

Here It Comes! The First Year of Middle School

You've been anticipating this for the past few years — your child's transition from elementary school to middle school. Be warned, this is a critical time and calls for extra vigilance on your part. Your son or daughter may still seem young, but their new surroundings can put them in some mature and tempting situations.

The likelihood that kids will try drugs increases dramatically during this year. Your child is going to meet lots of new kids, seek acceptance, and start to make more — and bigger — choices. For the first time, your kids will be exposed to older kids who use alcohol, tobacco or other drugs. New middle or junior-high schoolers often think these older students are cool and may be tempted to try drugs to fit in.

One type of drug in particular to watch out for is inhalants, since they tend to be abused at a very young age. Inhalants are ordinary household products that are inhaled or sniffed by children to get high — but can cause serious brain damage, among other side effects. Examples include model airplane glue, nail polish remover, cleaning fluids, hair spray, gasoline, air conditioner fluid/Freon, computer duster and cooking sprays. It's important to be aware of these harmful chemicals and be sure to educate your children about their effects as well.

To many middle-school kids, peer approval means everything and your child may make you feel unwelcome. He is going through a time where he feels as though he should be able to make his own decisions and may start to challenge your values. While your child may physically and emotionally pull away from you to establish his own identity — and may even seem embarrassed by you at times — he actually needs you to be involved in his life more than ever before.

Also, be aware that your child is going through some major physical and hormonal changes as well. Her moods may vary as she tries to come to terms with her ever-changing body and the onset of puberty. Keep yourself educated on what to expect — if you reassure her that nothing is out of the ordinary, your child can relax knowing that what she's going through is normal.

To help your child make choices during this critical time, you should:



Make it very clear that you do not want her to use alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, inhalants or other drugs.



Find out if he really understands the consequences of alcohol, tobacco, inhalants and other drug use.



Get to know her friends by taking them to and from after-school activities, games, the library and movies (while being sensitive to her need to feel independent). Check in with her friends' parents often to make sure you share the same anti-drug stance.



Volunteer for activities where you can observe him at school.



Hold a weekly family meeting to check in with each other and address problems or concerns.



Get your kids involved with adult-supervised after-school activities.



Give kids who are unsupervised after school a schedule of activities, limits on their behavior, household chores to accomplish, and a strict phone-in-to-you policy (along with easily accessible snacks).



Make it easy for your child to leave a situation where alcohol, tobacco or other drugs are being used.



Call kids' parents if their home is to be used for a party; get assurance that no alcoholic beverages or illegal substances will be at the party.



Set curfews and enforce them.



Encourage open dialogue with your children about their experiences.