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.

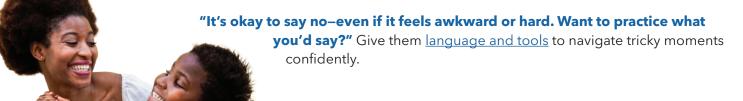
"People who start to use substances when they are kids or adolescents are more likely to become addicted.

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.



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 <u>healthy coping strategies</u> 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.
- **Xeep 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.



