. I WANTED TO TRY IT OUT AND BE JUST LIKE THEM. I THOUGHT THEY'D THINK I WAS COOLER. THAT LED TO OFFERS OF ALCOHOL AND MARIJUANA SO THEY COULD SEE WHAT I WAS LIKE INTOXICATED. YOU MAY THINK PEER PRESSURE IS YOUR PEERS BEGGING YOU TO TAKE A HIT OR A SIP BUT IT'S MUCH MORE COMPLICATED THAN THAT. YOU FEEL OBLIGATED TO DO SOMETHING BECAUSE OTHERS AROUND YOU ARE AND YOU DON'T WANT TO BE "LAME." BUT YOU ARE NOT LAME FOR TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF AND YOU WILL HAVE FRIENDS WHO WILL RESPECT YOU MORE FOR DOING YOUR OWN THING. YOUR HEALTH AND EDUCATION IS SO MUCH MORE IMPORTANT THAN TRYING TO CHASE COOL BY TAKING A SIP OR A HIT. IN THE END, THAT ISN'T WHAT COOL IS.

TALKING TO YOUR PARENTS ABOUT YOUR MENTAL HEALTH CAN BE UNCOMFORTABLE. YOU FEEL THEY WILL BRUSH IT OFF AND COME UP WITH EXCUSES. BUT OFTEN, YOUR PARENTS ARE THE ONLY ONES WHO WILL TRULY UNDERSTAND YOU. IF YOU CANNOT TALK WITH YOUR PARENTS, THEN YOU CAN TALK TO A SCHOOL COUNSELOR, OR FIND SUPPORT GROUPS OR TALK TO A TRUSTED FRIEND. BUT WHEN YOU HAVE PARENTS WHO YOU KNOW LOVE YOU, NOTHING BEATS THEIR COMFORT, EVEN IF TALKING TO THEM CAN FEEL SCARY SOMETIMES.

SINCERELY,

**A California High School Student**

# SPOTLIGHT ON RESILIENCE

In case it wasn't clear, there really is no way to avoid some hardships in the coming years. Challenges are inevitable, but the way that our kids deal with those challenges can actually protect them and build character. This is resilience: the ability to thrive and grow in good times and to bounce back in hard times. We can think of resilience like a rubber band. It can be stretched and stretched but still bounce back to its original shape. Of course, too much stretching, and eventually our rubber band may snap. But in general, we can put a rubber band through a great deal and still call it a rubber band.

Importantly, resilience is something we can develop and something that we can learn. Luckily for us, there's also a good deal of research about how we can help our kids develop resilience.

## THE SEVEN C'S

The Seven C's are a framework developed by the American Academy of Pediatrics, which guides us in understanding the key traits to foster for resilience.

**Competence:** Youth need the opportunity to develop skills to manage their lives, as well as to pursue what interests them. As parents, we can support their growing independence by giving them space to problem solve, work out conflict, or follow through on their responsibilities. Recognize and point out their individual strengths, especially where they differ from siblings or friends.

**Confidence:** When we believe in ourselves, we are more likely to take chances and quicker to bounce back from failure. We can help our children develop confidence by providing opportunities to be successful and by authentically noticing when they are trying hard, building skills, and growing.

**Connection:** Children develop resilience when there is at least one adult (or more!) who loves them unconditionally. Stable and unwavering love and care from an adult, is a foundation for resilience, and other relationships are important too, particularly teachers, counselors, or mentors from out-of-school programs. Peer connections, through friends or teammates, also contribute to a sense of feeling connected and supported.

**Character:** This is our children's sense of right and wrong, how they treat others, and their integrity. The best way to teach this is to model it and to talk about it. Daily life presents all sorts of opportunities to do both!

**Contribution:** Youth, like adults, thrive when they are making meaningful

contributions. Although preteens and teens get a bad rap for being egocentric, and it's true that in human development they have the starring role in their own stories, they are, in fact, deeply hardwired to connect and give to others. Help your child find the right opportunity to do this, whether it is through volunteering, or joining a team, or even through contributions at home.

**Control:** As adults, we all want a sense of control over our own lives, as this provides us with a sense of stability and confidence to manage whatever comes our way. Our children are developing this need, and realizing that the more control they have over their own decisions and actions, the more they will be able to cope with outcomes. We can help them by providing choices and discussing potential outcomes, and then letting them make the decision in appropriate situations.

**Coping:** This last C is big—so big—that we've that we've included a whole other section on it. For now, let's say that coping is our ability to handle stress and what we do to manage our feelings in hard situations.

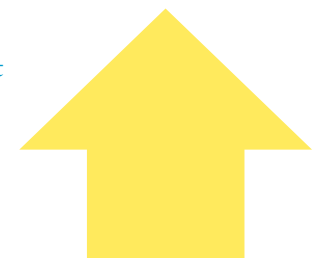
**49%** OF TRI-COUNTY 7TH GRADERS  **FEEL VERY CONNECTED TO THEIR SCHOOL**

**32%** OF TRI-COUNTY 7TH GRADERS  **FEEL THAT THEY HAVE A CARING RELATIONSHIP WITH AN ADULT AT SCHOOL**

**48%** OF TRI-COUNTY 7TH GRADERS  **FEEL THAT THERE ARE HIGH EXPECTATIONS OF THEM AT THEIR SCHOOL**

## GAPS IN OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESILIENCE BUILDING

Local data from the California Healthy Kids Survey point to how our teens feel connected and supported, and this, in turn, impacts how they develop resilience.



## Coping

Coping is our way of managing the tough stuff. We may cope in ways that positively impact our health and wellbeing, or we may cope in ways that ultimately erode our health and wellbeing. Here's one way to think of it: when we positively cope, we are nourishing ourselves. When we seek negative coping mechanisms, we are numbing ourselves. Because mental health issues are a primary driver of numbing through substance misuse, and because our young people are experiencing substantial physical, emotional and social changes during this stage, coping skills are especially important for them to develop and practice.

### Teaching Our Preteens To Cope Positively

Like most other things, teaching our preteens and teens to practice positive coping skills starts with us.

#### CONSIDER THESE:

- How do I respond when I am stressed?
- What have my children seen me do to relax and recover when I am faced with adversity?
- What have I already taught my child and what have they learned in school?
- Have I validated challenges with mental health and encouraged openness in sharing emotions?
- Have I conveyed an open and positive attitude about seeking support from adults when experiencing stress?

Let's take a moment to remember that healthy coping is hard. This has been the most challenging of years that we have collectively experienced: COVID safety concerns, distance learning, trying to balance work and parenting, worrying about our children's social development and learning process, a national reckoning with racial injustices, and a highly polarized political and cultural landscape. We have all been pressed to cope. Some of us have thrown up our hands at times in realization that we are, in fact, not coping very well. Right? Imagine being 12 years old and trying to cope. It's hard.

So where do we start? Well, we might start with ourselves again. We might figure out the strategies that help us positively cope and ensure that our children are watching us do the work and figure it out (for help doing this work, go to [numbornourish.org](http://numbornourish.org)). We might also figure it out with them, a joint venture that makes this an act of family resilience rather than a focus solely on your child. Here are some ideas for doing this together:

- Ask your child to make a list of all the things that make them feel good when they are feeling sad or stressed. You make your own list. Share them with each other (only the age-appropriate ones!).
- Work with your middle schooler to brainstorm "healthy" ways of coping and "unhealthy" ways of coping.
- Have a code word when either of you senses that the other needs a "time out" to go practice your coping skills.
- Post healthy coping practices on sticky notes around the house, such as reminders to Breathe on the bathroom mirror or Go for a Walk on the television remote.
- Learn mindfulness practices with your middle schooler, or encourage them to engage in any number of youth mindfulness programs in our area.
- Reach out to professionals for support. Child and adolescent therapists are really, really good at helping youth develop positive coping mechanisms.
- Teach your child about the science behind what substances do to their brains and encourage engagement in the sober activities that stimulate those same parts of our brain.

### Coping With Substances

Substances confuse the natural processes that our brains have for controlling mood, reward, pain levels, and feelings of love and connection. So depending on the type of substance used, our brains and bodies may feel extreme levels of joy, pleasure, relaxation and bonding; all of which are pretty enticing. The problem is that with repeated use, substances alter the communication between the messengers in our brain not only when a person is high, but also when they are not under the influence, driving them to use again in search of those good feelings. Over time, the circuits in the brain that control feelings like reward actually adjust to the drug, making it harder to feel positive feelings of joy without substances. This is why a person misusing drugs may stop finding pleasure in things that once brought them great joy.

Remember that coping skills take practice, and that we all engage in less-than-healthy coping at one point or another. But when we do this work with our children (and with ourselves!), we have a better chance that "unhealthy" coping takes the form of a screaming match with a little sister, and not a reliance on substances.

The information available on specific substances is endless, and often overwhelming. Sometimes as parents we feel like we have to know it all in order to know what our preteens are up against, or to know what to look out for in our child's behavior. But we don't have to know it all.

# Uppers, Downers, All Arounders

Your child may learn about substances in school during their middle school years, but you may want to start the conversation now, if you haven't already. So we've also included some tips on how to do that, and the basic information that is important for your new middle schooler to know. Then we will take a closer look at some of the more commonly used substances.

## Talking to Your Middle Schooler

### How To Have the Conversations

**You don't need to be an expert.** It helps to know a thing or two, but your real leverage as a parent is in the relationship you form and the openness you create to talk at all.

**It's not actually "the" conversation.** One conversation carries too much pressure. These should be many conversations, comments and questions over time that convey information and values along the way.

**Capitalize on what's already happening.** Anytime substances are in the media, current events, or local occurrences, it is an opportunity to talk. These moments create open doors to process and digest information and feelings, and although they can be hard, they are important moments to utilize.

**You don't need an excuse.** At the end of the day, you are the adult in your kid's life and that kid is a middle schooler. That's about the best excuse you will ever need. "Now that you're starting 6th/7th/8th grade, I wanted to talk about some things."

**Lose the formality.** Asking your child to talk at the dining room table probably isn't going to set the most comfortable mood. It can be awkward and intense for both you and your child. Instead, try chatting while you're out at the market together, or going for a walk, or a favorite of many parents, in the car. Talking in the car gives your child the opportunity to stare out the window or fidget with the radio, and that actually can make them feel more comfortable.

**Start with questions.** Lectures don't leave much room for conversation. Questions or open ended statements can open up a window into your preadolescent's world. How are you feeling about . . . ? What have you heard about . . . ? Help me understand . . . Why do you think . . . ?

**Listen first.** Oh, how hard it is to just listen. But it's key to opening up communication with our children. It will take intention to squash whatever reactions and responses you immediately have, but try it out. Try just listening. Then try using those questions we just talked about.

**You may have to teach a little bit.** You might discover, after learning what they already know, that you have to teach them the basics. You can use the information that we've already discussed, you can ask your them to read that page and then talk with you about it, or you can set them down in front of a website that you've pre-approved.

**Remember the load they are carrying.** The basics of drugs are part of a larger conversation about mental health, social influence, coping, and asking for support. Knowing the fact that "drugs are bad for you" is not prevention on its own.

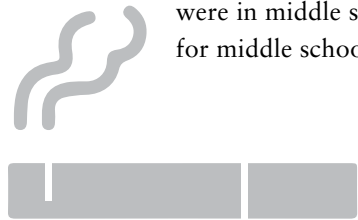
**BETWEEN THE NEWS, SOCIAL MEDIA AND WHAT KIDS EXPERIENCE EVERY DAY ON AND OFF CAMPUS, THEY ARE EXPOSED TO SO MUCH MORE THAN I EVER WAS. MORE OFTEN THAN NOT, I FEEL UNPREPARED TO HAVE THESE CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS AT SUCH YOUNG AGES, BUT I KNOW THAT IF I DON'T, I AM ONLY HURTING THEM.**

LOCAL PARENT



## What to Know

We sometimes assume that by the time our children are teens, they know it all—and at a certain point that may be true. But in general, that is not the case for most 6th graders. Most often, our kids don't even know the basics, leaving them in a new world filled with increased exposure yet without the critical information needed to make decisions. As parents, we need to educate ourselves as well, because substances do not look like they did when we were in middle school. So let's look at some of those basics that are useful for middle school, written as if for your preteen.



## WHAT IS A DRUG?

A DRUG IS ANY SUBSTANCE (NOT FOOD OR WATER!) THAT IMPACTS THE BODY PHYSICALLY AND/OR PSYCHOLOGICALLY WHEN IT IS TAKEN INTO THE BODY. IT CAN IMPACT HOW YOUR BRAIN WORKS, HOW YOU THINK OR FEEL AND BEHAVE, AND HOW YOUR SENSES WORK (REMEMBER THE 5 SENSES? SIGHT, HEARING, TASTE, TOUCH, SMELL)



### What Is The Difference Between Illicit Drugs, Controlled Substances, Prescription Medications, and Over-The-Counter Drugs?

#### Are Drugs Illegal?

Some drugs are allowed to be used in certain circumstances, and other drugs are sometimes or always illegal. This can depend on how old someone is, if they are sick or healthy, or how they got the drug in the first place. Say more about that . . .

#### To Keep It Simple, Let's Talk About the Following Categories:

**Legal for anyone:** Think about the morning cup of coffee or tea that your

adult may drink in the morning, or even the chocolate you got at Halloween. These contain caffeine, and caffeine is a drug, because it impacts our body and mind. Most of us feel more awake or energized with caffeine.

**Legal for adults:** Some drugs are legal for adults, but illegal for kids. In California, these include alcohol, tobacco, cannabis (marijuana), and in some localities, psychedelics. \*Important\* Just because a drug is legal, does not mean it is good for you. It just means that we let adults make the decision about whether or not to use it and how much to use.

**Prescription:** If you've ever gotten a prescription medication from a doctor, you know about these. Prescription drugs are really strong, so they are regulated and only given out for specific health issues. They are only legal to take in exactly the way the doctor has prescribed—and only to the person who received the prescription—in order to get them healthy. But prescription drugs can be abused if they are used more or differently than the doctor instructed, or used illegally if they are used by someone who did not receive the prescription. Both of these situations are dangerous for the person taking the drugs.

**Over-the-counter:** These are drugs that you can easily buy at the pharmacy for common health conditions like headaches or allergies. Think about Tylenol or Benadryl for example. Sometimes you have to be a certain age to buy specific over-the-counter drugs, and just like prescription drugs, they have to be taken exactly like the directions say, or else they can be dangerous.

**Illegal drugs:** These drugs—also called “illicit substances”—are always off limits and always really dangerous, even in smaller quantities. These are drugs like cocaine and heroin, for example.

#### What Are Different Ways People Use Drugs and Why Does It Matter?

Drugs can get in the body in various ways. They can be taken as a pill, eaten or consumed in beverage form, injected through a needle into the body, snorted up the nose, inhaled, smoked through a cigarette or a vape pen, and more. The way a drug is taken is important because it can impact how fast and how strong it affects the body, and it can also create additional health risks, like the risk of getting HIV or Hepatitis C through a needle.

#### What's in a Vape?

It depends. Vape pens, also called e-cigarettes, can be used to take in tobacco, cannabis (marijuana), or a combination of both. They also may contain something called e-juice, which is a liquid filled with all sorts of chemicals that can do damage to your body, including really scary stuff like antifreeze.



### What's the Big Deal?

So what's the big deal anyway? Well, the big deal is that drugs can have both short term and long lasting negative consequences on your body, your mind, your relationships, and your future. Some of the consequences include:

- Changing the way your brain grows
- Decreasing your ability to pay attention or focus
- Risky behaviors that can lead to injury or death
- Overdose
- Alcohol poisoning
- Lowering of grades
- Lacking energy
- Acting out of character
- Negatively impacting relationships with friends and family
- Lung disease
- Heart disease

Another big deal is that drugs are powerful—powerful enough that they can make us do them again even if we wish we wouldn't. This is called addiction, and it happens when our bodies get used to a substance and then need it. Someone who is addicted to a substance is more likely to have severe health consequences, damage important relationships in their life, ignore important responsibilities, and lose sight of the things that once brought them joy. We also know that young people become addicted much more easily than adults, and the younger a person starts using, the more likely they are to get addicted.

A really big deal about illicit drugs is that we don't know for sure what is in them. Someone may think they know what they are taking, but it can be mixed with another drug, which means that there's another substance hidden inside. This can be really dangerous. Recently, a drug called fentanyl has been known to be mixed with or replace other types of drugs. It is a synthetic opioid that is 50 to 100 times as potent as morphine and can cause poisoning and death. It is difficult to detect as you cannot see it or smell it. In recent years, right here in Santa Cruz, Monterey and San Benito counties, many teens and young adults have died because of fentanyl poisoning.

### How Do I Get More Information or Support?

A good way to get more information or support is to talk to trusted adults. You can let your kids know that a trusted adult may be a parent or the parent of a friend, a doctor, or it may be a teacher or counselor at school, or a sports coach. Another good way to get information is by using accurate websites. We know that there is a lot of misinformation online, so we've included a couple of good resources that you can trust.

For a comprehensive guide to various substances, check out:

- [www.drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org)
- [teens.drugabuse.gov](http://teens.drugabuse.gov)

### Focusing on Substances

**Uppers, or Stimulants**, stimulate the body's central nervous system, increasing a person's energy, heart rate, and blood pressure. Poor sleep and poor appetite are frequent effects, and the user may feel a sense of euphoria, confidence, and focus.

Examples: Cocaine, methamphetamines, nicotine, and certain party drugs like ecstasy as well as medications that were not prescribed to the user such as Adderall or Ritalin for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

**Downers, or Depressants**, slow down the body's central nervous system, impacting brain function, sleep, coordination, memory and judgment, and slowing down breathing and pulse.

Examples: Alcohol, Xanax, heroin, antihistamines, Ativan, and opioids like Vicodin, Oxycontin, and fentanyl

**All Arounders** can act as uppers or downers, but their main effect is to distort perception of reality, impair judgment and reasoning, and cause hallucinations. Examples: Cannabis, mushrooms, LSD.

**REMEMBER:** SUBSTANCES CAN BE MIXED TOGETHER WITHOUT US KNOWING, LEADING TO DANGEROUS AND EVEN FATAL CONSEQUENCES.

# SPOTLIGHT ON VAPING

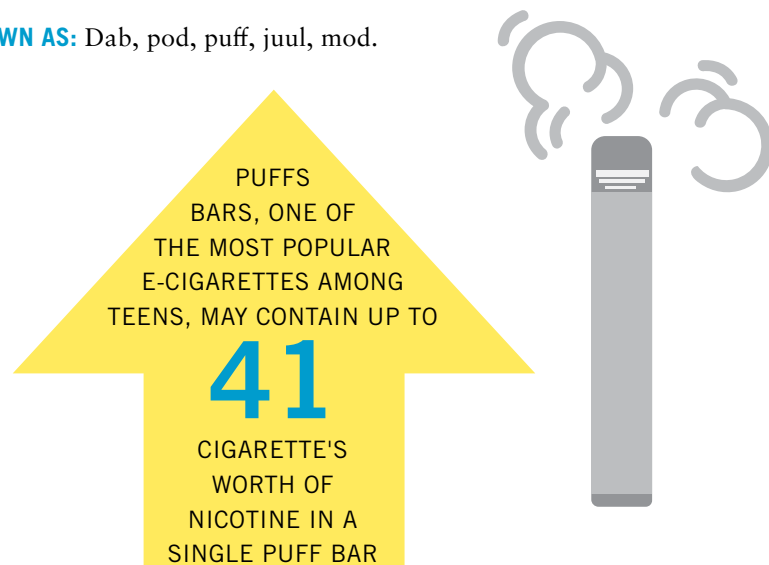
**WHAT IS IT?** Vaping is inhaling the aerosol created by a vaping device. These devices, also called “e-cigarettes” or electronic smoking devices, traditionally have been used for inhaling a liquid concentration of nicotine, flavorings, and various other chemicals. Now they are also used for consuming cannabis. In both cases, the vape device has a cartridge that carries liquid, and when that liquid is heated up and turned into vapor, the person using the device inhales the substance.

**WHY DO YOUTH USE IT?** Vape devices are small and odorless, making them easy to hide. They can sometimes look like a computer part and can be carried easily in a pocket or backpack without being noticed. This allows youth to get the desired feelings from nicotine or cannabis in a social or school environment without being easily detected.

**WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?** We are still learning about the health effects of using vape devices. However we do know about the negative impacts of psychoactive ingredients in nicotine and cannabis, and we also know that when vaping, people are far less aware of how much of a substance they are using. For example, a person knows when they have consumed 1 cigarette. But once a person has consumed a single JUUL pod, they have in fact consumed 41 cigarette's worth of nicotine, which is a big deal for such a highly addictive substance.

**KNOW THE SIGNS:** It can be hard to recognize the signs of vaping. Dry mouth, nose and throat are common side effects. The appearance of unusual devices with detachable parts are another clue.

**ALSO KNOWN AS:** Dab, pod, puff, juul, mod.



# SPOTLIGHT ON ALCOHOL

**WHAT IS IT?** Beer, wine, and liquor are all downers, which can seem counter-intuitive since a lot of people drink alcohol to “loosen up” and have more fun. Alcohol impairs our body’s functions by slowing down our brain, our body coordination, our heart rate and breathing, our decision making ability, and our reaction time.

**WHY DO PRETEENS USE IT?** Alcohol is easy to get, easy to consume, and may seem socially acceptable due to its widespread use. It lets the user unwind, relaxes inhibitions, and it can feel, well, fun (at first).

**WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?** The big deal is that preteens/teens tend to use alcohol to get drunk, and our bodies don’t actually like being drunk at all. That initial relaxing buzz can quickly turn into over-consumption, leading to a long list of problematic outcomes.

**Vomiting and Hangovers:** Hangovers are our bodies’ very efficient way of telling us that we have done something unkind to ourselves. Vomiting is the body’s defense mechanism against substances that are toxic, whether it’s food poisoning, accidentally consuming a toxic plant, or drinking too much alcohol. The body reads this as a poison, and a hangover is its very loud protest.

**Decision-Making:** Alcohol also has a habit of really messing with good judgment. A youth who otherwise makes healthy decisions will be more inclined to make some unhealthy moves, like getting in a car with someone who has been drinking, having unsafe sex, and drinking even more alcohol.

**Poisoning:** Heavy drinking can lead to alcohol poisoning, which is a life threatening condition where the body slows down so much that body temperature drops, breathing and heart rate slows, and a person loses consciousness. A person with alcohol poisoning needs immediate medical attention. But if that person is surrounded by other people whose drinking has impaired their judgment, who calls 911?

**Addiction:** The adolescent brain learns to like alcohol fast, and it develops a tolerance to it that requires higher and higher levels of consumption in order to get the buzz. When this is paired with the fact that the preteen/teen brain feels the euphoria of alcohol at a greater intensity, it’s a downward spiral into addiction.

**KNOW THE SIGNS:** Slurred speech, lack of coordination, hangover symptoms.

**ALSO KNOWN AS:** Handle, bottle, beverage, juice, drinks.



# SPOTLIGHT ON CANNABIS

**WHAT IS IT?** Cannabis refers to all products containing THC that users smoke, vape, otherwise inhale, eat and drink. But cannabis is no longer the same drug from generations before. The levels of THC have increased, and the ways that youth use cannabis have altered to deliver higher and more concentrated doses of the drug. Smoked, brewed as a tea, vaped, eaten, and dabbed, cannabis' chemical composition and usages are now far more varied.

**WHY DO ADOLESCENTS USE IT?** Generally youth use cannabis to relax or get silly. It's perceived as socially acceptable and not as dangerous as other drugs; a perception that increased with legalization.

**WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?** The view of cannabis as "natural" has often been equated with "safe", leading generations of people to wonder, "what's the harm?" **But today's cannabis, with higher levels of THC, varied methods of use, and forms that no longer even resemble a plant come with substantial negative short-term and long-term impacts on health.** The research also indicates that age matters: youth who use cannabis regularly experience greater and longer lasting negative impacts on the brain compared with people who started smoking as adults. Let's take a look at what the research says about the risks:

**Cognitive Impairment:** Consistent cannabis use has been associated with a decline in brain function such as memory, executive functioning, and processing.

**Addiction:** Starting to use cannabis during the adolescent years can cause an increased risk of physical dependence and addiction.

**Other Drug Use:** Frequent use of cannabis by adolescents showed a 130% greater likelihood of misusing opioids. Early initiation of cannabis is a main predictor of Opioid Use Disorder.

**Mental Health:** Cannabis use has been linked to increased mental illness, including depression, anxiety, and psychosis among youth.

**Suicide:** Preteens who use cannabis are more likely to make suicide attempts.

**Poor Academic Performance:** Youth who use cannabis regularly are more likely to have school absences and drop out from school.

**Lack of Motivation:** Regular cannabis users are more likely to experience amotivational disorder, meaning that they lack the will to engage in the activities that benefit them in life.

**Diminished Life Satisfaction And Achievement:** Cannabis users are at higher risk of struggling in life, including lower income, greater need for socioeconomic assistance, unemployment, engaging in criminal behavior, and lower self-rated satisfaction with life.

**Poisonings:** Edible cannabis products like gummies and candies have increased the risk of unintentional overdose, as well as accidental ingestion by children and adolescents.

**Motor Vehicle Safety And Accidents:** Cannabis use has caused an increased risk for motor vehicle accidents.

**KNOW THE SIGNS:** Slowed thinking and response time, impaired coordination, paranoia, glassy eyes, increased appetite, inappropriate laughter, anxiety, drop in grades or disinterest in previously enjoyed activities, more tired and less motivated, and change in friend group.

**ALSO KNOWN AS:** Bush, bud, tree, kush, weed, skunk, ganja, devil's lettuce, jazz tobacco, loud, carts, K2/Spice.

**THE TRANSITION FROM VAPING NICOTINE TO DABBING (VAPING) CANNABIS CONCENTRATE IS THE FASTEST CHANGE IN YOUTH DRUG CULTURE I HAVE SEEN IN MY ENTIRE CAREER. THESE YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE NO IDEA ABOUT HOW POWERFUL AND DANGEROUS CANNABIS CONCENTRATE CAN BE.**

**DON CARNEY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, YOUTH TRANSFORMING JUSTICE**

## DEAR PARENTS, FROM A TEEN WHO HAS BEEN THERE,

AFTER EXPERIENCING MIDDLE SCHOOL FIRST HAND, I UNDERSTAND THE STRUGGLES AND IMPORTANCE OF PARENTS AT THIS TIME OF A CHILD'S ADOLESCENCE. A FEW YEARS AGO I WAS IN THE SAME SITUATION AS YOUR CHILDREN WHICH IS WHY I CAN RELATE TO AND UNDERSTAND MIDDLE SCHOOLERS WELL.

FROM MY TIME IN MIDDLE SCHOOL ONE OF THE MOST HELPFUL THINGS A PARENT CAN DO IS BEING PATIENT AND UNDERSTANDING. EVERY CHILD IS GOING TO GET ANGRY AND PROBABLY BLOW UP BUT AS ADULTS AND PARENTS YOU HAVE THE RESPONSIBILITY OF UNDERSTANDING THAT THEY ARE IN A DEVELOPMENTAL PHASE AND AT TIMES WILL NEED TO LET OUT STRESS. I KNOW THAT WHEN I WAS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL WHEN I GOT MAD I WOULD ALWAYS SAY "I HATE YOU" TO MY MOM WHICH WAS NOT TRUE. SO TRY NOT TO TAKE ANYTHING PERSONALLY BECAUSE THE CHANCES ARE YOUR CHILD DOESN'T ACTUALLY MEAN IT. YOUR CHILD WILL BE FIGURING OUT THEIR EMOTIONS, IDENTITY, AND MORE, WHICH IS A LOT TO HANDLE.

BY PROVIDING YOUR CHILD WITH SUPPORT AND UNCONDITIONAL LOVE, IT ALLOWS THEM TO GROW AND LEARN VALUABLE LIFE SKILLS. WITH THIS BEING SAID, BEING CLEAR THAT YOUR LOVE IS UNCONDITIONAL IS REALLY IMPORTANT. YOUR KID IS WRESTLING WITH IDENTITY ISSUES AND CULTURAL IDEALS AT AN AGE WHEN THEY MOST WANT TO FIT IN AND BELONG. EXPRESSING TO THEM THAT YOUR LOVE IS UNCONDITIONAL WILL MAKE THEM FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE TALKING TO AND EXPRESSING THEIR FEELINGS WITH YOU. I REMEMBER WHEN I WAS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL I ALWAYS LOOKED FOR THE APPROVAL FROM MY PARENTS AND SOUGHT TO MAKE THEM HAPPY.

I THOUGHT IF I MADE A MISTAKE THEY WOULD LOVE ME LESS. I THINK PARENTS SHOULD GUIDE AND INTERVENE IN THEIR CHILDREN'S LIVES WHEN NECESSARY. HOWEVER, YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND YOUR KID IS GROWING UP AND BECOMING MORE INDEPENDENT SO KNOWING WHEN TO GIVE YOUR CHILD SOME BREATHING SPACE HELPS IN MOST SITUATIONS.

LASTLY, BEING REALISTIC ABOUT WHAT YOUR CHILD MIGHT ENCOUNTER IS HELPFUL. WHEN I WENT INTO MIDDLE SCHOOL I HAD NO IDEA WHAT WOULD HAPPEN AND WHEN I WAS PRESENTED WITH SITUATIONS THAT CONFUSED ME, I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO DO AND DIDN'T SEEK OUT MY PARENTS ADVICE OR HELP. I THINK IF PARENTS ADDRESS UNCOMFORTABLE TOPICS LIKE BULLYING, SEXTING, ALCOHOL, TOBACCO, RELATIONSHIPS, AND MORE, KIDS WILL FEEL MORE PREPARED IF THOSE SITUATIONS OCCUR. BY INFORMING YOUR KIDS AND HAVING CONVERSATIONS ON THESE TOPICS, THEY WILL FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE REACHING OUT TO YOU FOR HELP AND GUIDANCE. MIDDLE SCHOOL IS A DIFFICULT AND IMPORTANT TIME, AND THAT IS WHY GUIDANCE, HELP, AND LOVE FROM YOU IS SO NECESSARY.

SINCERELY,

**A High School Student**

# Finding Support

Let's Talk is an initiative of the Central Coast Tri-County Coalition, which aims to make enduring change so that all people in our region experience well-being and safety in a connected, resilient community environment. Rooted in core values of compassion, dignity, and equity, the Coalition focuses on youth, education and prevention to prevent substance use, decrease the harms of substance use, and ensure equitable access to support and treatment so that all people can thrive. Let's Talk is supported by the California Overdose Prevention Network, a project of the PHI Center for Health Leadership and Impact. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of PHI.

## RESOURCES

If you are looking for therapeutic care, you can talk with your healthcare provider or school-based counselor for support linking to resources.

### SAN BENITO COUNTY

**Bright Future Recovery**  
831-245-1623  
brightfuturerecovery.com

**Family Service Agency of the Central Coast Suicide Prevention**  
831-459-9373  
fsa-cc.org

**Hazel Hawkins Hospital Emergency Dept**  
831-636-2640  
hazelhawkins.com

**San Benito County Opioid Task Force**  
sbcopioidtaskforce.org

**San Benito County Resource Guide**  
sbcopioidtaskforce.org/printable-sbc-resource-guide

**SBC Behavioral Health Services 24 hr line**  
831-636-4020

**SBCBH Esperanza Center**  
831-636-4020, xt.309

**Sun Street Centers**  
831-265-7317  
sunstreetcenters.org

**Valley Health Associates**  
831-424-6655

**Youth Alliance**  
831-636-2853

**Youth Recovery Connections**  
831-387-8161  
youthrecoveryconnections.org

### MONTEREY COUNTY

**Behavioral Health Monterey County, CA**  
888-258-6029  
co.monterey.ca.us

**The Bridge Restoration Ministry**  
831-372-2033  
ww.tbrm.org

**Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula Emergency Dept**  
831-625-4900

**Community Human Services**  
Monterey 831-658-3811  
Salinas 831-237-7222  
chservices.org

**Door to Hope Comprehensive Behavioral Health Programs and Services**  
831-758-0181  
doortohope.org

**Interim, Inc. Housing, Healing Hope: The Path to Mental Health**  
831-649-4522  
interiminc.org

**Mee Memorial Hospital Emergency Dept**  
831-385-6000  
meememorial.com

**Natividad Medical Center**  
831-755-4111  
natividad.com

**Ohana, Center for Child and Adolescent Behavioral Health**  
831-OHANA01 (642-6201)  
montagehealth.org/ohana

**Prescribe Safe Monterey, CA | Montage Health**  
Printable Resource Guide  
montagehealth.org/prescribesafe

**Recovery Center**  
831-625-4608  
montagehealth.org

**Salinas Valley Memorial Hospital Emergency Dept**  
831-757-4333

**Sun Street Centers The Road to Recovery**  
831-753-5144  
sunstreetcenters.org

**Valley Health Associates Salinas**  
831-424-6655  
valleyhealthassociates.com

### SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

**Dominican Hospital**  
831-462-7700

**Encompass Community Services Youth & Family Behavioral Health**  
831-469-1700  
encompasscs.org

**Harm Reduction Coalition of Santa Cruz County**  
harmreductioncoalitionofsantacruz-county.com

**NAMI Santa Cruz County (NAMISCC)**  
831-427-8020  
namiscc.org

**Pajaro Valley Prevention & Student Assistance**  
831-728-6445  
pvpsa.org

**Safe Rx Website**  
hipscc.org/saferx  
The Safe Rx website links to a comprehensive resource folder with substance use information, resources, and treatment options available in Santa Cruz County, including services available in Spanish.

**Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency**  
santacruzhealth.org

**Santa Cruz County Schools Student & Family Behavioral Health Supports**  
sccoe.link/supports

**Youth Action Network**  
831-465-2211  
sccyan.org

**Watsonville Community Hospital**  
831-724-4741  
watsonvillehospital.com



# LET'S MAKE TIME TO TALK.



Scan QR code to  
take the survey.

Let's Talk began as a collaborative effort between Marin County Office of Education, Marin Health and Human Services and Marin Healthy Youth Partnerships, and has been adapted for the Tri-County Region by the Central Coast Tri-County Coalition.

**LET'S  
TALK.**