



# TALKING TO YOUR **MIDDLE SCHOOL-AGED CHILD** ABOUT ALCOHOL AND MARIJUANA

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A 10-step guide for parents, guardians  
and family members



Health, Housing  
& Human Services   
**CLACKAMAS COUNTY**  
*Prevention Coalition*

Oregon City  
  
**TOGETHER**





# INTRODUCTION

It's never too soon to talk to your child about alcohol, marijuana and other drugs. According to the Oregon Student Wellness Survey, the number of Oregon City middle school students who think using marijuana is harmful has decreased significantly during the past several years. This is an alarming trend because perceived lack of harm is seen as a precursor to using marijuana, alcohol and other actions such as vaping.

*This 10-step guide is designed to assist you in helping your child make smart choices as they transition into middle school and beyond, facing many challenges along the way.*

This guide is produced by Oregon City Together (OCT), a local Drug-Free Community Coalition of concerned parents, youth, community and school leaders, elected officials, and representatives from law enforcement, faith-based groups, organizations serving youth, neighborhoods and government agencies. This coalition focuses on preventing youth marijuana and alcohol use through increasing awareness, education, building skills, advocating policies and other evidence-based strategies.



## OUR MISSION

Building Opportunities  
for **HEALTHY &  
DRUG-FREE FUTURES.**

This brochure is funded with a generous grant from Clackamas County Children, Family & Community Connections Division.

## STEP #1

Why you need to  
talk ... now.

You are the best anti-drug! Adolescents are less likely to use drugs and alcohol when their parents talk to them about the risks. Experts recommend taking advantage of teachable moments long before marijuana, vaping and alcohol enter the picture to help middle schoolers understand what they put into their bodies matters.

- Always keep conversations open and honest.
- Come from a place of love, even when you're having tough conversations.
- Balance positive and negative reinforcement.
- Keep in mind that teachable moments come up all of the time — be mindful of natural places for the conversation to go in order to broach the topic of drugs and alcohol.

*Talk now and talk frequently.* When an adolescent uses drugs before the age of 15, they are far more likely to become addicted than if they had waited.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has an excellent free app for parents called "Talk. They hear you." This app features an interactive simulation that helps parents and others learn the do's and don'ts of talking to kids and can be found at <https://www.samhsa.gov/underage-drinking/mobile-application>.





## STEP #2

Know the facts, be able to explain the science.

Human brains do not fully develop until the mid-20s. Thus, adolescence is a time when the parts of the brain particularly vulnerable to marijuana, alcohol and other drugs are still developing. This means experimentation with drugs and alcohol can have lasting, harmful effects on your teen's health.

### HERE'S WHY ...

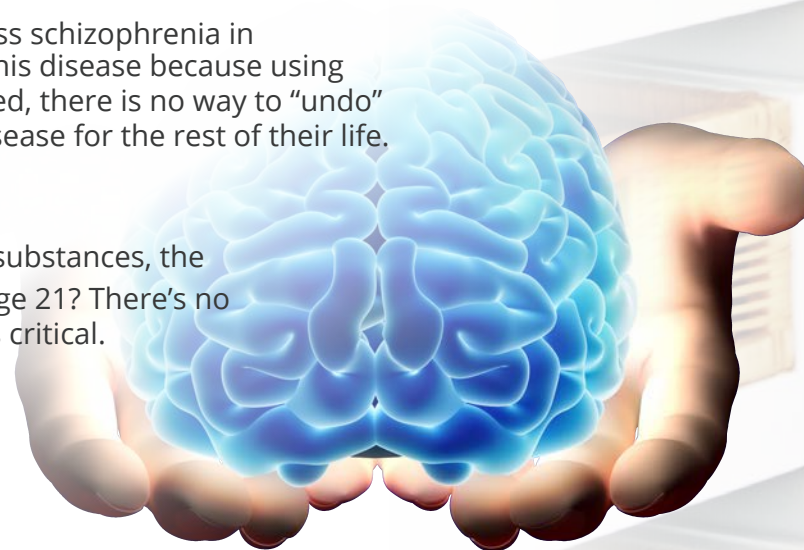
Teenagers' brains are still developing the reward system that allows us to experience pleasure. When we have a rewarding experience, our brain releases dopamine. But drugs and alcohol "hijack" this critical system, interfering with its normal development. The molecular structure of drugs looks similar enough to natural dopamine that the adolescent brain—which has more receptors than the adult brain—treats them the same.

As those artificial chemicals from alcohol and other drugs get into the brain, the teen brain makes less dopamine on its own because it thinks it has enough. As the brain makes less dopamine, it starts to require more and more of the drug in order to get the same feeling you would normally get naturally, increasing the likelihood of addiction.

The teen brain is changing so much that repeated exposure to a substance like alcohol or marijuana can alter the trajectory of brain development in a way that causes brain circuits to go awry. For example, there's little evidence that using marijuana after age 20 damages the brain, but a rapidly-growing body of research suggests that adolescent weed users may have lower IQ scores than their drug-free counterparts.

Using marijuana also can activate the mental illness schizophrenia in individuals who have a genetic predisposition to this disease because using marijuana can induce psychosis. Once it is activated, there is no way to "undo" it. The person will have to learn to manage this disease for the rest of their life.

Delay. Delay. Delay. The longer teens delay using substances, the better it is for their brains. Does that mean until age 21? There's no magical answer but delaying it to age 18 or later is critical.





## STEP #3

### Set a good example.

Children who see parents drink or use marijuana to “relieve stress” may see it as a stress-reducing option for themselves. As positive role models to our youth, never speak about drinking, vaping, smoking or using marijuana as something relaxing or fun.



## STEP #4

### Be prepared to answer questions about your own use.

Your kids look up to you and only you can decide what you are comfortable sharing. Try to stay focused on them.

#### *Some ways to answer . . .*

*We're talking about you, and I want you to be safe and make good choices.*

*I've seen a lot of people get into trouble with alcohol and drugs, and I do not want to see you get hurt.*

#### *If you do drink or smoke now . . .*

*When I started smoking, I did not know how easy it is to become addicted and how hard it is to stop.*

*I'm an adult and my brain is already developed -- that is one of the very good reasons why it is against the law to drink alcohol, use tobacco or marijuana before you are 21.*



## STEP #5

### Start the conversation.

Your middle schooler is listening to you, even when it looks like they are not. What you say about choices can help them grow up healthier.

Use open-ended questions ... and listen. Show them what they say and think matters.

Find the right moment. Perhaps it is when you pass a local marijuana retail outlet or vape shop. Use a TV show or movie you are watching as a prompt.

*"In the show we just watched, how do you think that boy or girl could have avoided being around alcohol and drugs?"*

Or a situation you both saw.

*"When I picked you up yesterday, I noticed some kids vaping -- what do you think about that?"*

Talks can -- and should be -- short. Make it clear what you expect. They need to know you will be checking in with them from time to time.



## STEP #6

### Make family rules and keep them.

Make clear rules. Write them down and display in a visible location. Privileges or rewards provide reinforcement for following the rules, but consequences are sometimes needed as well.

Be consistent with the rules. Inconsistency invalidates your authority and expectations.

Know who your child's friends are and talk to their parents about your rules and expectations. Remember that social hosting, allowing minors other than your own children to use drugs or alcohol on your property, is illegal and carries a stiff fine.





## STEP #7

Help your teen figure out how to say no.

Help your child come up with what to say when they are offered drugs or alcohol by a peer. "You're going to a party. What are you going to say if this happens?"

Examples...

*"My mom (dad, coach) would kill me if she smelled weed on me."*

*"I'm playing basketball this season. That's why I'm not drinking now."*

*"Don't waste your money on me."*

Do a bit of role playing to find what feels most comfortable.



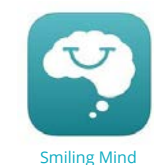
## STEP #8

Help reduce stress and anxiety.

Youth whom are stressed and anxious use marijuana and alcohol two to three times more than others. There are many effective ways to reduce stress! For example, teach mindfulness -- there are great apps for meditation and similar practices. Assist with organizing homework and other activities. Reduce extra activities if necessary. Help manage unrealistic expectations. Encourage regular exercise.

Meditation apps useful for young people include Headspace, Calm, Insight Timer, Stop, Breathe & Think, Smiling Mind and Take a Chill.

### APPS TO REDUCE ANXIETY & STRESS





## STEP #9

### Limit access.

If you smoke or vape, don't leave your cigarettes or devices around. Likewise, be cautious with your liquor supply. Use a lock box for marijuana and never keep prescription painkillers in an accessible spot, like your bathroom cabinet.

## STEP #10

### Know the warning signs.

#### Signs might include:

- ⚠ A change in mood.
- ⚠ Sleeping or eating more or less than usual.
- ⚠ Less interest in school, friends or activities.
- ⚠ Quality of homework getting worse and/or skipping school.
- ⚠ New friends you have not met.
- ⚠ Missing money or items from the household.
- ⚠ Talking about parties where alcohol and drugs are present.
- ⚠ Breaking rules and acting angry.

Of course, many of these behaviors are normal for middle schoolers, but if you think your child is using, have a calm and supportive talk with them and get help.

Talk to your school counselor, private counselor and/or physician. Both Ogden and Gardiner Middle Schools have prevention specialists or counselors.



# RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

Clackamas County provides alcohol and drug treatment services through a network of providers. Services include information and education, as well as treatment for adults and youth with substance abuse issues. If you need help or know someone who does, please call 503-742-5335.

Our area is served by several hotlines.

Clackamas County Crisis Line: 503-655-8585.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:  
1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)

Oregon Youthline (peer to peer): 877-968-8491;  
text: teen2teen to 839863;  
or chat live at [www.oregonyouthline.org](http://www.oregonyouthline.org)

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration  
(SAMHSA): [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA): [www.nida.nih.gov](http://www.nida.nih.gov)

NIDA for Teens: Facts on Drugs, Brain Chemistry and  
Addiction: [www.teens.drugabuse.gov](http://www.teens.drugabuse.gov)

Partnership for Drug-Free Kids: [www.drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org)







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503-785-8520, ext. 6