Talking to your middle school-aged child about alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs:

A 10-step guide for parents

Massachusetts Department of Public Health
Bureau of Substance Abuse Services
Massachusetts Tobacco Cessation and Prevention Program

To order this and other brochures on alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, please go to www.maclearinghouse.com.

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Step #1
Why you need to talk.

As a parent, you have a strong say over your children's choices. Talking to them can help them make the right decisions about alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. Many parents are surprised to learn that setting rules can strongly affect their kids' future.

When your children go to middle school (grades 6 to 8), they face many new challenges. They want to try new things. They want to fit in. Their friends may pressure them to do things they may not feel so good about.

Remember, no matter how prepared you are, the chance to talk could happen when you don't expect it. Your child could start the talk at any time. This booklet will help you be to be ready to answer their questions when they ask them.

How to help your child stay away from alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs:

- *Talk about what they like to do and what could happen if they drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, or take drugs. For example, they can't do as well in sports or could get into a car accident. They could get into trouble at school or with the police. They could get addicted to tobacco, alcohol, or another drug and find it hard to quit.*
- *Talk to them about your family rules.*
- *Notice your children doing something right and congratulate them. It builds their confidence.*
- *Stay connected. Keep talking. Listen to your kids when they talk.*

1. The Partnership for a Drug-Free America (www.drugfree.org) Partnership Attitudes Tracking Study (PATS) – Teens 2005

"I wanted to talk to my child about alcohol, smoking, and drugs, but I was afraid I'd say the wrong thing."

"I want to talk to my daughter about not smoking, but I don't know where to start."

Step #2
Get ready to talk.

You may be surprised what you can find out about your child!

Take this quiz and check the answers with your kids. It's fun and the information will be helpful in talks with your children.

How well do you know your child?

- What are their favorite colors?
- Who are their best friends?
- What are the names of your kids' teachers?
- Who are their favorite teachers?
- Who are some of your kids' role models?
- What do they admire about these people?
- What are their favorite movies, TV shows, music or radio stations?
- What are their favorite activities or hobbies?
- What are their dreams for the future?

Adapted from Keeping Youth Drug Free, Center for Substance Abuse Prevention.

Step #3
Be prepared to answer questions about **your** smoking, drinking, or drug use.

What can I say if my children ask me if I ever used drugs?

You are someone who your child looks up to - you can decide what you're comfortable sharing. Try to stay focused on them.

Some ways to answer

- *"We're talking about you, and I want to help you to be safe."*
- *"I've seen a lot of people get into trouble with alcohol and drugs, and I don't want to see you get hurt."*
- *"Everybody makes mistakes. I want to keep you from making a bad choice."*

What can I say or do if I drink or smoke now?

- *"When I started smoking, I didn't understand how hard it would be to quit. Maybe you can help me quit."*
- *"I'm an adult. It's against the law to drink if you are under 21."*
- *Be a good role model. Never talk about smoking, drinking, or drug use as something exciting or fun.*

Step #4
Know the facts before you start talking.

Your child may know more about drugs, tobacco, and alcohol than you do! Don't worry. You don't need to know everything.

Here are a few facts to get you started:

- Most pre-teens ***don't*** use alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs.
- The younger a child starts to use alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs, the more likely it is that they'll get addicted.
- Brain damage can happen when kids use alcohol, tobacco, and many other drugs.
- Young people may try prescription drugs from their parents' or grandparents' home without knowing this is illegal and dangerous.
- You may have lots of products in your home that could be used in illegal ways.

Find out more. Check out drug facts parents of middle schoolers need to know on the inside back cover.

Step #5
Start the conversation.

Your children are listening to you — even when it looks like they aren't! What you say about choices they make can help them grow up healthier.

Here are some ways to get your kids talking to you about what's going on in their life:

- Ask your child what's going on — about friends and what's new and fun.
- Get your child to talk about feelings, such as how they feel about school, their friends, or how they feel about being a pre-teen.
- Ask questions so they know you're listening.
- Listen to your children and show them that what they say and think matters.
- Respect their answers even if you don't agree with them.
- Use what happens on radio or TV shows to start talking. For example, *"In that show we just watched, how do you think that girl (or boy) could have avoided being around alcohol or drugs?"*
- *"I realize we haven't talked about alcohol or drugs. I love you and I want to be sure you're healthy. So our family needs to set some rules."*
- *"When I picked you up at school yesterday, I noticed some kids your age smoking. What do you think about that?"*
- *"I know most kids your age don't drink. I just want to talk with you about how important it is not to drive in a car with anyone who has been using drugs or drinking. Promise me you'll call me if you need a ride — any time."*

Talks can be short, but make it clear to your children what you expect from them. They need to know that you'll be checking in with them from time to time. Your kids will thank you, even if they don't say so for years.

"Whenever I talk to my daughter, it seems like she tunes me out."

Step #6
Make family rules and keep them.

Rules to follow

- Make clear rules. Rules can include: when your children are expected home, what chores they have to do, etc.
- Write the rules down. Put them in a place where they can be seen.
- Consider rewards for following the rules, like a family trip or going to the mall.
- Give every rule a punishment if broken, like no phone calls or computer time for one week.
- Stick to the rules all the time.
- Go over the rules as your child gets older, and change the rules as they become more responsible.

Watch your children's activities

When you know what your middle schoolers are doing, they are less likely to use alcohol, cigarettes, or other drugs.

Here are some tips and examples of rules to set:

- No riding in a car driven by a person who has been drinking alcohol or using drugs.
- No drinking of alcohol until you are 21 except for a sip of wine for special religious reasons.
- No staying at parties where other teens are drinking or using drugs.
- No using illegal drugs, ever.
- No smoking ever, not even a puff.
- Stay away from places where others are smoking. Secondhand smoke is dangerous and can make kids sick.
- Talk with other parents about the rules you have set for your kids.
- Know where your children are and have a set time when your kids need to be home.
- Make a plan in case your child gets into a situation where alcohol or other drugs are being used.

Adapted from "The Rules of the House", www.sph.unc.edu/familymatters.

"My daughter always balked when I set rules, but she says now it helps her make good choices about not using alcohol or drugs."

Fitting in and pressure from friends

If their friends are drinking alcohol, smoking, or using drugs, your pre-teens might feel like they need to fit in. You can help your children build confidence by talking to them about how to say no. You can suggest your kids say:

- *"No thanks. Let's go to my house and hang out."*
- *"Not now, I gotta go."*
- *"No! I'll get grounded."*

Help them to come up with their own way to say no.

Congratulations! You are on your way to helping your kids stay alcohol, tobacco, and drug free.

Kids are less likely to use tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs if their parents have established a pattern of setting clear rules and consequences for breaking those rules. [3]

3. Partnership for a Drug-Free America, www.drugfree.org.

Step #7
Keep your home safer from alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.

Helpful hints:

- Think about keeping tobacco and alcohol locked up.
- Do not ask your child to handle your cigarettes or alcohol.
- Keep track of your prescription and over-the-counter drugs.
- Throw away old medicines mixed with kitty litter or coffee grounds.*
- Watch your cleaning products, paint cans, hair spray, and nail polish remover — they can be poisonous. Watch your kids if they use these products.**

  If you smoke, your kids are more likely to smoke. Middle school students are *three times more likely to have tried smoking* if they live with a smoker. For help quitting, call 1-800-QUIT-NOW (1-800-784-8669; TTY 1-800-833-1477)

* Visit www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/pdf/prescrip_disposal.pdf for details

** For information on abuse, prevention, and safer household products, go to www.inhalantabusetraining.org.

Step #8
Build your support system.

There are many people to turn to in your community who can support you as you talk with your pre-teen about alcohol, tobacco, and drugs:

- Family doctors, nurses, and faith leaders may have experience in talking to middle schoolers and parents about alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.
- School counselors and coaches can be helpful.
- Community health centers and anti-drug coalitions have information to share.

Other ways to keep your kids safer:

- Make sure your children's school has a strong anti-drug program.
- Start a neighborhood watch to report drug dealing or underage drinking.

The laws

Knowing some of the laws about using alcohol, tobacco, and drugs could help your middle schooler stay away from them. These laws have consequences. For example:

- Giving or selling tobacco to anyone under 18 is illegal.
- It's illegal for anyone under the age of 21 to have alcohol.
- Using marijuana or any other illegal drug is against the law.
- Using or even holding someone else's prescription is breaking the law.

For more information on Massachusetts laws, see www.mass.gov.

Step #9
Watch for warning signs.

Take this Quiz!

If you have seen some of these changes in your kids, they might be using alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs.

- Have you noticed a change in mood?
- Is your child sleeping or eating more or less than usual?
- Does your middle schooler show less interest in school, friends, or activities?
- Is the quality of schoolwork getting worse or is he or she skipping school?
- Does your middle schooler have new friends you haven't met?
- Is money missing, or have objects disappeared from the house?
- Is your child talking about parties where drugs and alcohol are being used?
- Is your middle schooler breaking rules or acting angry?

Some of these behaviors are normal for pre-teens. But if you think your child may be using illegal substances, have a calm and supportive talk with him or her and get help. Getting help early is the key to protecting your child's health. Request a free copy of "Alcohol and Other Drugs: Is Your Teen Using?" at 1-800-952-6637 or TTY: 1-617-536-5872. You can also order or download it at www.maclearinghouse.com.

See other resources on page 20.

"I missed the warning signs. My daughter's only 12; I thought she was too young to be trying drugs."

Step #10
Get help if you need it: Places for information.

Helplines and Hotlines in Massachusetts

Mass 211: Information and referrals for youth (including recreational programs), cultural, and family services. 2-1-1 or 1-877-211-6277 (toll-free; multi-lingual); TTY: 1-508-370-4890; www.mass211help.org.

Massachusetts Smokers' Helpline: A free and confidential way to support you as you try to quit smoking by offering telephone sessions with a trained tobacco treatment specialist. 1-800-QUIT-NOW (1-800-784-8669); Spanish 1-800-8-DÉJALO (1-800-833-5256); TTY: 1-800-933-1477.

www.makesmokinghistory.org: Information on tobacco prevention, quitting smoking, and secondhand smoke.

Massachusetts Substance Abuse Information and Education Helpline: Information and treatment referrals.1-800-327-5050 (toll-free; 7 days a week; multi-lingual); TTY: 1-888-448-8321; www.helpline-online.com.

Institute for Health and Recovery: Referrals to residential services and information for youth and their families affected by alcohol or other drugs. 1-866-705-2807 (English and Spanish); www.healthrecovery.org.

Massachusetts and Rhode Island Poison Control Center: Information and hotline about inhalants and other poisons. 1-800-222-1222 (toll-free; 24 hours); TTY: 1-888-244-5313; www.maripoisoncenter.com.

Massachusetts Resources

Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Bureau of Substance Abuse Services: Information on alcohol and other drugs and services. www.mass.gov/dph/bsas.

Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Tobacco Cessation and Prevention Program: Information on tobacco. www.mass.gov/dph/mtcp.

Massachusetts Health Promotion Clearinghouse: Free information on alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs:

- *Talking to Your 11- to 13-Year Old Child about Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drugs* (Spanish and Haitian Creole)
- *Choose to Keep Your Freedom* (English and Spanish)
- *Inhalants Poison Your Body* (English)
- *Preventing Substance Abuse Starts at Home: Safeguarding Your Children* (English and Spanish)

For copies of these brochures or more copies of this booklet, contact 1-800-952-6637 (toll-free; English, Spanish, and Portuguese); TTY: 1-617-536-5872; www.mahealthclearinghouse.com.

National Resources

The Cool Spot: Interactive website for young teens. www.thecoolspot.gov.

National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA): Real stories, information, activities. www.nida.nih.gov/parent-teacher.html.

Family Matters: Information; step-by-step on-line guide for parents. www.sph.unc.edu/familymatters.

If your child is unresponsive or can't wake up, call 911 immediately.

Facts every parent needs to know about alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs

The Substances: As a parent, you may want to know some of the basics before you begin talking to your child.

	WHAT IS IT	RISKS	WHAT TO LOOK FOR	EXAMPLES OF LEGAL STATUS
ALCOHOL	• Booze • Juice • Beer • Wine • Cooler	• Damage to the brain • Bad decisions; increase in violent behavior and sexual activity • Depression and suicide • Alcohol addiction • Injury or death from car accidents, alcohol poisoning, or overdose	• Alcohol missing from bottles at home • Smell of alcohol on breath; trouble talking or walking	• Illegal to have alcohol in the United States if you are under age 21
TOBACCO	• Smokes, butts, spit, chew, dip • It can be smoked in cigarettes, cigars, black and milds (mini cigars), or chewed (smokeless tobacco) • Dissolvable tobacco can be: tablets, breath strips, hand gel, toothpicks, etc.	• Addiction — middle school-age brains develop an addiction to nicotine more easily and parts of the brain never fully develop. Within days of starting to smoke, pre-teens show signs of addiction. • Bad breath, yellow teeth, tooth decay, smell on clothing, etc. • Less energy, less physical strength • Lung disease, oral cancer, loss of teeth, heart disease, cancer, stroke, asthma	• Cigarettes, matches, lighters • Smell of smoke in clothing, hair • Breathmint-like tins • (In some users) Sweatiness, shakiness, paleness, nausea and vomiting	• Illegal to sell or give tobacco products to youth under age 18
MARIJUANA	• Pot, weed, reefer, joint, blunt, dope, grass, herb • It's dried leaves and flowers of the hemp plant • Can be smoked using rolling papers or pipes	• Affects memory, learning, concentration, and school work • Makes heart beat faster; causes panic attacks • Cough, lung damage, cancer • Addiction	• Cigarettes, cigars, small pipe, lighters, matches, rolling papers, bobby pins • Water pipe or bong (container filled with liquid with a small tube) • Sweet, smoky smell in air or on clothes • Loss of motivation, confusion, red eyes, hungrier than usual	• Illegal to possess or use marijuana
PRESCRIPTION AND OVER-THE-COUNTER DRUGS	• Some are called Kpins (Klonopin, used for anxiety),Oxy or OC (OxyContin, used for pain), Vikes (Vicodin, used for pain), Skittles or Kibbles (Ritalin, used for ADHD), cold medicines, and more. • Found in homes, stores, or pharmacies • Can be tablets, capsules, or cough syrups	• More dangerous when mixed with alcohol • Loss of appetite • Fevers, convulsion, headaches • Irregular heartbeat and breathing • Addiction • Overdose, death	• Missing medicine • Twitching, sleepiness, or sleeplessness • Change in mood • Less interest in school, activities, or friends, or new friends you haven't met yet • Eating or sleeping more or less than usual	• Illegal to purchase or use Rx drugs without a valid prescription from the doctor • Illegal to give away your own or others' prescription drugs; illegal to sell your own or others' prescription drugs • Illegal to use over-the-counter drugs in the production of illicit drugs
INHALANTS	• Glue, kick, bang, poppers, whippets, snappers, locker room, snort, laughing gas • They are common household products (such as cleaners, nail polish remover) • Can be sniffed or "huffed" through the mouth	• Brain, liver, and kidney damage • Loss of consciousness • Addiction • Death from heart failure, accidents, or suffocation	• Sneezing, coughing, nosebleeds • Mood swings, confusion • Sores on face, in mouth; rash around nose	• Use of these products as inhalants is illegal

- Additional information on alcohol can be found at **www.niaaa.nih.gov.**
- Information on additional drugs can be found at **www.drugabuse.gov.**
- Information on other inhalants can be found at **www.inhalantabusetraining.org.**
- More MA laws relating to substance abuse can be found at **www.mass.gov.**