

Resisting Peer Pressure



Middle school is an exciting time of change—students are taking on advanced schoolwork, going through puberty, and figuring out who they are. At the same time, they often face new pressures to try things that are dangerous, illegal, or out of their comfort zone.

While that might be scary, the good news is that you can have a powerful influence on how your child handles the pressure. Use these suggestions to teach your middle schooler to stand up for himself, deal with risky situations, and resist unsafe behavior.

Be informed

Learn about the types of substances children can abuse (illegal drugs as well as inhalants and over-the-counter drugs), their risks, and signs of use. This will make you feel more “in the know” and help you start a conversation with your middle grader. Your pediatrician, the school counselor, and relatives or neighbors who have raised teenagers can all be good sources of information. Also, check the Internet and public libraries for articles about teen health and substance abuse.



Start talking

Share what you learn with your child. She’ll see that you’re open to talking about these topics and will understand that she can come to you with questions. For example, you can point out that people react differently to drugs and alcohol. Even if she knows people who take prescription drugs that aren’t theirs and they seem fine, that doesn’t mean her body will handle them the same way. You might also mention interesting facts

that relate to her age. For instance, you could say, “People who start drinking before the age of 15 are more likely to become alcoholics.”

Discuss your values

Kids who know where their parents stand are less apt to give in to peer pressure. Don’t be afraid to tell your youngster how you feel about risky behaviors (“I’m completely against tobacco use”). Give him firm rules (“I won’t allow smoking in my house”), and be clear about what will happen if he breaks them. (“If

you smoke, your allowance will be taken away. I’m not going to help you buy cigarettes.”)

Encourage healthy activities

Suggest that your middle grader join a club at school, participate in sports, or volunteer in the community. Being involved in activities with other kids can give him self-confidence and a sense of responsibility—valuable traits to help him withstand peer pressure. Whenever possible, let your child invite his friends

over. You’ll give them a safe place to hang out and be able to keep an eye on them.

Teach impulse control

Children who learn to wait are learning to control their impulses, which can help them resist peer pressure. Have your child wait before getting something he wants (say, holding off on video games until after homework or saving for a special purchase rather than borrowing the money from you). Also, let him see you exercise self-control (emptying the dishwasher before heading out to shop or balancing your checkbook before turning on your favorite TV show).

Stay connected

When preteens and young teens spend time away from home, they still need parents to watch out for them. If your middle grader goes out, find out who she will be with and what they will be doing. Set a time for her to return home and consequences for not coming back on time. Let her know that you expect her to check in (texting when she arrives at the movies, calling if she wants to change plans).



Reasons to say “no” right now!

Wanting to be part of the crowd can cause middle graders to cave in when other kids encourage them to try dangerous activities. Since children this age tend to focus on the present, they are more likely to resist if they know how those behaviors can affect them *now*. Share these short-term reasons to say “no.”

Friendships. Your middle grader’s reputation will affect the kind of people who want to be friends with her. Children who don’t drink or do drugs are less likely to stay close to her if she experiments with things that make them uncomfortable.



Extracurriculars. Many school activities—sports, band, clubs—have rules that members must follow. Breaking the rules (using alcohol or drugs, fighting on school property) could get your child kicked out of favorite extracurricular activities.

Embarrassment. Being under the influence of alcohol or drugs can cause your middle grader to let her guard down. She may do things she’ll be sorry about, such as making out with someone she doesn’t like. Or she might say or do things that will embarrass her later. Other kids may even take videos or photos of her and forward them on cell phones or post them on the Internet, where a lot of people can see them.



Appearance. Using drugs like marijuana can make your child’s eyes bloodshot, and alcohol can sour her breath. Cigarettes can turn her fingernails yellow, stain her teeth, and make her hair

and clothes smell like smoke. Also, if she uses drugs, she may let her appearance go by not showering or not keeping her hair neat.

Ways to escape a tough situation

Practicing pretend situations can boost your middle grader’s confidence so he can handle tough events in real life.

Role-play together, taking turns being the “friend” who tries to pressure your teen into drinking a wine cooler, shoplifting, or taking someone else’s Ritalin. Watching his reaction may give you insight into the types of situations he may have already been exposed to. Here are three ideas:

1. Be ready with an excuse

If someone offers your child a joint, for example, and he doesn’t feel strong enough to “just say no,” he can say, “I promised to mow the lawn this afternoon. I have to go.” Or he can use you as a scapegoat. He could say, “My parents would ground me

till I’m 20,” or “My dad *always* finds out if I do something wrong. It’s not worth it to me.”

2. Use code words

Say your middle schooler goes to a friend’s house, and the friend wants to break into the liquor cabinet. Your child can call or text you from a private spot like a bathroom. Or he could call from the house phone, saying he forgot to ask you something. Then, he can use a code phrase you agreed on in advance (“What happened to Uncle Phil?”).

That will be your signal to pick him up or tell him he has to come home.

3. Walk away

Suppose your child attends a party and someone offers him a cigarette and won’t back down. He can simply say, “No, I’m not interested,” and walk away.



Middle Years