

A Cambridge

Caregiver's

Guide



to preventing **youth
substance use &
promoting well-being**



Cambridge
Public Health
Department

 **CHA**
Cambridge
Health Alliance



Dear Parents, Caregivers,

Coaches, and Friends:

Middle school and high school can be an exciting and challenging time for your child—and for parents, caregivers and the other important adults in the child’s life, too. Even though older children might seem to be pulling away and looking for more independence, in reality, they still want to feel like they’re an important part of the family and know that you still love and care for them.

Recent data tell us the majority of Cambridge middle and high school students feel that their parents’ opinion is important to them when deciding whether to try alcohol or other drugs. As a parent or caregiver, this may seem like the furthest thing from the truth.

Talking about substance use can be challenging, but we hope the information in this guide can help you start (and continue) those conversations.

This guide was created for parents, caregivers, and all adults who work with pre-teens, teens and young adults. It’s full of information to help you make a difference in the life of your loved young one.

These tips are great for learning how to talk with your children about substances like alcohol and marijuana and can also be used to start a conversation about vaping, mental health, sex, and other topics that young people deal with at this stage of life.

The key is communication: talk early and talk often!

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Remember, you are not alone. Your children are part of a strong community of family, friends, neighbors and educators—all of whom they can lean on for support. We have a collective responsibility to ensure all Cambridge children feel safe, healthy, and supported. We’re in this together!

Sincerely,

Cambridge Public Health Department

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Why Now?

As your child reaches the end of middle school and makes the transition to high school, plenty of changes are happening. No longer a child, not quite a teen, your student is finding his or her way through things like new classes, new friends, a changing body, and new health challenges.

One of those challenges is the decision whether or not to use alcohol, marijuana, e-cigarettes, or other substances.

Did you know that substance use increases with age? **Among Cambridge Public School students, 4% of 8th graders, 11% of 9th graders, and 41% of 12th graders report they currently drink alcohol.** That means talking with your children early and often about substance use is really important—and that time between middle and high school is an especially important time to have the conversation.

Think your opinion doesn't matter? Think again! According to health survey data, **92% of middle school students and 75% of high school students perceived that their parents would disapprove if they used marijuana.**

Making the jump from middle to high school is challenging enough. Talking with your children early and often, helping them plan ways to handle tough situations, and offering positive ways to cope with stress and anxiety can help make that transition easier for everyone.



“We have found it’s best to have open communication on anything and everything. No subject is off limits. We also do our best to model healthy behaviors at home.”

—Anish, Father of Cambridge
9th Grader & 11th Grader

TRENDS

Among Cambridge High School Students



Students who **experienced financial hardships the previous year** reported the highest percentages of alcohol and marijuana use compared to other student groups.



In 2021, a higher percentage of **LGBT+ high school students** reported alcohol and marijuana use compared to all high school students.

SOURCE: 2021 CAMBRIDGE TEEN HEALTH SURVEY

[4]

What do we mean by “substance use”?

The term substance use can mean different things to different people. For this guide, we consider youth substance use to include:

- Alcohol
- Cigarettes
- Electronic cigarettes, including vaping and Juul
- Marijuana
- Inhalants
- Cocaine
- Ecstasy
- Heroin
- Prescription drugs
- Over-the-counter meds to get high

What To Say: How to Have the Tough Conversations

1 Start a conversation with your child.

It can be tough to talk about sensitive topics, no matter how old your child. But talking is important and we all have a responsibility to keep our children safe.

Start by using a news item or a TV or movie storyline as a reference and ask what your child and his/her friends think about the issue. Listen and be respectful. It might be hard for your child to open up if they feel that you already have a right or wrong answer waiting.

TRY IT: “It seems like that character wasn’t ready to do X. Is this happening at your school? How do your friends handle situations like this?”

2 Set expectations for follow-up

conversations. Start talking and keep it going. Talking about substances or other difficult topics means many ongoing conversations. Create space for both of you to talk and let your child do much of the talking. Ask questions that show you’re listening and hearing.

3 Be supportive and listen.

You can never tell your child that you love him or her too much. Use that love to open the conversation and let him or her know that you won’t get angry if you are both honest and willing to learn. Don’t jump to conclusions! Try asking your child to walk you through a decision he’s made or will soon be making.

TRY IT: “I found this vape pen in your bag. Can we talk about how it got there? What would you do differently next time?”

4 Be clear.

Make sure your child knows that you do not approve of him or her using substances. Your opinion matters! Talk about why, including the risks and other positive ways to cope with stress or anxiety.

5 Set rules and follow through.

Talk about and agree on rules, like curfew and privacy. Once agreed upon, these need to be respected by both you and your child. If the rules are broken, follow through with a reasonable punishment. Punishments that are too harsh can undermine your relationship and progress.

TRY IT: “What do you think is a reasonable curfew? What should happen if you’re not home on time?”

6 Create a safe word.

Many parents and caregivers use a safe word or phrase that a child can use while they’re out with their peers. Texting or saying it over the phone lets you know that he or she needs your help getting out of a tough situation.

TRY IT: “The dance is coming up, and I know you’re planning on hanging out at [friend]’s house after. If you ever feel uncomfortable, just text me “X” and I’ll come pick you up, no questions asked.”

7 Get social.

Learn which social networks and apps your child uses. Be clear about what is off limits when it comes to using technology, and make it clear that you will keep tabs on their activity—and make sure you actually do.

SOURCE: DRUGFREE.ORG

Say This, Not That!

Here are words to avoid when talking with your child about alcohol and other substances—and words you can use instead.

| AVOID | USE |
|---|---|
| [BAD] Smoking weed is bad for you. | [HARMFUL] Smoking weed is harmful to your health and brain. |
| [STUPID] Drinking alcohol is a stupid idea. | [UNHEALTHY] Drinking is unhealthy for teens, and that's why I'm concerned. |
| [DISAPPROVE] I disapprove of you hanging out with that group of friends. | [CONCERNED] I'm concerned about your new group of friends and worry that they may not be the best influence. |
| [DISAPPOINTED] I am disappointed in you for smoking weed. | [WORRIED] I'm worried about your decision to smoke weed. When's a good time to talk about it? |

ADAPTED FROM: PARTNERSHIP FOR DRUG-FREE KIDS

[6]



To share or not to share...?

Parents and caregivers sometimes feel untruthful hiding their own experiences. If your child asks if you've ever tried alcohol or drugs, you can choose to keep your experiences private (not everything in your history needs to be available) or to share them, but don't reminisce or glamorize your experiences. You can also explain that as a parent or caregiver, it's your job to help them avoid things they will regret, and substance use definitely increases the chances of doing something they might regret.

SOURCE: CHILD MIND INSTITUTE

What To Do: Actions You Can Take

My child doesn't drink or use drugs, right...?

Actually, some do, and the **percentage of Cambridge middle school students who think it would be "very easy" to get substances from home has increased between 2019-2022.**

While most parents and caregivers don't willingly give their children alcohol, prescription drugs, or other substances, anything not locked up is easy for most children to find, consume, and share.

Here are a few things you can do:

- 1 Monitor the alcohol you have at home. Know how much you have and where you keep it.
- 2 Don't forget about prescription drugs. Consider locking these up or keeping track of how many pills you have.
- 3 Safely store marijuana products in a child-resistant container and lock them away.
- 4 Be a good role model. Demonstrate positive behaviors by not using substances around your children or driving under the influence.

[7]

We asked:

“What makes young people less likely to start using substances?”

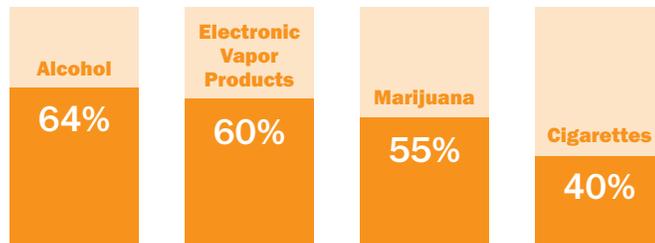
Cambridge said:

- Positive influence from peers
- Healthy relationships
- Building self-esteem
- Family responsibility
- Concerns about consequences
- Structure, organized activities, and sports

SOURCE: CPHD FOCUS GROUPS & INTERVIEWS, 2022

TEEN PERCEPTIONS

Cambridge high school students perceived that it would be **easiest for them to obtain:**



SOURCE: 2022 CAMBRIDGE TEEN HEALTH SURVEY

Social Host Liability

If you think it's safe to have your children and their friends drinking in your home, you might want to think again. In Massachusetts, parents and their children may face:

Criminal Prosecution

Parents can receive criminal penalties—as much as a \$2,000 fine and a year of jail time—for knowingly giving alcohol to an underage person, other than their children or grandchildren, in their home. Your child can also face these criminal penalties for giving alcohol to an underage friend in the family home.

SOURCE: KATHARINE M. FELLUCA, ATTORNEY AT THE LAW FIRM OF CLARK, HUNT, AHERN & EMBRY IN CAMBRIDGE

Civil Lawsuit

If you host a social gathering and give too much alcohol to a guest (whether they're underage or not) and that person harms someone else as a result (like getting behind the wheel and causing an accident, for instance), you can be sued for a potentially huge sum of money to compensate the victim or the victim's family, if that person was killed. Your child can face this social host liability as well.



“Our family conversations about substance use started from lessons our kids were learning in middle school, events in the news, or things they were hearing from friends. Now that they're getting older, the discussions have shifted more towards the challenges of standing their ground when others make different choices.”

—Michele, Parent of Cambridge 9th Grader & 11th Grader

PHOTO CREDIT: SUZY FEINBERG



SPOTLIGHT: MENTAL HEALTH & WELLNESS

Mental health, much like physical health, can range from good to poor and can also change over time. Our mental health affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices.

In Cambridge, middle school students were most likely to worry about:

TOP WORRIES

- * School issues
- * Social issues
- * Appearance issues

[9]

What can I do? How can I help?

Our role as parents, caregivers, and adults who work with teens is to help them establish healthy ways to cope with stress.

Start by having a conversation with your child. If you've noticed a recent change in behavior, talk about your observations and concerns, listen respectfully when your child talks, and be mindful of the amount of stress your child is experiencing. If you are concerned, visit nami.org to learn how you can support your child's mental health.

SOURCE: 2022 CAMBRIDGE MIDDLE GRADES HEALTH SURVEY



WELLNESS TIPS FOR TEENS & PRE-TEENS

- Eat three healthy, balanced meals each day.
- Exercise regularly. Even just 15 minutes per day can help.
- Avoid caffeine and products high in sugar.
- Limit screen time, particularly on social media.
- Ask for help. Sometimes just talking about what stresses you out can be beneficial. You don't have to face everything on your own.

DID YOU KNOW?

Only 8% of Cambridge high school students report getting at least eight hours of sleep on a regular school night.

Without enough sleep, adolescents have a higher risk for many health problems, like poor mental health.

SOURCES: 2022 CAMBRIDGE TEEN HEALTH SURVEY; CDC, 2019

Resources

Massachusetts Substance Use Helpline

helplinema.org | 1-800-327-5050

The Helpline is the only statewide, public resource for finding substance use treatment, recovery, and problem gambling services. Helpline services are free and confidential.

Partnership to End Addiction

drugfree.org

The Partnership is dedicated to providing science-based resources and services to help parents address adolescent substance use.

The Trevor Project

thetrevorproject.org

Provides 24/7 crisis support services to LGBTQ+ young people.

Truth Initiative

truthinitiative.org

thisisquitting.com

Support for youth to quit vaping/Juuling.

becomeanex.org

Support to quit smoking cigarettes.

National Alliance on Mental Illness of Massachusetts (NAMI Mass)

namimass.org

NAMI seeks to improve the quality of life for people living with mental health conditions, their families, and their caregivers.

Compass is the helpline at NAMI Massachusetts. Compass provides free information, ideas, resources, and support to help people across the state navigate the complex mental health system and related systems of care.

617-704-6264 or 1-800-370-9085 | compass@namimass.org



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Cambridge Public Health Department is a city department administered by Cambridge Health Alliance, a regional health care delivery system.

119 Windsor Street | Cambridge, MA 02139 | 617-665-3800
cambridgepublichealth.org | [@CambHealth](https://twitter.com/CambHealth)