

# Navigating the Middle Years

*The tween years can have their challenges, but they also have their joys! These tips will help you steer your way through the middle grades with success—and enjoyment—for both you and your middle grader.*



## Connect with your tween

Getting your child to communicate with you may just be a matter of finding the right time and place. Try a different setting, such as in the car on the way to soccer practice or while taking a walk around the block. He may open up more than he would if you were just staring at each other. Also, listen for openings that he gives you. If he mentions a topic he's interested in or brings up something funny that happened in school, be ready to listen and follow his lead.



casm or negative language, and she'll be more likely to respond in kind. A good rule of thumb: Don't say anything you wouldn't want someone else to say to her.

## Think before you speak

Your middle grader missed the bus for the second time this week, and you have to drive him to school again! Before bringing up a topic that makes you angry, use strategies to calm down, such as breathing deeply or simply waiting

## Model respect

Set the stage for better interactions—and a better relationship—by treating your tween with respect. When you chat, put away distractions like your phone, and look her in the eye. Speak nicely, avoiding sar-



a few minutes. Then, start the conversation on a positive note by saying something like, "You know I love you no matter what. Here's what we need to work on...." Your discussion will be more peaceful and productive if he feels loved and understood from the beginning.

## Agree on guidelines

Make a plan to ensure civil discussions with your tween. For instance, you might say that each person should be able to speak without being interrupted. Or set ground rules about no put-downs or yelling. Also, try to use *I* messages so no one feels attacked. You could say to her, "I feel worried when you don't come straight home from school," instead of "You never follow my rules!" Then, to avoid recycling old fights, only bring up past issues if they relate to the matter at hand.

## Listen to problems

When your child is faced with a challenge, such as an argument with a friend, try to avoid jumping right in with your opinion. Instead, ask how he thinks he should handle the situation. If he needs help, share how you dealt with a similar issue (perhaps you asked a mutual friend for help in making up). You'll give your middle grader valuable problem-solving practice, and you'll reduce the chances that he'll get defensive.

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**Compromise wisely**

If you find yourselves at odds, remember this: It might be possible for you both to get what you want. In fact, you'll help your tween develop conflict-resolution skills by negotiating solutions. Say she wants to sleep at a friend's house, but you want her to get a good night's rest for her game the next day. You might suggest that she go to her friend's for a while but come home to sleep. Or she may ask if her friend can sleep over at your house instead, and you could make sure they get to bed on time. Encourage her to listen to your suggestions with an open mind, and you do the same for her.

**Notice good behavior**

Middle graders still aim to please you — especially if they feel appreciated. Recognize good deeds with a high five, a "Way to go!" or a sincere thank-you. Consider giving an extra privilege from time to time. For instance, if your child volunteers to help a younger sibling with homework or cleans the family room without being asked, you might let him choose your weekend family activity or pick the film for movie night.



**Put it in writing**

Making your expectations clear will put you and your middle grader on the same page. Together, make a list of household rules covering safety (drugs, Internet use), school (attendance, homework), and family life (chores, meals). Then lay out consequences for breaking rules (grounding, loss of phone privileges). *Tip:* Having fewer rules makes them easier for your child to remember—and for you to enforce—so try sticking to the ones that matter most ("Finish homework before playing video games"). If she argues, simply point to the rule and walk away. She'll get the message, and you won't invite a fight.



**Find opportunity in mistakes**

Every mistake can be an important learning opportunity. If your middle grader is upset because he didn't spend enough time studying for a big math test and got a poor grade, encourage him to come up with a plan for next time. He might set up a calendar and organize study guides. Let him know there will be more chances to do well—and that you're proud of him for thinking ahead.

**Choose your battles**

Along with your child's desire for more independence comes a need to control her own environment. Try to decide what's most important to you. Maybe you can overlook a messy room or loud music, but you probably want to put your foot down about school attendance or dating. Letting the "little stuff" go will give her small victories that will mean a lot to her.

**Take care of yourself**

Calm, happy parents tend to have calmer, happier kids. Think of ways to relax when parenting your middle grader becomes stressful. For example, you might read a book or take a bath. It's also helpful to chat with friends who are parents of tweens and share tips on handling parenting situations. You will feel better knowing you're not alone—and you may even find solutions you hadn't thought of!

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# Reading and Writing in Content Areas

When you think of classes where your child needs strong reading and writing skills, you probably think of English or language arts. But reading and writing are crucial for learning science, social studies, math, and other subjects, too. Share these ideas with your youngster.



## READING STRATEGIES

Help your child gain more knowledge when she reads with these tips for before, during, and after reading.

### Before reading...

#### ● Scan for main ideas

What will a textbook chapter cover? Before your middle grader starts to read, suggest that she notice the title, scan the headings, and look through the review questions at the end. These sections will let her know what main ideas (the most important things the author has to say about a topic) will be covered. Reading with a purpose in mind will improve her comprehension.

#### ● Make a "KWL" chart

Encourage your child to create a chart that contains details about the subject. Have her divide a sheet of paper into three columns: "Know," "Want to know," and "Learned." She can list facts she already knows in



the first column (there are three branches of the federal government) and add things she wants to know in the second column (what the judicial branch does). Then, when she reads, she can write new information she learns in the last column and check on facts she wrote in the first one.

### During reading...

#### ● Ask questions

Readers who make up questions to answer as they read understand the material better. Your youngster can think about the main ideas and then ask himself questions that will help him read for supporting details. For instance, if a main idea is "Renewable energy comes in many forms," he might ask, "What are different forms of renewable energy?" Then, he can read for the details (geothermal, hydropower, solar, wind).

#### ● Get the picture

Visualizing information may boost your middle grader's understanding. He might make a time line to track historical dates (inventions of the 19th century, the presidency of Abraham Lincoln). Or he could sketch out a word problem in math class. For example, to find the total square feet of carpet needed for two rooms, he could draw a rectangle for each room and label the length and width. Then, he can use it to

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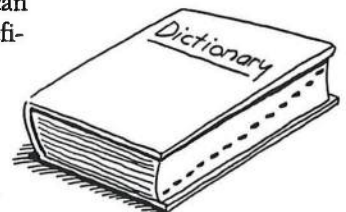
## What's that word?

Tackling new information is easier when your child understands the words he's reading. Boost his vocabulary with these ideas:

- Pay attention to new words. They may appear in bold or italic type or in a separate box on the page.
- Learn definitions. Sometimes the meaning of a word is right in the same sentence. ("The least common denominator, or the smallest number that can be used as the denominator for both fractions, of  $\frac{1}{2}$  and  $\frac{2}{3}$  is 6.") Other times,

reading the whole passage can make the meaning clear. Definitions may also be in a separate box on the page or in the book's glossary.

- Make a list. Write down new words and their definitions as you come across them. Keep the list on hand for easy reference.



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write an equation. By multiplying the length and width of each one and adding the two results together, he'll discover how much carpet he will need for both rooms.

### After reading...

#### ● Retell

Have your child talk about what she read and learned. Let her lead the conversation by telling you the most interesting facts she discovered. Then, pose questions that will encourage her to give you details. For example, if she said, "Instrumental music was very popular during the Renaissance," you might ask her to name a few of the instruments. Discussing the information will help her remember more of what she learned.

#### ● Read it again

Is there a section that confused her? Has she forgotten an explanation? Suggest that she reread. The extra practice will reinforce new vocabulary, provide an opportunity to find things she missed, and help her make sense of things she might not have understood the first time around.



## WRITING TO LEARN

Writing is a hands-on way for your middle schooler to learn and remember information in every class. Try these creative ideas that make it fun to put ideas into writing.

#### ● Illustrated notes

A picture might be worth a thousand words, especially if it's part of your child's notes. In science class, she might draw and label a flow chart to show how the water cycle works. In English, she could create comic strips and use vocabulary words in the dialogue bubbles. Adding an image to her words gives her one more way to connect with what she is learning.

#### ● Letter writing

Putting information into a new format encourages your middle grader to think about main ideas, pull out important details, and explain them in his own words. All are great ways to make the facts stick in his memory. For example, he could turn what he has learned into a letter. Say he's studying Brazil in geography. He might imagine that he's a tourist visiting the country and write a letter to a grandparent about his trip. He could describe the monkeys, birds, and trees he saw when he walked through a rain forest, for example.



#### ● Study guides

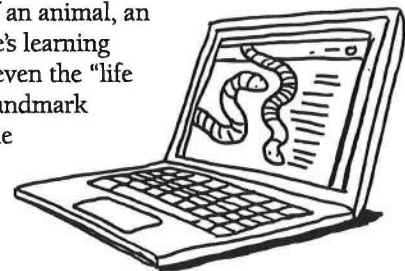
Making a study guide is a great way to prepare for a test. Suggest that your child create study guides as she reads textbook chapters. For instance, for a chapter on World War II, she can divide a sheet of paper into four sections ("causes," "major battles," "key people," and "outcomes"). Then, as she reads, she should hunt for details and write them in the correct section. Suggest that she use a different-colored pen for each topic and keep her notes brief (lists with three or four bullets work well).

#### ● Scrapbook of knowledge

What did your middle grader learn this week? Have him make a scrapbook of the material, and he'll be more likely to understand—and enjoy—it. He could clip newspaper articles of current events his social studies class has discussed and write his own captions for them. If he's reading about nutritious foods in health class, he could create menus for healthy meals. He might also include step-by-step directions for his science fair project along with a photo of the finished project.

#### ● Unlikely biographies

Your middle grader has probably read a biography of a historical figure—but anything can have a life story. Encourage her to write a short biography of a character from a novel she's reading in literature class (*Jane Eyre*). *Idea:* She could bring a 21st-century twist to her work by creating an imaginary Facebook page for Jane Eyre, with entries Jane might have written about her job as a governess or her wedding day and comments from other characters. Or your child could write a biography of an animal, an insect, or a plant she's learning about in science or even the "life story" of a famous landmark (Statue of Liberty, the Sphinx) that she's studying in social studies.



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# How to Give and Get Respect

*Being respectful helps your middle grader get along with family members, teachers, and peers. And this important habit can lead to success in school and in the future. Encourage her to treat others well, use good manners, and follow rules.*



## Respect yourself

People who respect themselves believe that others should treat them well. Here are ways your tween can foster self-respect.

**Stay true to yourself.** Your child will earn self-respect by knowing who she is and standing by what she believes in. For instance, if she enjoys time to herself, she shouldn't feel pressured to say yes to every invitation to hang out with friends. If she doesn't think kids should smoke, she shouldn't act like



cigarettes are cool. It might not always be easy, but she'll respect herself more in the long run.

**Do your best.** By working hard in school and at extracurricular activities, your tween demonstrates respect for herself. Explain that you want her to put effort into whatever she does. For instance, doing homework carefully, studying for tests, and practicing her musical instrument regularly all show that she takes pride in her work.

## Respect others

Your middle grader won't agree with everyone all the time. These ideas can help him respect people in different situations.

**Model what you mean.** Your child will learn by following your example. If he is disrespectful, use it as an opportunity to

model respect. Focus on his behavior ("I don't like the way you are speaking to me") rather than on *him* ("You are so rude!"). *Tip:* Reinforce his respectful behavior by pointing it out. For example, if he tells you he was upset when you mentioned his grades in front of his aunt, you might say, "I appreciate your waiting until we got home to tell me. Let's talk about it now."

**Focus on words and actions.** Ask your tween to consider how what he says and does affects others. Does he make people feel respected? For instance, if he gets a grade he doesn't understand, help him practice how to bring it up with his teacher using a respectful tone. ("I'm confused about why I got a C. Do you have time to explain it to me?") Or if he disagrees with a classmate about who should be elected student council president, he could focus on the issues rather than criticizing the candidates. *Idea:* Have him think of people he looks up to and how they talk to and act toward others. They can help him understand what respect looks and sounds like.



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## Mind your manners

Using basic manners communicates respect. Help your child make a good impression with these tips.

**Practice everyday manners.** Prepare your youngster for common situations by practicing polite behavior. For example, act out how to introduce someone. (“Natalie, this is Jack. Jack, Natalie.”) Or he can work on accepting compliments gracefully by smiling and saying, “Thank you.”

**Discuss etiquette challenges.** Brainstorm situations your tween might find himself in where he’s unsure what to do. Talk about what to do if someone gives him a birthday

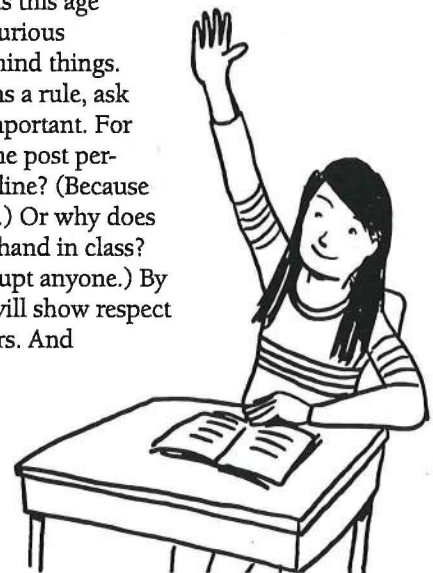
present and he already has the item. Explain that it’s possible to be both honest *and* polite by making a nice comment. (“This is my favorite color. Thanks!”) Or if he gets a phone call when he’s in line to order food, he could step outside to answer or return the call later.

## Follow the rules

Abiding by rules shows respect for authority and can help your middle grader stay safe and get along with others.

**Hold your child accountable.** Show your tween that you take school and household rules seriously by expecting her to follow them. For example, if the school dress code says no tank tops, don’t allow her to wear them. The more you stand by rules, the more likely she is to respect them as well.

**Explain rules.** Kids this age are often genuinely curious about the reasons behind things. If your child questions a rule, ask why she thinks it’s important. For instance, why can’t she post personal information online? (Because strangers could see it.) Or why does she have to raise her hand in class? (So she doesn’t interrupt anyone.) By following rules, she will show respect for teachers and others. And when people feel respected, they are more likely to respect her in return.



## Be a good sport

Student athletes who treat opponents, teammates, coaches, and officials with dignity show good character—and earn respect as a result. Share these ways your child can demonstrate respect on the field or court:

- Play by the rules, regardless of whether your actions can be seen by coaches or officials.
- Avoid “trash talking” to intimidate or put down opponents.
- Accept officials’ calls graciously, even if you don’t agree with them.



You can also set an example of respectful behaviors for your tween when you’re watching a sporting event with these tips:

- Offer encouragement (“Way to go!”), and refrain from booing or making negative remarks.
- Be polite to opposing teams and their fans. For example, say hello, or congratulate them on a win.
- Discuss concerns with your youngster’s coach privately, rather than in front of other players.

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# Organized for School Success



Now that your child is in middle school, she may have six or seven desks, classrooms, and teachers—plus a locker! And she's expected to take increasing responsibility for her own learning and success, laying the groundwork for even more responsibility in high school and beyond.

All of that change means organization is more important than ever. Here are ways to help your tween organize her time, study efficiently, and make sure assignments are finished and turned in.

## Manage time wisely

Being a good time manager includes knowing what you *have* to do and what you *want* to do, as well as accurately judging how long each activity will take. Consider these ideas for helping your child learn to manage time well so she can maximize her learning.

### Write it down

Encourage your tween to think of her student planner as her sidekick on her journey through middle school. Suggest that she use one color to write required tasks (homework, band practice) and another color for those she'd like to make time for (riding bikes with friends, organizing her photos). Let her know in advance about appointments or family events so she can include those, too. Having all of her commitments written down in one spot will let her see them at a glance so she always knows what's ahead.

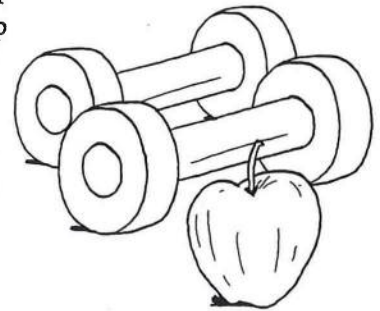
### Learn to estimate time

Have your middle grader time himself doing activities like studying or researching. For instance, he may plan to spend 30 minutes on Saturday doing library research for a social studies report, but find out that it actually takes him an hour. By paying attention to his start and stop times, he can estimate more accurately in the future and set aside the time he will need.



## Stick to routines

Regular daily routines often lead to better organization and greater school success. Suggest that your tween develop the ones that work best for him. They should include 9–11 hours of sleep, healthy meals and snacks, at least an hour of exercise, and time for family and friends. Help him make adjustments if a routine isn't working. If it's hard for him to get started on homework right after school, perhaps he'll decide to relax for 15 minutes rather than jumping in immediately.



## Set mini-deadlines

Your tween can manage time better by breaking tasks into chunks. She could write down deadlines for specific parts of her work. If she starts studying for a history test at 5 p.m., she might plan to read and take notes on one chapter by 5:30 p.m., then quiz herself until 6 p.m. If she has a science project due in two weeks, she could give herself one week to complete the experiment, two days to write up her findings, two days to make a poster, and three days to practice presenting her project.

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## Arrange homework space

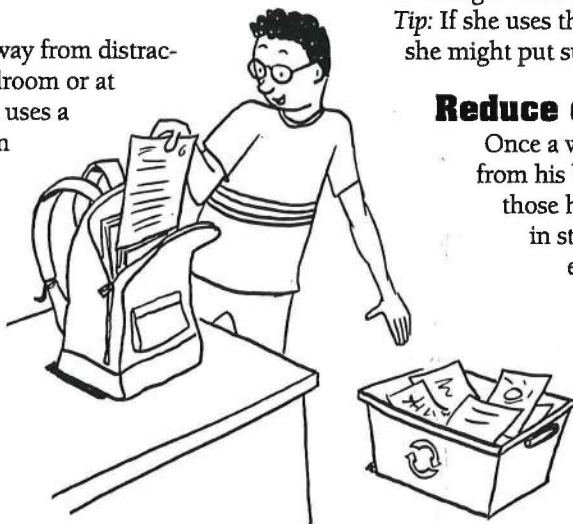
Your child is in charge of doing his own homework, but you can help by making sure he has what he needs. Try these tips for creating a well-stocked homework spot where he can focus on his assignments and do his best work.

### Pick a place

Have him choose a well-lit location away from distractions. He could work at a desk in his bedroom or at the dining room table, for example. If he uses a shared spot like the kitchen, cut down on noise by making homework time “quiet time” for everyone. Younger siblings might read or color, and perhaps you’ll also read or do paperwork.

### Stock supplies

Let your middle grader decide how to organize her supplies. She could decorate glass jars for storing scissors, pens, and pencils. Zipper bags might hold paper clips, erasers, and sticky notes. And shoeboxes are ideal for items like



a tape dispenser, a pencil sharpener, a hole punch, a ruler, a stapler, and index cards. Suggest that she keep a dictionary handy and notebook paper and graph paper in a magazine file or a drawer. For work on a laptop or tablet, she should keep her charger close by and monitor the battery level.

*Tip:* If she uses the kitchen table for homework, she might put supplies on a shelf in a cabinet.

### Reduce clutter

Once a week, he could clear old papers from his backpack. He should throw out those he doesn’t need and store the rest in stacked plastic trays for future reference. For example, he might save old quizzes and tests to study for final exams. This will help him find what he needs quickly and make sure important papers don’t get lost.

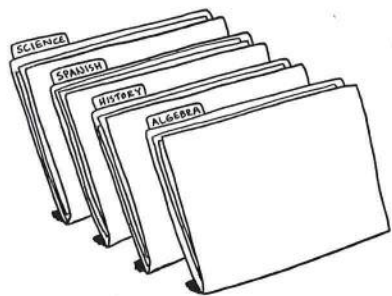
## Stay on top of schoolwork

Middle school courses require your tween to juggle a range of assignments, papers, and projects. She’ll need to take materials back and forth—from home to her locker to the right class—and be sure everything gets turned in on time. Here are suggestions for organizing assignments.

### Pack wisely

At the end of each school day, she can glance at her assignments in her student planner to see which textbooks and other supplies she has to take home. For example, she may need her trumpet to practice a new song or her English study guide to prepare for a test on a novel.

### File assignments immediately



Have your middle grader label a separate folder or binder for each subject and keep his backpack nearby when he does homework. As he finishes each assignment, he can put it in the

correct folder or binder and into his backpack right away. That way, he’ll be sure to take completed work with him rather than leaving assignments on his desk or on the kitchen table in the morning.

### Turn it in

Remind your tween that taking homework to school is just part of her job—she won’t get credit if it’s left in her backpack or locker! She should make a habit of taking out her homework as soon as she arrives in class and putting it in the designated spot to be graded. Then, she can check it off in her planner so she knows she turned it in. *Tip:* If your child is absent, point out that she is responsible for asking her teachers what she missed so she can make it up.



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# Healthy & Drug-Free

*Middle school is an exciting time. Your child is becoming familiar with a new world of classes and peers and growing into a young adolescent. But it is also a time of increased risk, since she may be exposed to alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.*

*The good news? You can have great influence over your tween's choices. Consider these ways to help her avoid risky behaviors.*



## Keep stress at bay

Young people sometimes turn to alcohol or other drugs when they are overwhelmed. So if your middle grader knows how to cope with stress, she'll be less likely to use substances as an escape.



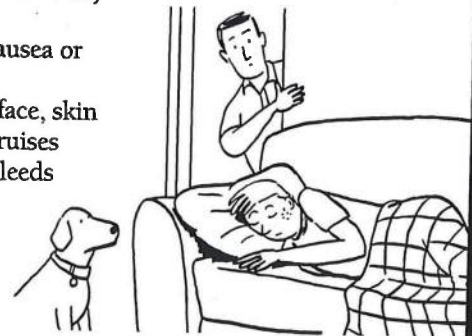
Being on top of her schedule will go a long way toward helping her feel in control. Encourage your child to write her commitments and assignments in a planner, and remind her of upcoming appointments to add. Also, have her create routines for morning, after school, and bedtime to make life more predictable and her days easier to manage. For example, each evening she could put her backpack by the door and set out clothes and breakfast foods for the next morning.

Teach coping skills by sharing ways you cope with stress. You might say, "I've had a tough day. I think I'll take a bath to unwind." Ask what makes her feel relaxed (perhaps reading or drawing). Suggest that she do those activities each day to stay calm.

## Watch for warning signs

Symptoms of drug use can be similar to typical tween behaviors, so watch for whether they continue longer than normal or if two or more are happening together. Here are common warning signs:

- Withdrawing from family, friends, and activities
- Significant drop in grades
- Unusually tired or overly energized
- Unexplained nausea or vomiting
- Red or flushed face, skin irritations, or bruises
- Frequent nosebleeds or runny nose
- Spots around the mouth
- Increased use of eyedrops (to reduce redness)
- Sudden use of air fresheners or incense (to mask drug, cigarette, or alcohol odor)
- Unusual activity with money (frequently asking for money, selling items, stealing money)



If you suspect your child is using drugs, check with his teachers and school counselor. Ask your youngster directly—let him know you care about his safety and want to get him help. If he denies using drugs but symptoms continue, take him to the doctor. You can also call the Partnership for Drug-Free Kids helpline (855-378-4373).



**Find healthy activities**

Pursuing wholesome activities will fill your tween's free time when he might otherwise get into trouble. They can also help him meet adults and peers who are good influences and give him a chance to develop new skills. In turn, those skills may boost his self-esteem and prevent drug use.

Have your middle grader check the school office or website for extracurricular offerings and look into community center programs, too. He could also consider volunteering for a cause (say, collecting books for a children's hospital). Encourage him to chat with friends to see what they do after school—he may want to join a club or play a sport with a buddy.

**Keep communication lines open**

Talking regularly with your middle schooler about drugs and alcohol is one of the best ways to keep her from experimenting. Start by asking what she knows about these substances. Make it clear she's not allowed to try them. Point out that using mind-altering drugs at her age is especially harmful because her brain and body are still growing. Also, focus on risks that will matter to her like getting kicked off her sports team, losing friends, or embarrassing herself. If she has questions, answer them if you can, or tell her you'll find out the facts.

Then, discuss ways for her to turn down alcohol or drugs. She might simply say, "No, thanks" and walk away. Or she could try humor. ("I like my brain the way it is.") Another idea is to use school or activities as an excuse. ("I have a test tomorrow" or "I can't risk my swim coach finding out.") *Note:* Make sure she knows she can contact you for a ride or help getting out of an uncomfortable situation.



**Drugs: Be in the know**

Depending on where you live, some of these drugs may be more popular than others. Ask school officials or local police what they see most often, and read online handbooks like [drugfree.org/drug-guide](http://drugfree.org/drug-guide).

**Alcohol.** Kids who start drinking at younger ages have a much greater chance of becoming addicted. Keep an eye on alcohol if you have it at home (for instance, checking the level in liquor bottles). Better yet, lock it up.

**Nicotine.** While smoking is on the decline among young people, e-cigarettes are gaining in popularity. They may help adults wean themselves off of regular cigarettes, but using e-cigs to inhale nicotine-based vapor can get young people hooked.

**Marijuana.** Surveys show that many adolescents don't see "weed" as risky anymore—especially since it's legal for adults in some states. Explain that marijuana carries special dangers for adolescent brains. In addition to being illegal for children, it can damage attention and memory, making it harder for kids to learn.



**Inhalants.** Ordinary household products like shoe polish, glue, and spray paint can be inhaled or sniffed to get high. Your child might not realize they present serious hazards, including liver, lung, kidney, and brain damage, heart attacks, and even death.

**Over-the-counter and prescription drugs.** Some kids use cough syrup, painkillers, tranquilizers, antidepressants, sleeping pills, or stimulants (such as ADHD medicines), thinking they aren't as dangerous as "regular" drugs. However, they are habit-forming and harmful—and even deadly—if not used as directed. Lock them in cabinets, and dispose of unneeded medications immediately.

**Heroin.** The use of heroin is increasing rapidly—and so are deaths from overdoses on this dangerous drug. Because some heroin users are first addicted to prescription opioids, dispense one dose at a time if they're prescribed for your tween, and keep them away from her otherwise.

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