

Parents:

To learn more about risk factors, scan this QR code with your smartphone.



Playbook for Parents of Pre-Teens

Protecting your pre-teen's well-being and heading off problems





What is this playbook about?

This book seeks to help parents of pre-teens (primarily ages 7-12) take actions to help protect their children's health and well-being, now and in the future.

Your understanding of and attention to your pre-teens' mental health, behavior and the way they interact with their environment can have a powerful, positive effect. It can impact how they mature into adolescence and handle such challenges as academic stress, pressure from social media and peers, difficult family circumstances and substance use.

There are many stresses resulting from the 2020-21 pandemic, including a disruption of normal work, home and school routines, social isolation, financial hardship and the anxiety and trauma associated with illness and loss. Therefore, it's more important than ever that parents have the skills and strategies needed to keep their kids safe, resilient and healthy.

Risk factors and protective factors

Some kids sail through adolescence without major difficulty, while others encounter problems of various kinds along the way. These can seem to be random outcomes in our children's lives. However, they can often be traced to experiences in early and middle childhood, coupled with biological vulnerabilities.

Risk factors are characteristics or circumstances in a child's life that increase the likelihood that

they will experience more difficult challenges. This includes mental health problems or substance use. On the other hand, **protective factors** are characteristics or circumstances that can serve as buffers against negative outcomes.

The good news is that there is a great deal that parents can do to strengthen protective factors and minimize or guard against the risk factors in their child's life. This playbook tells you how and provides links to resources that can help.

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The idea of risk factors makes sense, since we look at the risk factors for other ailments like cancer and diabetes. It is important to look at what risk factors could apply to my child

Parent of pre-teen

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Risk factor: Mental health issues

Extensive research from the Kaiser Permanente Division of Research and other reputable sources shows taking early action is crucial. If mental health issues such as ADHD, anxiety, post-traumatic stress and depression can be identified and addressed early – in the pre-teen years or earlier – they are much less likely to be associated with substance use disorders and other problems as the child ages into adolescence and young adulthood.

It's often hard to tell what is a mental health problem and what is normal teen behavior. With mental health issues generally, it's **a persistent pattern of worrisome behavior, observed over an extended period**, that should cause concern and should be explored with the child's pediatrician and/or a mental health specialist.

Additionally, parents' own untreated mental health issues have been shown to place their children at higher risk of developing substance use disorders and mental health problems.

Lastly, do all you can to promote exercise, good nutrition and regular, adequate sleep, which directly impact your child's mental and physical health.

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The Kaiser Permanente Division of Research shows that children who had a trauma or stress related diagnosis before age 12 were 23% more likely than other children to develop a substance use problem in their teens. Children who had a self-harm diagnosis before age 12 were almost 5 times more likely.

Protective factor: Mental health resources



If you think your child may be struggling with mental health issues, learn more at Child Mind Institute ([childmind.org](https://www.childmind.org)). This is a good resource with numerous guides addressing specific mental health disorders: [childmind.org/topics-a-z/guides](https://www.childmind.org/topics-a-z/guides)

Helping children build resilience – an ability to cope with everyday stress and challenges, and to interact in a healthy way with peers – is key to addressing many emotional and behavioral issues. Both the Partnership to End Addiction and the American Psychological Association have resources to help parents foster resilience in their kids: [drugfree.org/article/school-stress-raising-resilient-self-aware-kids](https://www.drugfree.org/article/school-stress-raising-resilient-self-aware-kids) and [apa.org/topics/resilience-guide-parents](https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience-guide-parents)

To learn about mental health issues that they are struggling with themselves, parents should consult NAMI – the National Alliance on Mental Illness ([nami.org/Home](https://www.nami.org/Home)). NAMI has extensive resources as well as a national helpline: 1-800-950-NAMI (6264) or info@nami.org. To find a mental health care provider, ask your primary care physician or check the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) website: [nimh.nih.gov/health/find-help/index.shtml#part_150431](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/find-help/index.shtml#part_150431)



Risk factor: Behavioral Issues

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A child's behavioral issues can often be addressed through supportive parenting, by channeling impulsive behaviors in healthy directions, and by helping them develop resilience and social skills. If left unaddressed, these issues can lead to problematic behavior into the teen years.

»» **Sensation seeking** Try and find ways for your “daredevil” child to take healthy risks that involve little physical danger. Look for physical, mental or social challenges that still provide the thrill of overcoming fear or hesitancy.

»» **Impulsivity** Help channel your child's impulsive behavior into games and the pursuit of set goals, and offer skills and incentives to check impulses and delay gratification.

»» **School connectedness** Resist forcing your children to engage with school. Instead, help by finding ways of motivating your kids to participate and achieve.

As with mental health disorders, it can be challenging to tell the difference between some behavioral problems and normal pre-teen development

Again, parents should be alert to this problematic behavior's severity and duration. This includes continuing inability to control themselves or get along with others or persistent lack of engagement with school. These are causes for concern and for seeking professional help.

Protective factor: Behavior management resources



Sensation-seeking and impulsivity can be addressed by channeling kids' energy into healthy, productive activities. These resources offer ideas and suggestions for how parents can help: drugfree.org/article/healthy-risk-taking/ and scholastic.com/parents/family-life/parent-child/why-impulse-control-harder-ever.html

School connectedness – children's engagement with schoolwork and their teachers -- is important to develop in childhood; it helps position a child for later success, not just in academics but psychologically and socially. Here's a resource that can help: drugfree.org/article/how-your-child-feels-about-school-matters/



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Risk factor: Environmental Issues

Today, even for many pre-teens, “peer pressure” has expanded to include social media. Platforms like Instagram and Snapchat can be fun, empowering and can even create community in some instances, but they can also be dangerous and intimidating. It’s another space requiring monitoring and management by parents. Stress can come from other areas of kids’ environment, including the family dynamic at home.

As your kids enter the tween years and spend a bit more time out of the house, **it’s important to monitor their activities**. Know where they are after school, who their friends are and also set and enforce basic rules. Research shows that children and adolescents whose parents have a clear idea of their activities and friends are far less likely to get involved in risky behaviors.

Some of the same strategies used to build resilience and an ability to cope with social or academic stress, or stress arising from childhood trauma, can be used to help pre-teens deal effectively with the pressures – and sometimes the bullying and meanness – of social media.

At home, it’s critically important to **keep open communication with your pre-teen**, while clearly communicating expectations about behavior. It’s also important to model healthy behaviors, including responsible use of alcohol and legal drugs. When parents consistently use nicotine, alcohol or substances to cope with their own stress, it teaches kids that this is a viable and acceptable strategy for dealing with the pressures in *their* lives.

Finally, **safeguarding substances** such as tobacco, alcohol and prescription medication at home is key to preventing “experimentation” and keeping kids safe.

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I worry about social media, kids don’t necessarily care what they put on the internet; my child was bullied over a picture she posted.

Parent of a younger child



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Protective factor: Resources to manage your child’s environment



There are proven strategies that parents can use in managing their children’s use of technology and social media: seattlemamadoc.seattlechildrens.org/teens-technology-and-parenting-in-2019/; childrenandscreens.com and commonsensemedia.org/blog/tweens

Here is some guidance on parental monitoring and rule-setting: drugfree.org/article/set-limits-monitor/

Helping your child develop resilience can equip them to better handle peer pressure, both online and offline: apa.org/topics/resilience-guide-parents

Good communication between parents and kids takes practice and effort, particularly as kids get older. Here are some educational modules that can help: drugfree.org/skill-building/

Modeling healthy behavior, including ways of coping with parents’ own stress, is key: drugfree.org/article/school-stress-modeling-healthy-behavior-teen/

Be sure to safeguard tobacco, alcohol and prescription medications at home: drugfree.org/article/secure-dispose-of-medicine-properly/





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Parents need to keep their eyes peeled, even at a young age. I need to have more conversations with the pediatrician.

Parent of younger children

A final word

Your child's pediatrician can be helpful in dealing with many of these issues. They can also refer you to other health care providers who specialize in mental health and behavioral problems. As a trusted professional, they can also communicate and reinforce important risk reduction messages to your child.

You should feel able to talk to your pediatrician about any concerns you have with your child's physical or mental health, or about behaviors that are worrying you.

Here are the kinds of questions that may be useful:



- My child has a lot of difficulty interacting with other kids and making friends. Is this normal at their age? What can I do to help?
- My child always seems to be down or stressed out. When I ask them about it, they say it's nothing, but they're just not happy. Should I see a mental health professional about this?
- My child wants nothing to do with school; I can't get them to focus on homework, and I have a feeling they just sit in class all day, not paying any attention. How can I keep this from continuing?
- My child has seen us having drinks and has started asking when they can drink, too. What should I say to them?
- They just legalized marijuana in this state, and my child has been asking if that means it's ok for teenagers to use it? What can I tell them?
- Can you talk with my child about the impact of alcohol, drugs, tobacco or vaping on their health and well-being, to help keep them from starting any of these?
- How can we as a family work on developing resilience so we can weather the stresses that happen?
- Can my mental health and / or history of substance misuse impact my child? What can I do now to help my child avoid future problems?
- You've told me that my family history of addiction is a risk factor for my child for developing a substance use problem. Does that mean they are destined to develop problems?

