



**Parents:**

To learn more about risk factors, scan  
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# Playbook for Parents of Teens

Protecting your teenager's well-being and  
handling challenges they may face

**Partnership  
to End Addiction**



## What is this playbook about?

**We know you want to protect your teenager's health and well-being and respond to the difficulties they may face.**

This playbook offers information and resources to help you raise safe and healthy kids. Here, you'll learn how to address challenges such as mental health problems, behavioral issues, stress from social media, peers, difficult family circumstances and substance use.

There are many stresses resulting from the 2020-21 pandemic. These include 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 childhood and adolescence without major difficulty, while others have problems of various kinds along the way. This can often be traced to two things: risk factors or protective factors.

**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 resources that can help.



**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 teen**

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Developed in collaboration with Kaiser Permanente Division of Research



## Risk factor: Mental health issues

Extensive research from the Kaiser Permanente Division of Research and other reputable sources shows that if mental health issues such as ADHD, anxiety and depression can be identified and addressed early, they are less likely to be associated with serious problems as the child ages into their teen and young adult years.

Mental health issues identified in the teen years can often “co-occur” with substance use. This happens when some kids turn to nicotine, alcohol or other drugs as a way of “self-medicating” for a mental health problem. Self-harm such as cutting, burning or punching is another way some kids cope.

It’s often hard to tell what is a mental health problem and what is normal teen moodiness

or acting out. **With mental health issues generally, it’s an on-going pattern of worrisome behavior.** This pattern observed over an extended period, should cause concern and you should explore any ongoing mental health concerns with your child’s health care provider and/or a mental health specialist.

Additionally, parents’ own untreated mental health issues may place their children at higher risk of developing substance use disorders and mental health problems.

Lastly, parents should do all you can to promote exercise, good nutrition and regular, adequate sleep, all of which directly impact teens’ 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.**





The Child Mind Institute ([childmind.org](https://www.childmind.org)) offers numerous parent guides addressing specific mental health disorders:

[childmind.org/topics-a-z/guides/](https://www.childmind.org/topics-a-z/guides/), including one with specific steps that parents can take to help children who have suffered trauma: [childmind.org/guide/helping-children-cope-traumatic-event/](https://www.childmind.org/guide/helping-children-cope-traumatic-event/)

When a child struggling with a mental health issue is also engaging in substance use, it's important that *both* issues are addressed because they're very likely inter-related. Find our guide, *Substance Use + Mental Health: Your Guide to Addressing Co-occurring Disorders*, at this link: [drugfree.org/parent-e-books-guides/](https://www.drugfree.org/parent-e-books-guides/).

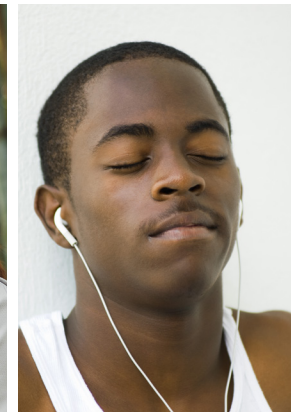
If you are struggling with mental health issues, consult NAMI – the National Alliance on Mental Illness ([nami.org/Home](https://www.nami.org/Home)) or call their national helpline: 1-800-950-NAMI (6264).

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/](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/)

Mindfulness has been shown to reduce stress and improve many mental health problems. Read more here: [positivepsychology.com/mindfulness-based-stress-reduction-mbsr/](https://www.positivepsychology.com/mindfulness-based-stress-reduction-mbsr/)

[mindfulness-based-stress-reduction-mbsr/](https://www.positivepsychology.com/mindfulness-based-stress-reduction-mbsr/)

There are also apps that offer guided meditations, breathing exercises, music and more. Some find yoga to be helpful, with free classes for beginners to advanced practitioners for all ages available online.



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## Risk factor: Behavioral Issues

Taking early action can help your child avoid problematic behaviors as they grow older. You can do this by demonstrating your support as a parent, finding ways for them to take healthy risks and helping them develop resilience and social skills.

We take a closer look at three issues: sensation seeking, impulsivity and a lack of school connectedness.

**Sensation seeking** is a desire for new experiences and excitement — often the kinds of experiences that make your heart pound and take your breath away. While there can be an upside to this, it can also open the door to injury-prone activities, accidents and substance use. Try and find ways for your “daredevil” teen to take healthy risks that involve little physical danger. Look for physical, mental or social challenges that help provide the thrill of overcoming fear or hesitancy.

We all act without thinking through consequences at times. For some teens, **impulsivity** can be a problem when it impacts relationships, self-esteem and school performance. Examples include interrupting

others, dramatic emotional responses, stealing, lying and aggressive behavior. Help channel your child’s impulsive behavior into games and the pursuit of set goals. Teach skills and offer incentives to check impulses. Help your child learn to delay rewards rather than demand instant ones.

Some teens may feel like they don’t belong at their school or that teachers and students don’t care about them. This fosters a **lack of school connectedness**. As a result, they are more likely to engage in risky behaviors including having sex at a young age, substance use, and gang involvement in addition to poorer grades and attendance.

You can help by finding ways to motivate your teen to participate and achieve. Look for opportunities where they can master skills, be involved in the community and take on volunteer activities. This can help build teens’ confidence and social skills and reduce risky behaviors.

As with mental health disorders, it can be challenging to tell the difference between normal teen behavior and a serious problem. Again, parents should be alert to an ongoing pattern of worrisome behavior. Dangerous or bullying behaviors – picking fights, stealing, vandalism, abusive behavior – are causes for concern and for seeking professional help.



Left to right: Vatcharachai Songprasit / EyeEm via Getty Images; Health Korvola / DigitalVision via Getty Images; Adamkaz/E+ via Getty Images;



## Protective factor: Behavior Management Resources



Sensation-seeking and impulsivity can be addressed by channeling teens' energy into healthy, productive activities. These resources offer ideas and suggestions for how you can help:

[drugfree.org/article/healthy-risk-taking/](https://drugfree.org/article/healthy-risk-taking/)

[scholastic.com/parents/family-life/parent-child/why-impulse-control-harder-ever.html](https://scholastic.com/parents/family-life/parent-child/why-impulse-control-harder-ever.html)

Building and strengthening resilience helps equip teens to manage challenges in school, with peers and socializing. It also helps them better understand the pros and cons of social media.

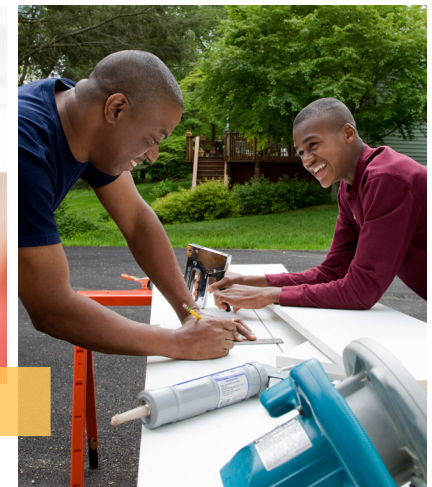
[drugfree.org/article/school-stress-raising-resilient-self-aware-kids/](https://drugfree.org/article/school-stress-raising-resilient-self-aware-kids/)

[www.apa.org/topics/resilience-guide-parents](https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience-guide-parents)

School connectedness — children's sense of belonging at school is important to try and develop in childhood helps position a child for later success, not just in academics but psychologically and socially. Here are resources that can help:

[kidshealth.org/en/parents/school-help-teens.html](https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/school-help-teens.html)

[drugfree.org/article/how-your-child-feels-about-school-matters/](https://drugfree.org/article/how-your-child-feels-about-school-matters/)



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## Risk factor: Environmental Issues



Today, “peer pressure” has expanded to include social media. Platforms like Instagram and Snapchat can be fun, inspiring and can even build community, but they can also be dangerous and intimidating. It’s another space for parent monitoring and management. Stress can also come from other areas of kids’ environment, including the family dynamic at home.

Parental monitoring contributes to key protective factors. It includes knowing your child’s friends and where they are after school,

as well as setting and enforcing basic rules such as curfews and no substance use. This is not easy as teens become more independent. However, there are strategies that you can adopt to stay aware of your teens’ activities and to guard against negative influences.

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

It’s critical to keep open communication with your children (even though teens may resist frequent and lengthy conversations with you!). You can be supportive while clearly communicating your expectations about behavior. It’s also important to model healthy behaviors, including responsible use of alcohol and legal substances. When parents consistently use nicotine, alcohol or other 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.



Clockwise from top left: SDI Productions/E+ via Getty Images; Hill Street Studios/DigitalVision via Getty Images; Lucy Lambriex/DigitalVision via Getty Images



## Protective factor: Resources to manage your child's environment



There are proven strategies that you can use in managing your children's use of technology and social media: [seattlemamadoc.seattlechildrens.org/teens-technology-and-parenting-in-2019/](https://seattlemamadoc.seattlechildrens.org/teens-technology-and-parenting-in-2019/); [childrenandscreens.com](https://childrenandscreens.com) and [commonsensemedia.org/blog/tweens](https://commonsensemedia.org/blog/tweens)

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

Developing resilience can help your child better handle peer pressure, both online and offline. Learn more here: [apa.org/topics/resilience-guide-parents](https://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/](https://drugfree.org/skill-building/)

Modeling healthy behavior, including ways of coping with your own stress, is key: [drugfree.org/article/school-stress-modeling-healthy-behavior-teen/](https://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/](https://drugfree.org/article/secure-dispose-of-medicine-properly/)



We live in a coastal community in Maine that has been devastated by substance use. Marijuana is also legal here and my kids are pretty aware.

**When it comes to resources, I think communication is important and monitoring behaviors to see how your kids react.**

Parent of teen



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## Risk factor: Early Substance Use



Left to right: sturti/E+ via Getty Images; sturti/E+ via Getty Images

“

I practice absolute transparency. I had a meth addiction in my youth, and I want to be honest about my past;

**I want to answer questions honestly and have my kids be honest with me.**

Parent of teen

**Parents should take early substance use by their teen child seriously.** This is especially critical if there are mental health, behavioral or environmental issues present. These risk factors make it more likely that early use, particularly *frequent* early use, may develop into a substance use disorder (sometimes referred to as addiction).

In recent years, research has uncovered a lot more information about the serious and potentially irreversible effects of early alcohol and drug use on the adolescent brain.

An additional factor of concern is a family history of addiction. You can communicate this risk to your teen, while helping them to develop skills for coping with stress and reducing anxiety.





Partnership to End Addiction has multiple resources and services that can help if you are concerned about your child's substance use. Find out more at

[drugfree.org/get-support-now/](https://drugfree.org/get-support-now/)

Check out the full range of resources and services at [drugfree.org/parent-e-books-guides/](https://drugfree.org/parent-e-books-guides/), particularly [\*Nicotine, Alcohol & Other Drugs: A Parent Companion to Center on Addiction's National Survey: Teen Insights into Drugs, Alcohol and Nicotine\*](#)

Frequent substance use is one key indicator of a possible substance use disorder:

[drugfree.org/article/how-to-identify-substance-use-disorder-addiction/](https://drugfree.org/article/how-to-identify-substance-use-disorder-addiction/)

A family history of addiction means that early use — even “experimentation” — by teens is even riskier. Communicate with your

teen about a family history and the role of genetics. At the same time, help them build the resilience needed to cope with everyday stress and anxiety.

[drugfree.org/article/when-addiction-is-in-your-family-tree/](https://drugfree.org/article/when-addiction-is-in-your-family-tree/)

Safeguard and dispose of unwanted or expired medications including over-the-counter medications:

[drugfree.org/prescription-over-the-counter-medicine/](https://drugfree.org/prescription-over-the-counter-medicine/)

[drugfree.org/article/medication-misuse-what-you-need-to-know-to-help-protect-children-teens-and-young-adults/](https://drugfree.org/article/medication-misuse-what-you-need-to-know-to-help-protect-children-teens-and-young-adults/)

[drugfree.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Partnership-for-Drug-Free-Kids-Dispose-Rx-Medication-Disposal-Guide.pdf](https://drugfree.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Partnership-for-Drug-Free-Kids-Dispose-Rx-Medication-Disposal-Guide.pdf)

### Contact our helpline

Our help is free, confidential and safe.

 Text CONNECT to **55753**

 [Schedule a call](#)

 [Email a specialist](#)



### NICOTINE, ALCOHOL & OTHER DRUGS





## Questions to ask your health care provider



Your child's pediatrician can be helpful in dealing with many of these issues. They can:

- Refer you to other health care providers who specialize in mental health and behavioral problems.
- Communicate and reinforce messages to your child.
- Talk with you about your concerns about 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 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?

I'm pretty sure my child is drinking / getting high on weekends with friends. How worried about this should I be? What can I do about it?

My family has a history of addiction and mental illness. Is there anything I can do if my child inherited those tendencies?

My child has been diagnosed with a conduct disorder (or other mental health issues). Are there other conditions that they might be at risk for? What should we be looking out for?

Can you discuss why confidentiality between you and my child is important? In what instances will you tell me if something is wrong?

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?

