

## Ask BYFS

### Risky Behavior in Middle School

***Parent Question: As my child moves on to middle school, how should I prepare her for the likely increased exposure to drugs and alcohol, as well as other things that are not present (hopefully) in elementary school?***

This is a good question to be considering now that your daughter will be exposed to students who have different levels of maturity and are of different temperaments. Some children are more inclined to be risk takers than others and this will certainly have an impact on the decisions they make in the pre-teen and teen years.

Here are some thoughts and suggestions:

1. If you are parenting with someone, talk with each other about your expectations for your child. These can be very emotional conversations because parents bring many experiences from their pasts including their own teen years and their family of origin to values about alcohol and substance use. By senior year of high school, Bedford's most recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) indicates that 48% of seniors had experimented with alcohol. Marijuana is usually the other drug of choice. The YRBS indicates that 35% of students have experimented with marijuana. Be prepared.
2. Realize that there will need to be on-going and open communication about your expectations. Most parents would prefer that their children wait until they were of legal age to use alcohol, if they use it at all, but statistics tell us that youth do not always do that. Be sure to state your expectations. Keep the message simple and keep the door open to discussion.
3. Maintain an on-going relationship with your child that leaves room for them to come to you if they have questions or concerns about things they see and hear in school. Ask questions periodically, like "Do you ever hear about anyone drinking alcohol, smoking or having sex?"
4. Health classes can teach students the facts about alcohol and drugs, but only parents are in the position to share values. Use opportunities to share values by watching television shows, commercials and movies together. Without being too preachy or annoying, try to engage in dialogue about decisions being made by teens regarding their choices about alcohol use, sex, lying, and other important issues.

5. If you have a conversation when your child is in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, you will need to have a conversation every year. Some youth may not pay attention to what they hear until it directly affects them.
6. Prepare your home by minimizing access to alcohol. Availability may not be a temptation for your child, but it may be for a friend who comes to your home to visit.

Final thoughts: When youth experiment, it is usually not "peer pressure" that drives them, but their own curiosity and access. If you have a risk taker, try to direct them to safe and healthy risks. Remember - these are children to whom we are teaching appropriate behavior, not adults with adult knowledge and decision making abilities.

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