

Talk early and often about alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. Even when it gets tough.



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Talking regularly with youth about the dangers of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs reduces their risk of using in the first place.

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Start Talking!
Building a Drug-Free Future



Know! Transition Increases Risk

While there is much excitement about the start of a new school year, there may be much apprehension and anxiety as well. This may be especially so for youth entering into their first year of middle or high school, and for adolescents of any age transitioning to a new school (due to a move or a number of other reasons). The thought of unfamiliar faces, new teachers and coaches, increased academic and athletic expectations, lockers that possibly won't open and sharing hallways with older students – the risk for first day jitters is at an all-time high. But there is another “risk” factor that increases during such times of transition as well – the risk for the onset of substance use.

Middle school is the time when substances like alcohol, cigarettes and possibly marijuana, tend to make their first appearance. According to the [2016 Monitoring the Future \(MTF\)](#) study, by 8th grade, 23% of students drank alcohol, 10% smoked cigarettes, and 13% used marijuana. As young people progress into high school, the risk for use of these particular substances, and others, grow significantly due to an increase in access and availability, drug use by upper classmen and an increase in substances being used at social activities. To compare, among 12th grade students, 61% drank alcohol, 28% smoked cigarettes and marijuana use had more than tripled, with 45% having used in the past year.

It is also important to note that among high school seniors, the MTF study showed the use of small cigars (16%) and prescription drugs (12%) to be significant.

When it comes to the reasons young people give for drinking, smoking and using other drugs, not much has changed over the years. Teens use in an attempt to:

- ease anxieties;
- loosen up at social gatherings;
- relax when stressed or to “stop feeling” when sad or depressed;
- fit in or give in to peer pressure;
- improve academic or athletic performance;
- lose weight or gain muscle;
- and of course some teens use simply to get high, take a risk or satisfy their curiosity.

What has changed over the years, according to the MTF study, alcohol, tobacco and drug use among teens declined significantly in 2016, and have hit their lowest rates since the 1990s. In looking at the percentage of students still drinking and smoking, however, we see that there remains work to be done. Parents are the first line of defense in the prevention of substance use among youth; and while it may seem very basic, here are some things you can do to protect your child, regardless of age or grade level:



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Empowering Parents To Raise Their Children To Be Substance-Free



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Include these items on your Back-To-School To-Do list:

1. Be active and supportive in your child's daily life.
2. Ask questions about substance use and reinforce non-use messages.
3. Make clear your expectations and consequences for breaking rules.
4. Know where your child is and who they are with at all times.
5. Make sure young people are being monitored when hanging out together. For times you are not physically present, check in with them regularly.
6. Keep an eye on your child's social media activities.

In general, middle and high school youth are interested in gaining independence, trying new things and taking some risks – all normal aspects of development. Unfortunately for some, these normal aspects of development may increase the tendency to experiment with substances. Being there for them and having regular and ongoing conversations about the dangers of substance use can and does go a long way toward keeping them safe, healthy and drug-free.

For the full report from the 2016 Monitoring the Future, [click here](#).

Sources: [How to Raise a Drug-Free Kid: The Straight Dope for Parents](#). Joseph A. Califano, Jr., 2009. [Monitoring the Future: Press Releases: Teen use of any illicit drug other than marijuana at new low, same true for alcohol](#). [Monitoring the Future: Publications: National Survey Results on Drug Use 1975 – 2016](#).

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