



# RAISING HEALTHY TEENS



Middle School  
Parent Handbook



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                            |    |
|----------------------------|----|
| Introduction               | 5  |
| Staying Involved           | 7  |
| Talking to Your Child      | 8  |
| The Middle School Brain    | 10 |
| The Pressure to Be Perfect | 26 |
| Resources                  | 33 |

## What Is Raising Healthy Teens?

Raising Healthy Teens is a public health initiative sponsored by Providence Mission Hospital. Our purpose is to help youth in South Orange County reach their full potential by not letting drugs and alcohol get in the way of their success.

We offer strategies that families can use to empower their children to make healthy choices and resist risky behaviors, such as drinking and using drugs. To learn more, visit [raisinghealthyteens.org](http://raisinghealthyteens.org) or join our Facebook and Instagram pages.





# RAISING HEALTHY TEENS

Your Child Is Entering  
Middle School. Now What?



## Transitions Are Challenging for Youth and Parents

The transition from elementary to middle school is one of the biggest milestones in a child's life. It's an exciting time for them and you. Middle school students are on their way to becoming more independent, developing broader academic and extracurricular interests, and navigating new friend groups—all while their bodies and hormones are changing.

Middle school can also be an incredibly challenging time for students and parents. As your child goes through puberty and starts to assert their independence, they also have to contend with a new level of academic, athletic, and social pressure. The need to fit in and be "perfect" in the eyes of their peers, especially in a place like South Orange County, is intense during the middle school years. This peer pressure can drive your child's personality and behavior just as their brains and social persona are developing.



Staying  
Involved





# Parental Involvement



Because middle schools are larger and more complex than elementary schools, parental involvement looks different. Instead of volunteering at recess or in your child's classroom, the best way to stay connected is through the school's parent portal and by participating in events, such as Parents' Nights, and school-sponsored parent groups. While this will keep you informed about school policies and your child's academics, knowing what's going on in their personal and social life requires a new set of skills and strategies.



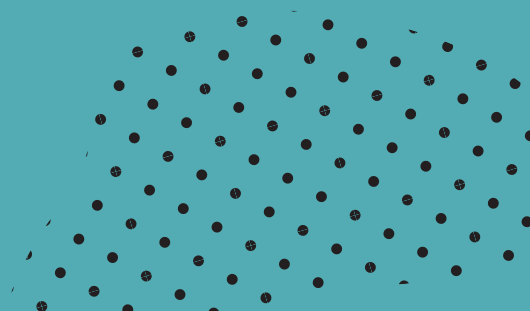
## Knowledge Is Power

Understanding the pressures your child is up against—including exposure to alcohol and other drugs at such a young age—is critical for parenting during the middle school years. But how do you do this? Where do you start?

**Start by talking.** Raising a healthy child begins with having healthy conversations with them. By engaging in open and honest dialogue, we can help our children reach their full potential and overcome the challenges and temptations they might encounter.



☆  
Talking  
to Your  
Child

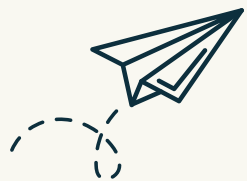




# The Importance of Communication



Successful parenting includes having productive conversations with your child about tough issues. If you talk to your child directly and honestly, they are more likely to respect your rules and advice about alcohol and drug use and the consequences for engaging in high-risk behaviors.



The middle school years are crucial to decisions about using alcohol and other drugs. Research shows that the earlier youth start drinking and using drugs, the more likely they are to develop substance use disorders at some point in their life. Children who learn about the dangers of alcohol and other drugs early and often are much less likely to use them than those who do not receive these important messages at home.

# Friends vs. Parents

## Who Matters More?

Friends become even more important during the middle school years. A middle school child's self-image is determined in part by the extent to which they are accepted by their peers, especially popular peers. Their interests and decision-making are often determined by what the group thinks and does. Thankfully, parents are still the greatest influence in their children's lives. They look to you for acknowledgement, support, and understanding, especially when faced with difficult social situations.

"Trying to talk to kids about drugs and alcohol for the first time when kids are experimenting and using later in high school is really difficult if you have not laid the foundation for those conversations when kids are younger."

- from the 2020 Providence Mission Hospital Community Assessment



## Empowering Your Child

A child needs their parents to set clear expectations so they don't use alcohol and other drugs while their brains are still developing. They also need to hear from you that being "perfect" is not a realistic or attainable goal. Empowering your child to make their own decisions will set them up for success in middle school, high school, and beyond.





# Tips for Talking

The following tips will help you have productive conversations with your child.

## Be Patient and Ready to Listen

Be prepared to do more listening than talking – it should feel like a conversation, not a lecture. It will be helpful if you can keep an open mind and show your genuine concern and interest. Ask open-ended questions rather than just “yes” and “no” questions. It’s okay for your conversations to take place over time.

## Start the Conversation Naturally

Teens will likely be more receptive to a relaxed approach as opposed to anything that feels like a formal sit-down meeting. Rather than saying, “we need to talk,” you might ask your teen what he or she is encountering with their friends.  
LET YOUR TEEN KNOW THEY’RE BEING HEARD.

## Be Positive

Be attentive, curious, respectful, and understanding. If you approach the situation with shame, anger, or scare tactics, your conversation may not be very productive. For example, let your teen know that you are on their side and that you are here to support them.

## Set Clear Expectations / Have High Expectations

Make sure your child knows what you value as a family and what your expectations are for their behavior. Let them know that you want them to be successful and will support them—no matter what. Also, set your guidelines for their behavior, including both the incentives for adhering to the rules and the consequences for breaking those rules—and, most importantly, that you really will enforce those consequences if the rules are broken. Kids who are not regularly monitored by their parents are four times more likely to use alcohol and other drugs.

## Talk Openly About Your Family History

If there is a history of addiction in your family, then your child has a greater risk of developing a problem. Discuss this risk with your child as you would with any other illness.

## If Your Child Is Interested in Drinking or Using Drugs, Ask Why?

And ask what might happen if they do. This will get your child to think about their future—and some of the possible negative consequences of drinking or using drugs.

## Teach Them How to Say “No”

Kids who don’t know what to say when someone offers them alcohol and other drugs are more likely to give in to peer pressure. Help them be prepared by role-playing different scenarios they might encounter. As a parent of a middle school student you can practice the skills needed to say “no”.

Examples of reasons for saying no include:

- “I want to keep a clear head.”
- “I could get suspended from the team.”
- “I don’t use alcohol or drugs.”
- “My parents would kill me if they found out.”
- “I don’t want to disappoint...”
- “Instead of [using the drug], let’s do this [identify healthy activity] instead.”

## Offer Empathy, Compassion, and Support

Let your child know you understand the middle school years can be tough. Acknowledge that everyone struggles sometimes, but that alcohol and drugs are not a useful or healthy way to cope with problems. Let your child know that they can come to you for support and guidance. Model healthy ways of coping with stress such as exercising, eating well, and getting enough sleep.

## Give Them the Facts

Don’t just leave your child’s anti-drug education up to their school. Educate yourself so you can share the most up-to-date information with your teen. Let them know how important it is to protect their brains during these years of growth and development. Help your child understand the negative impact of drug use on their minds and bodies.

# Parenting Tips That Work

## Think GMC!



### Guidelines

Set clear guidelines for behavior. Discuss with your child which behaviors are acceptable in your household and which are not. Be sure to address behaviors that are appropriate for middle-school-aged youth, such as doing homework, setting a time to be home in the evening, putting limits on the use of tech devices, and using alcohol and other drugs.

### Monitoring

Determine how you will know when rules are followed and when they are not. For example, if a child is going to a friend's house for the night, call the parents to ensure they will be around to monitor the behavior.

### Consequences

Establish both positive and negative consequences: identify what will happen when the rules are followed and when they are not. Setting the consequences is a great way to have a conversation by asking, "What are special things we can do together?"

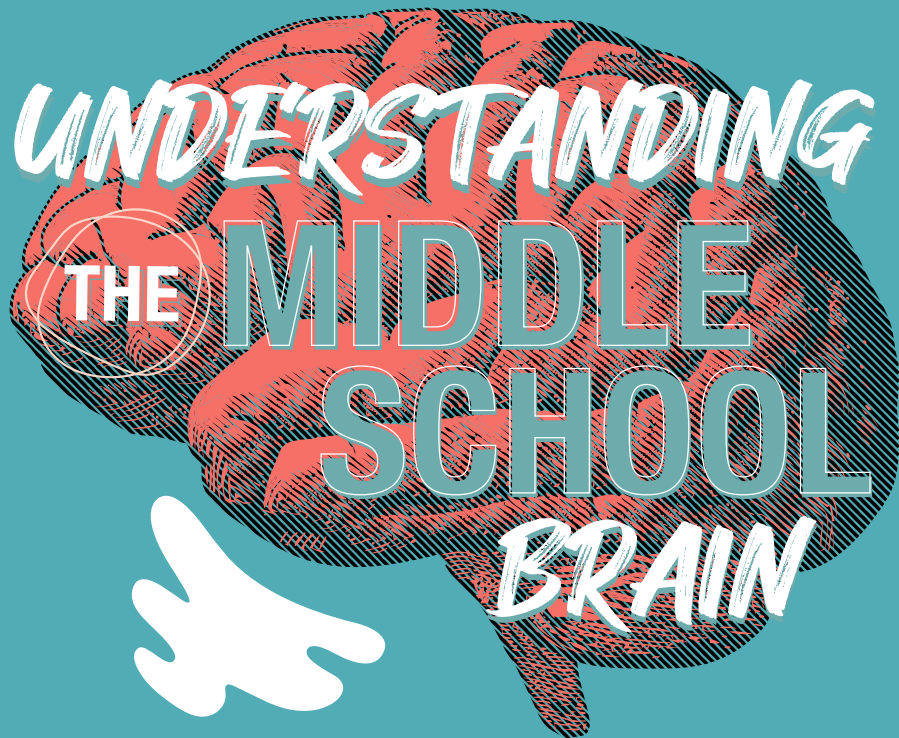






The  
Middle  
School  
Brain





Raising adolescents can be challenging. Sometimes you might wonder why they do things or make decisions that don't make sense. It's because the rational part of their brain is still maturing. In fact, their brains aren't fully developed until age 25. Middle school children think with the emotional part of their brains and often act impulsively, even when they are smart and doing well in school.

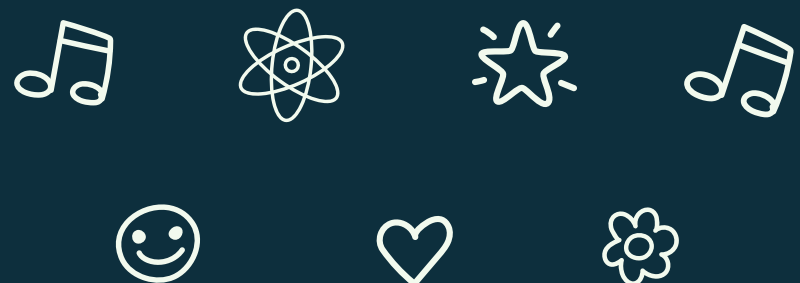


## A Work in Progress

The area of the brain responsible for skills like planning and controlling impulses is located in the front part of the brain and is called the prefrontal cortex. It is one of the last brain regions to mature. Because these planning and self-control skills are still developing, adolescents are more likely to engage in risky behaviors without considering the potential results of their decisions.

Middle school brain development is so intense that it is second only to the brain development a baby undergoes during ages 0-15 months. Although adolescence is a vulnerable time for the brain and for youth in general, most middle school children go on to become healthy adults.

As upsetting as it can be for parents of adolescents to deal with their unpredictable behavior, it should be comforting to know that so much of what's happening with your child is normal and a necessary part of their development as they move into adulthood.





# Effects of Alcohol and Other Drugs

Help protect your child's brain. Get the facts on youth brain development and substance use.



## Alcohol and the Middle School Brain

The legal age to drink alcohol in California is 21. This is based on the fact that a young person's brain is undergoing rapid growth and changes well into adulthood. Using alcohol during this developmental period can actually rewire the brain for substance use disorder. When children start drinking alcohol at a young age, they are more likely to continue the habit into adulthood. In fact, children who begin drinking before age 15 are six times more likely to develop a problem with alcohol later in life than those who begin drinking after age 21.



## Marijuana and the Middle School Brain

Because a young person's brain is still developing until their mid-20s, using marijuana during this time can permanently damage the structure of their brain, specifically the areas dealing with memory and problem solving. Students who use marijuana regularly (defined as once a week or more) tend to get lower grades and are more likely to drop out of school.



## Vape, E-Cigs and the Middle School Brain

Because a young person's brain is still developing until about age 25, it is easier for them to become addicted to nicotine, a dangerous substance found in tobacco products and e-cigarettes. Nicotine is absorbed quickly into the body and goes directly to the brain, activating areas that make one feel satisfied and happy. Both smoking and vaping nicotine put adolescents at risk for becoming lifelong smokers. Using nicotine during the adolescent years can rewire the brain to become more easily addicted to other drugs. It can also have long-lasting effects on brain development, making it harder for children to concentrate, learn, and control their impulses.



## Prescription Medication and the Middle School Brain

Using powerful medications during the middle school years can interfere with important brain development and may rewire the brain for substance use disorder. Not only are children at greater risk of becoming addicted to prescription medications, but misuse or abuse of prescription drugs also increases the risk of using and becoming dependent on other addictive substances.



The  
Pressure  
to Be  
Perfect







**Perfectionism**—the perceived need to be perfect—can contribute to depression, anxiety, alcohol and drug use, and other behavioral health concerns even in middle school. In short, perfectionism can be harmful to a child’s well-being. Social media’s portrayal of perfect online lives can add to these feelings. Children who struggle with perfectionism can turn to alcohol and other drugs as a way to self-medicate or try to fit in better. When youth use drugs and alcohol to numb their pain or gain popularity among their peers, they miss out on learning healthier ways to work through their mental health and social challenges.

# The Perception of Perfection

Youth who live in South Orange County identify that they feel the pressure to be perfect in many aspects of their lives. There’s academic pressure to get the best grades, social pressure to look and act a certain way, and performance pressure to be the best athlete. Sometimes children put this extreme pressure on themselves. Other times, the pressure comes from multiple directions—school, home, coaches, friends, and social media. As your child enters middle school, these pressures begin to build. Now is the time to protect your child and strengthen their ability to succeed amidst the budding pressures of perfectionism.



# Addressing Perfection at Home

Parents are the strongest influence in a child's life, even if your middle school student doesn't show it! It's important to let your child know you understand these pressures and actively listen to them when they voice what they are going through. It's important to make sure they understand the difference between striving for excellence, which is a healthy goal, and trying to achieve perfection, which is impossible.



Many parents find it helpful to have a family discussion about values and expectations. What's in the best interest of your child's emotional well-being? Is there too much pressure, either from you or your child, to earn good grades? How do compassion, self-motivation, effort, hard work, and success fit together in a healthy way for your child and your family?

Providing stability and support to our children by encouraging honest dialogue will help them build resiliency and lifelong coping skills so they won't need to lean on substances or risky behaviors when the pressure is on.



# Resources



## Wellness & Prevention Center

949-680-0516 | [wpc-oc.org](http://wpc-oc.org)

The Wellness & Prevention Center provides individual, family, and group mental health services in South Orange County. They specialize in serving youth ages 12-25 at easy-to-access locations in schools and in the community. They offer services regardless of ability to pay or insurance coverage.

## OC Links

2-1-1 | [211oc.org](http://211oc.org)

By dialing 2-1-1, you will be connected to a live Information and referral specialist who will match you to resources in your community based on your needs. Assistance is confidential and offered in over 170 languages.

## Partnership to End Addiction – Helpline for Parents

855-378-4373 | [drugfree.org](http://drugfree.org)

Call for free confidential conversations with trained counselors for support and guidance on preventing substance use and managing recovery from addiction in English or Spanish. Helpline also offers parent coaching from trained volunteers with lived experience.

## Substance Abuse and Mental Health Helpline

800-662-4357 | [samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline](http://samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline)

24-hour help including free and confidential treatment referral and information about mental or substance use disorders, prevention, and recovery in English and Spanish.

## Center for Parent and Teen Communication

[parentandteen.com/seek-professional-help](http://parentandteen.com/seek-professional-help)

Information to strengthen family relationships and build youth with character strengths that prepare them for healthy, successful, and meaningful lives. Includes a self-care plan for parents and a stress management plan for teens.



For a full list of local resources and additional tips:



WEBSITE  
[RaisingHealthyTeens.org](http://RaisingHealthyTeens.org)



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