

# Talking to 11-14 Year Olds About Healthy Choices



## KEY FOCUS AT THIS AGE:

### Building confidence, navigating peer pressure and developing personal values

This is a time of big changes – bodies, brains, friend groups, and independence. Pre-teens and early teens are more aware of what's happening in the world around them. They may see vaping at school, hear about drinking at a sleepover, or see substance use on social media. They're starting to form their own opinions – so your guidance is still essential, but the delivery matters more than ever.

## Key messages to share

**"You might hear about or even see people using substances. That doesn't mean it's safe or smart."**

Normalize that exposure will happen, but they don't have to go along with it.

**"Your brain is still growing. Substances can get in the way of your goals, your focus, and your health."** Start to [bring in science-based reasoning and long-term impact](#).

**"People who start to use substances when they are kids or adolescents are more likely to become addicted. Addiction is a disease where a substance tricks your brain and body into telling you they need it, even though it's hurting you."** Explain the unique, science-based risks of experimenting with substances as a young person.

**"You don't have to figure this all out alone. I'll always listen, no matter what."**

Keep the door wide open for future conversations and support.

**"It's okay to say no—even if it feels awkward or hard. Want to practice what you'd say?"** Give them [language and tools](#) to navigate tricky moments confidently.



## How to talk about substances in a natural way

**When they mention substances in peer situations:** “Has anyone ever offered you something like that? What did you think or feel?”

**After a health class or school assembly:** “What did you hear today that surprised you? Anything that didn’t make sense?”

**If they share something they saw online or on TV:** “What do you think that person was trying to show by drinking or smoking in that video?”

**When they’re upset or anxious:** “A lot of people use things like alcohol or cannabis to numb stress. What are some healthier ways we can handle tough feelings?” Practice [healthy coping strategies](#) with them.

## Simple activities to reinforce the message

**Scenario Swaps:** Bring up short, hypothetical situations:

- › “If your friend dared you to hit a vape once, what could you say?”
- › “What would you do if someone brought alcohol to a sleepover?”
- › See more examples and questions for reflection and discussion in [this guide](#).

**Safe Word Strategy:** Come up with a text code they can send if they ever want to leave a situation or call you without explanation (e.g. “pineapple = come get me now”).

**YouTube Debunk:** Watch or discuss a viral trend together that involves substances and break it down – what’s real vs. exaggerated? What might the consequences be?

## Tips for parents & caregivers

- › **Be calm, not reactive.** If they admit to seeing or hearing something risky, thank them for telling you.
- › **Keep asking open-ended questions** – without interrogating or judging.
- › **Encourage their curiosity and questions, but you don’t have to have all the answers.** If you don’t know the answer to their question, say “I’m not sure, let’s look it up together.”
- › **Reinforce that saying ‘no’ means they’re strong** -- not boring or weird.
- › **Praise their healthy choices** more than punishing mistakes.
- › **Model your own healthy coping habits** – what do you do when you’re stressed?
- › **Be honest about your own experiences with substances**, both in your youth and now into adulthood. Don’t condone the behavior, but empathize with their curiosity.

