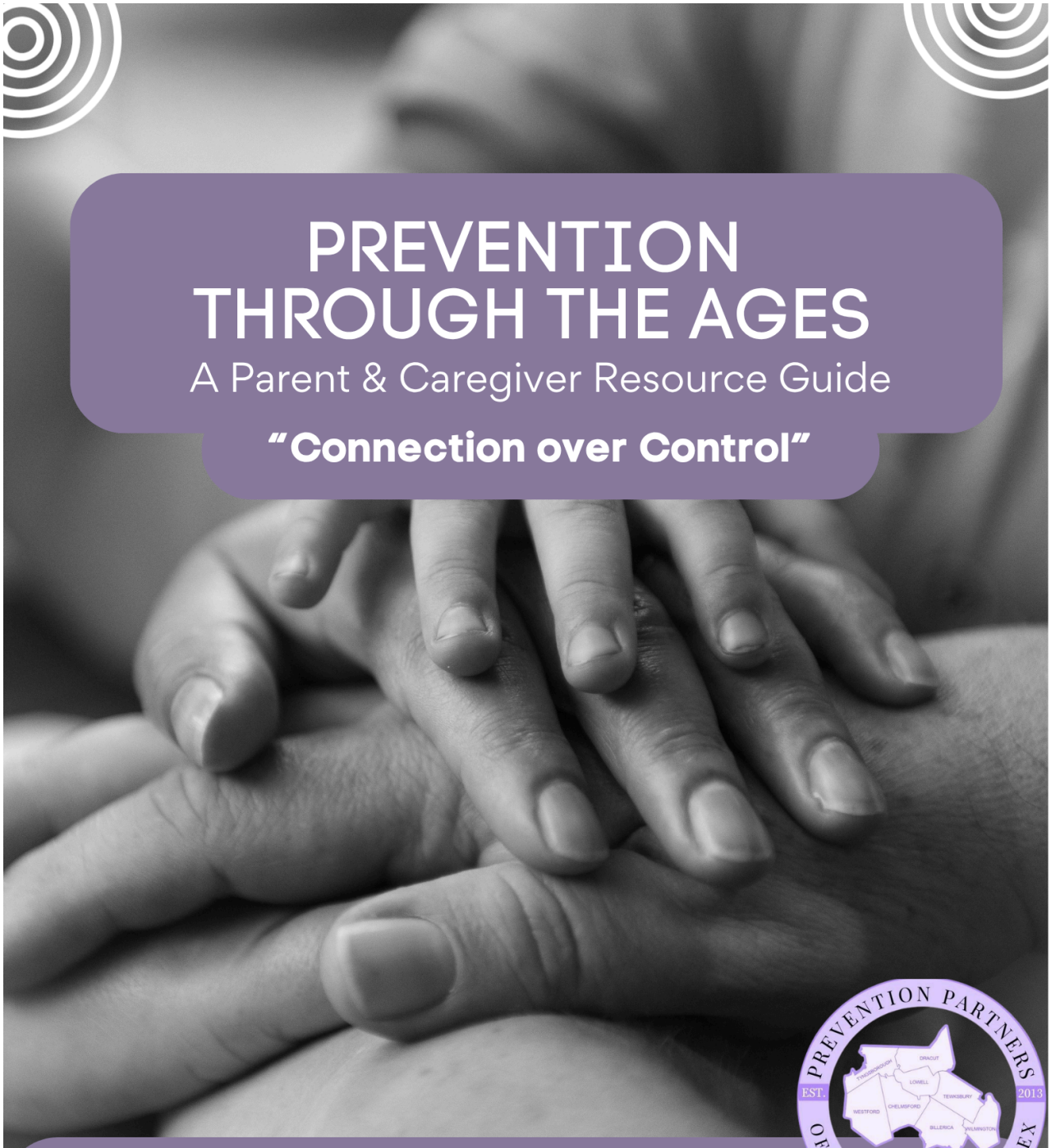


# PREVENTION THROUGH THE AGES

## A Parent & Caregiver Resource Guide

**"Connection over Control"**

PREVENTION PARTNERS OF NORTHERN MIDDLESEX
EST. 2013

https://preventionpartnersnm.org/

https://www.facebook.com/RegionalPPNM

## Substance Use Disorder Prevention Through the Years!

# CONNECTION OVER CONTROL

### A Parent & Caregiver Resource Guide from Ages 3 to 24

*Greater Lowell & Middlesex County*

*This resource guide is designed to provide parents and caregivers with a wide range of resources tailored to each developmental age and stage. Because of the breadth of information included, the guide is extensive and can feel like a lot to take in at first. To make it easier to navigate, the digital table of contents is interactive and will take you directly to the specific age group, topic, or resource you are looking for.*

*https://preventionpartnersnm.org/parent-caregiver-resource-guide/*

*Our goal is to make the guide as user-friendly and accessible as possible while still providing the depth and variety of resources families may need.*

## In an Emergency

School-based resources are not a substitute for emergency or crisis services. If there is an immediate danger or medical emergency, **call 911.**

For mental health, suicide, or substance-use crisis support, call or text the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at **988.**

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## Substance Use Disorder Prevention Through the Years!

# CONNECTION OVER CONTROL

### A Parent & Caregiver Resource Guide from Ages 3 to 18

*Greater Lowell & Middlesex County*

## Connection is prevention.

Helping parents build strong relationships, protective experiences, belonging, and healthy independence during adolescence.

## Why Connection Matters

Each stage of growth brings enormous change for our youth, with the teenage years often presenting greater challenges. Youth are developing their identities, becoming more independent, building relationships outside their families, navigating social media and peer pressure, making decisions about substances and relationships, and beginning to imagine their lives as adults.

Prevention is not simply about stopping risky behavior. It is about strengthening the relationships, skills, support systems, confidence, and sense of belonging that help young people make healthy decisions. Substance use disorder prevention begins in the early years by building a strong foundation that helps youth navigate challenges as they grow—without feeling left out or pressured to engage in risky behaviors.

As children grow, prevention becomes less about control and more about connection. The goal is not to control every choice your child makes, but to guide them, build their confidence, and create a relationship they can turn to when they need you most, without judgement or criticism.

## Positive Childhood Experiences

Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) can promote healthy development and help buffer the effects of adversity. Massachusetts highlights four building blocks that communities and families can strengthen:

- Nurturing, supportive relationships with family, peers, and trusted adults.
- Safe, stable, and equitable environments at home, school, and in the community.
- Social and civic engagement that creates belonging and connectedness.
- Opportunities for social and emotional growth, including decision-making, coping, communication, and resilience.

This can look like knowing there is an adult who will listen, feeling accepted at home, belonging at school, participating in a team or community activity, having mentors, and being given age appropriate opportunities for independence.

## Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences (HOPE)

Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences or HOPE is inspiring a movement to advance health and well-being for children, families and communities.

## Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Why Does it Matter?

We define social and emotional learning (SEL) as an integral part of education and human development. SEL is the process through which all young children and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. SEL can help all young people and adults thrive personally and academically, develop and maintain positive relationships, become lifelong learners, and contribute to a more caring, just world.

## Restorative Practices Restorative Practices PPNM

Restorative Practices are a set of tools, developed out of the principles of Restorative Justice, that are used to build and repair relationships among community members, oftentimes serving as an alternative to punitive discipline. Restorative Practices are designed to foster healthy dialogue and increase mutual understanding and empathy among the participants, leading to an overall sense of connection and increasing the capacity to handle conflict in a way that promotes growth and repairs relationships." – Pathways to Restorative Communities.

## Drug Facts: Mind Matters Series from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)

Mind Matters invites young teens to take a scientific journey to learn about the brain's complex responses to specific drugs, including cocaine, inhalants, K2/Spice and Bath Salts, marijuana, methamphetamine, nicotine, opioids, and prescription stimulants.

## Age-Appropriate Conversations Around Substances

Age-appropriate conversations – Substance

Make your drug safety conversations appropriate to your child's age. Talksubstances.org provides suggestions and guidelines to hold the often challenging conversations.

# Early Childhood Ages 3-5

Early childhood is a crucial time for brain and body development. More than 1 million new neural connections are formed every second (Center on the Developing Child), making these early years an important opportunity to lay the groundwork for healthy development. Building strong, positive relationships with parents and caregivers helps children develop a sense of security, trust, and connection.

Early prevention can also help establish healthy habits and attitudes around substances while building a foundation for positive decision-making. These skills extend far beyond substance use—they shape how children learn to manage emotions, build relationships, solve problems, respond to challenges, and make healthy choices throughout their lives.

For children ages 3–5, open conversations, patience, and reassurance help build strong bonds and trust. Simple things like asking about their day, setting clear boundaries, answering their questions, and letting them know they can always come to you lay the foundation for healthy relationships. Small conversations now can lead to big trust later.

At this age, Substance Use Disorder (SUD) prevention starts with teaching children about safety in simple, age-appropriate ways. For example, if you drop a pill on the floor, explain that it is not theirs to touch or put in their mouth. Help them understand that even vitamins or medicines that look like candy or animals are not safe for them to take on their own.

Teach children that medicine should only be given by a trusted adult with permission from a parent or caregiver. You can also explain that a medicine bottle with their name on it is intended for them, while medicine belonging to someone else is not safe for them to take.

Most importantly, help them understand that something that may be safe for an adult is not necessarily safe for a child. These simple lessons create a foundation for making safe choices as they grow.

It is easy at this age to establish a certain amount of control, but as they age this control can become a barrier. **Begin with conscious conversations that build connection and trust early, NOT control.**

## Tips for talking to your child (Ages 3-5):

- **Listen and be present.** Give your child your full attention and show them what they have to say matters. Get on their level and make eye contact.
- **Ask open-ended questions.** Instead of just asking "How was your day?", try "What was the best part of your day?"
- **Name and validate feelings.** Help your child put words to their emotions and let them know all feelings are okay.
- **Keep conversations simple.** Use age-appropriate language and answer questions honestly.
- **Use everyday moments.** Mealtimes, car rides, playtime, and bedtime can be great opportunities to connect.
- **Model healthy communication.** Show your child how to express feelings, listen, solve problems, and respectfully set boundaries.
- **Connect before you correct.** When your child is upset or struggling, offer comfort and understanding before addressing the behavior.

## 8 Simple Phrases Can Change How to Talk with Your Child:

- **"I need to think about that."** Modeling the importance of pausing, thinking, and processing before responding helps children develop these skills for themselves.
- **"How does that make you feel?"** Encouraging children to identify and talk about their feelings helps them better understand and manage their emotions.
- **"Wow."** Sometimes, a simple "wow" gives you a moment to pause and process an unexpected situation before responding impulsively.
- **"Let's see if we can find some good in this."** Allow your child to experience and express their disappointment first. Then, help them look for a positive solution, or lesson in the situation.
- **"Listen to your body."** Teaching children to recognize how emotions feel in their bodies can help them better understand what they are experiencing and respond in healthy ways.
- **"Let's take a breath together."** Taking a moment to breathe can help children—and parents—slow down, manage big emotions, and respond thoughtfully instead of reacting impulsively.
- **"Would you like a do-over?"** Giving your child the opportunity to try again teaches them that mistakes happen and that they can make a different choice without shame or harsh criticism.
- **"That's a great idea!"** Encouraging your child's ideas helps build confidence, creativity, and problem-solving skills while showing them that their voice matters. (parents.com)

## Additional Resources

**Playing is how Toddlers Learn**:
https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/toddler/fitness/Pages/Playing-is-How-Toddlers-Learn.aspx

- Play is how your toddler explores and learns about the world as they grow and develop.
- As a parent or caregiver, you can support and encourage this play. Allow your child lots of time to play, and join in the fun when you can!
- Play is how young children start to get ready for school.

**Age Appropriate Conversations:**

- Talk Substance: https://www.talksubstance.org/talk/the-importance-of-communication/age-appropriate-conversations/

**Starting the Conversation with Kids- The Kids Mental Health Foundation**

- https://www.kidsmentalhealthfoundation.org/mental-health-resources/starting-conversations/starting-conversations

# The Growing Child: School-Age (Ages 6-12)

The ages 6–12 are a critical period for brain growth, especially in areas controlling impulse control, decision-making, and learning. Early substance exposure can impair this development, leading to cognitive, emotional, and behavioral issues. Conversations about substance use should be clear, honest, and tied to their everyday experiences so they can relate to them. They are curious at this age but can understand cause-and-effect and are more aware of what is going on around them. Children at this age are more susceptible to peer influence, both negative and positive, and environmental risks. Other risk factors include genetic predisposition, social influences and advertising and mental health.

Children progress at different rates. They have different interests, abilities, and personalities. An important part of growing up is learning to interact and socialize with others. During the school-age years, you'll see a change in your child. They will move from playing alone to having multiple friends and social groups. Friendships become more important. However, family connection is more important than ever. Now is the time to continue building strong relationships and creating open, honest communication that your child knows they can rely on. John Hopkins Medicine breaks down the differences at this stage of growth.

## Tips for talking to your child (Ages 6-12)

- If you have not already done so, introduce the word “drug”. Explain the difference between when some drugs might be helpful and when they might be harmful.
- Explain how some drugs-like medicines that a doctor gives can help them feel better if they are sick but can hurt them if they are not.
- Be clear that drugs like alcohol, nicotine and marijuana can be very harmful at their age because their brain is growing and making connections and pathways that drugs can change. This video by Daniel Siegel explains how the brain is “pruning” itself.
    - Understand the Adolescent Brain-Daniel Siegel
- Look for “teachable” moments if you are watching TV or a video and you see someone smoking or drinking. You can ask “what do you think is going on in the show” “what do you think about them smoking or drinking” instead of telling them NOT to do it, see how they feel and use that as a jumping off point for this and future conversations.
- Conversations at this age can seem overwhelming to them so let them ask additional questions instead of continuing to explain something that may not feel relevant to them.
- Often at this age the introduction of these topics are enough but answer any questions they have as honestly and age-appropriately as you are able.
- Celebrate good choices they have made by praise, stickers or added privileges.

## More Tips for talking to your child (Ages 6-12)

- Tone is everything. Think about a discussion, not a lecture. Ask them calmly what they know about drugs and what they see in school and around their friends.
- Find out where they get their information and concentrate on the substances that are most relevant in the area. Usually it is alcohol. Nicole and marijuana.
- Pay close attention if they mention other substances and keep facial expressions and tone calm and reassuring.
- Research “unknowns” or “misconceptions” and follow up if needed.
- Lead by example, they are watching what you and their trusted adults are doing.
- Find healthy activities to do together as a family that does not include any type of substance. Demonstrate that you can have fun without being on a substance.

## Additional Resources

**Ask-Listen-Learn:**

- https://asklistenlearn.org/about/
- Responsibility.org, alongside a team of educators and organizations specializing in elementary- and middle schoolers, developed Ask, Listen, Learn: Kids and Alcohol Don't Mix. Ask, Listen, Learn is a completely FREE digital underage drinking prevention program for kids ages 9-13 (grades 4-8) and their parents and educators with the goal to reduce underage drinking.

**Age-Appropriate Conversations:**

- Talk Substance: https://www.talksubstance.org/talk/the-importance-of-communication/age-appropriate-conversations/

**National Library of Medicine**:

- National Library of Medicine: Development During Middle Childhood: The Years from Six to Twelve.

**Mass.gov**

- Prevention tips for your middle school-aged child | Mass.gov

**The Kids Mental Health Foundation**

- Talking to Children and Teens About Substance Use

**iCare**

- iDECIDE has created iCARE, a new, free program for caregivers looking for self-paced education and tips about navigating adolescent substance use.

## The Teen Years (Ages 13 – 18)

The teen years are a time of developing independence, exploring new experiences, and making important choices. More than 90% of adults with substance use disorder report beginning substance use before age 18 (National Library of Medicine). Earlier initiation of substance use is associated with a greater risk of developing substance-related problems, including dependence, chronic use, other health consequences and death by overdose or SUD. **Connection matters more than control.** Keep communication open by listening without judgment, setting clear expectations, and letting your teen know they can come to you—even when things are difficult. A strong, trusting relationship gives teens the confidence to talk openly, ask for help, and make healthy choices, including choices around substance use.

## Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs)

Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) can promote healthy development and help buffer the effects of adversity. Massachusetts highlights four building blocks that communities and families can strengthen:

- Nurturing, supportive relationships with family, peers, and trusted adults.
- Safe, stable, and equitable environments at home, school, and in the community.
- Social and civic engagement that creates belonging and connectedness.
- Opportunities for social and emotional growth, including decision-making, coping, communication, and resilience.

For teens, this can look like knowing there is an adult who will listen, feeling accepted at home, belonging at school, participating in a team or community activity, having mentors, and being given appropriate opportunities for independence.

## 10 Ways to Stay Connected With Your Teen

- **Ask — and actually listen**. Try: "Do you want me to listen, help you figure it out, or give you advice?"
- **Make conversations part of everyday life**. Talk in the car, while cooking, on a walk, after practice, or while getting food. Small conversations make bigger conversations easier.
- **Get curious before getting angry**. Start with: "Help me understand what happened." Understanding is not the same as approving.
- **Know their world**. Learn about their friends, school life, interests, music, games, activities, and online world because those things matter to them.
- **Create predictable time together**. A meal, weekly drive, coffee run, show, walk, or other routine can create connection without forcing a serious conversation.
- **Notice the good.** Point out effort, kindness, responsibility, growth, creativity, and the ways your teen contributes.
- **Let them practice independence**. Give teens age-appropriate opportunities to choose, problem-solve, take responsibility, and learn from mistakes.
- **Help them build a network of trusted adults**. Coaches, teachers, counselors, relatives, mentors, employers, and community leaders can all be protective relationships.
- **Set boundaries with a reason**. Clear expectations still matter. Explain the safety or value behind a rule and involve your teen in problem-solving when possible.
- **Keep the door open**. Make sure your teen knows: "If you are ever unsafe, call me. We will deal with everything else after I know you are safe."

## Talking About Alcohol, Cannabis, Vaping & Other Drugs

Do not wait until you suspect substance use to start talking. SAMHSA recommends many short, ongoing conversations and emphasizes that parents should communicate care, clear expectations, reliable information, awareness, and practical strategies for avoiding risky situations.

- ***Conversation starter***: "What do kids your age think about vaping or cannabis?"
- ***Conversation starter***: "Do people drink or use substances at the parties you go to?"
- ***Conversation starter***: "What makes it hard for someone to say no?"
- ***Conversation starter:*** "What would you do if a friend became sick after using something?"
- ***Conversation starter***: "If you were somewhere unsafe, who would you call?"

Parents and caregivers can also reduce access and harm by safely storing medications and substances in the home, properly disposing of unused medications, learning about current youth substance-use trends, and keeping naloxone available when appropriate.

## When Your Teen Tells You Something Difficult: PAUSE

**P — Pause before reacting.** Your first reaction can affect whether they come to you again.
**A — Ask what happened**. Get the full story before deciding what to do.
**U — Understand what they need.** Ask: "Do you want help, advice, or do you need me to listen?"
**S — Support safety first**. Address immediate health and safety needs before consequences.
**E — Engage in next steps together**. When possible, include your teen in deciding what happens next.

## Try This Instead

**Instead of: "Why would you do that?"**
Try: "Help me understand what was going on."

**Instead of: "You're not going to that party."**
Try: "Let's talk about what might happen there and how you can stay safe."

**Instead of: "Give me your phone."**
Try: "Something about this situation is worrying me. Can we talk about it?"

**Instead of: "You need to pick better friends."**
Try: "How do you feel when you're around them?"

**Instead of: "You're too young to understand."**
Try: "Tell me how you see it."

**Instead of: "If you ever drink, you're grounded."**
Try: "I don't want you drinking. But if you are ever unsafe, call me. I will come get you."

## One Conversation This Week

- Ask your teen what has been stressing them lately.

- Take a drive, walk, or get food together without an agenda.
- Ask about something they are genuinely interested in.
- Tell them something specific you appreciate about them.
- Ask who they trust when they are having a difficult day.
- Talk about substances without lecturing.
- Ask what they wish adults understood about teenagers.
- Learn something about their favorite music, game, show, sport, or hobby.
- Eat one meal together without phones.
- Tell them: "No matter what happens, you can call me."

## Build Their Circle of Support

Ask your teen: "Who are five people you could go to if you needed help?" Their circle might include:

- Parent or caregiver
- sibling
- grandparent
- aunt/uncle
- teacher
- counselor
- Coach
- mentor
- friend's parent
- doctor
- employer
- faith/community leader

A teen having several trusted adults is a strength. Supportive relationships outside the immediate household can add another layer of protection and belonging.

## Belonging Is Prevention

Help your teen find places where they feel useful, accepted, and connected. Possibilities include:

- Sports, arts, music, cultural groups, student clubs, after-school programs, and recreation.
- Volunteering, community service, youth leadership, mentoring, faith communities, and employment.
- College/career exploration, internships, skill-building programs, and community health initiatives.

## Digital Life & Social Media

Instead of focusing only on screen time, stay curious about what your teen experiences online. Talk together about:

- Privacy, location sharing, online relationships, scams, exploitation, and sharing images.
- Cyberbullying, comparison, body image, substance-related content, and how social media affects mood.

• Sleep and nighttime phone use, family expectations, and what to do if something online feels unsafe.

Try asking: “Does social media ever make you feel worse about yourself?” or “If something online made you uncomfortable, would you feel like you could tell me?”

## Healthy Relationships

Talk about respect and consent before there is a problem. Healthy relationships should include trust, communication, boundaries, independence, safety, and the ability to say no. Controlling someone’s phone, passwords, clothing, friendships, or whereabouts is not the same as caring about them.

## Mental & Emotional Well-Being

Adolescence includes normal changes in mood and independence, but caregivers should pay attention to significant or persistent changes in behavior, sleep, relationships, school performance, interests, substance use, or expressions of hopelessness or self-harm. You do not need to diagnose the problem before seeking support.

**A connection-first opener**: “I’ve noticed you haven’t seemed like yourself lately. You’re not in trouble. I just want to know how you’re doing.”

## Additional Resources:

**SAMHSA — Talk. They Hear You**. — Parent and caregiver tools for starting and continuing conversations about alcohol and other drugs, including Five Conversation Goals, fact sheets, brochures, and discussion resources. Learn more

**Massachusetts — Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs)** — Information for families and community members on relationships, safe and stable environments, belonging, and social-emotional growth. Learn more

**Massachusetts — Creating Positive Experiences for Children** — Practical ideas for building strong relationships, engaging in positive activities, creating safety, and supporting well-being. Learn more

**HealthyChildren.org — American Academy of Pediatrics** — Evidence-informed parenting and adolescent health information, including communication, substance-use prevention, mental health, digital media, and healthy development. Learn more

Mass.gov– Evidence informed/based prevention tips for your high shool-aged adolescent with some suggestions on how to prevent alcohol and other drug use. Learn more

**The Kids Mental Health Foundation–** Free resources-guides,videos, curriculum and articles- are custom built by more than 1,000 mental health professionals. The goal behind

these free resources is simple: empower adults with the confidence to understand, address and promote the mental health of kids. Learn more

## Sources & Further Reading

The guidance in this resource guide was informed by the following public-health, pediatric, prevention, and local community resources:

- Massachusetts Department of Public Health. Information for community members about Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs). https://www.mass.gov/info-details/information-for-community-members-about-positive-childhood-experiences-pces
- Massachusetts Department of Public Health. The Power of Positive Childhood Experiences. https://www.mass.gov/the-power-of-positive-childhood-experiences
- Massachusetts Department of Public Health. Creating positive experiences for children. https://www.mass.gov/info-details/creating-positive-experiences-for-children
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Talk. They Hear You. Parent & Caregiver Resources. https://www.samhsa.gov/substance-use/prevention/talk-they-hear-you/parent-resources
- SAMHSA. Five Conversation Goals: Talk. They Hear You. https://www.samhsa.gov/substance-use/prevention/talk-they-hear-you/parent-resources/conversation
- American Academy of Pediatrics / HealthyChildren.org. Teen health and parenting resources. https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/teen/Pages/default.aspx
- Growing up Drug Free https://www.getsmartaboutdrugs.gov/sites/default/files/2024-08/GUDF_2024_FINAL_508.pdf
- The Importance of Communication-Substance: https://www.talksubstance.org/talk/the-importance-of-communication/
- iDECIDE has created iCARE, a new, free program for caregivers looking for self-paced education and tips about navigating adolescent substance use.

### Connection is prevention.

Stay curious. Keep talking. Listen more than you lecture. Help your teen belong. Keep the door open.

## Young Adulthood: Ages 19–24

Preventing substance use in young adulthood is important because this age group faces unique social and economic risks while the brain continues to mature until roughly age 25, particularly in areas related to **impulse control, judgment, and emotional regulation**. Substance use during this period can increase the risk of long-term cognitive, emotional, and behavioral problems. There is limited evidence-based information specifically focused

on parenting during this stage. We have gathered resources from PhDs, physicians, and other professionals that may not always fit the traditional definition of "evidence-based," but we found their perspectives and practical guidance valuable and relevant. We hope these resources offer helpful ideas and support as you navigate this stage. Building a strong relationship with your adult child is an ongoing process that requires patience, respect, and a willingness to evolve. Shifting from a directive role to one based on mutual respect, offering support without control, and maintaining open communication can help create a healthier and more satisfying relationship for both of you.

## What is Happening at This Stage?

Ages 18–24 fall within a developmental period often called emerging adulthood. The transition into adulthood has changed over time. Education may last longer, career paths may take time to establish, housing costs can affect when young people leave home, and young adults may move between periods of greater and lesser dependence on family. The Family Institute's guide describes several characteristics associated with emerging adulthood, drawing from Jeffrey Arnett's developmental framework:

- **Identity exploration**
  Young adults are continuing to explore who they are, what they value, what relationships they want, and what direction they want their lives to take.
- **Instability**
  Education, employment, relationships, living arrangements, and plans may change during these years.
- **Self-focus**
  Young adults have greater opportunity to make decisions based on their own needs, values, interests, and goals.
- **Feeling in-between**
  A young person may feel like an adult in some situations while still relying on parents in others.
- **Possibilities**
  Young adulthood can bring opportunities to explore different futures and make significant decisions about work, relationships, education, and lifestyle.

## Emerging Adults-The Family Institute

Through research, education, and clinical services, The Family Institute of Northwestern University is one of the nation's leading relationships-based behavioral health organizations committed to strengthening and healing children and adolescents, couples, families, and individuals.

The Family Institute: Emerging Adults' Relationships With Their Parents — The Family Institute

## Parenting Adult Children as They Age Parenting Adult Children as They Age | Psychology Today

- Each decade of your adult child's life has its own predictable demands and challenges
- Understanding their current life stage,you can adapt your strategies for dealing with them effectively
- Make sure that your relationship with your adult child isn't perceived as a demand
- When your kids are grown, you still have many years to develop, negotiate and refine your relationships.
- A new approach to parenting is needed when children become adults.
- Our role is no longer to manage or direct our adult children, but to mentor and accept them.
- It's essential to respect an adult child's autonomy and boundaries
- Taking responsibility for your own mistakes can help heal and strengthen your relationship.

## 8 Keys to Stronger Relationships With Your Adult Children

**Parenting Adult Children: Building a New Relationship**

- **Recognize That Your Roles Have Changed**
  As children become adults, the parent-child relationship needs to shift from managing and directing to supporting, mentoring, and accepting them as adults. What worked when they were younger may no longer fit.
- **Respect Autonomy and Boundaries**
  Adult children have the right to make their own decisions, set boundaries, and choose how often they communicate or spend time with you. Try not to take it personally when their priorities change. Let them know you are there when they need you.
- **Take Ownership and Apologize**
  All parents make mistakes. Acknowledging past behavior, taking responsibility, and offering a sincere apology can help create healing and strengthen the relationship.

- **Avoid Unsolicited Advice**
  Advice can sometimes feel like criticism or a lack of trust. Instead, ask, “Would you like my thoughts?” and respect their answer.
- **Allow Them to Make Mistakes**
  Watching an adult child make choices you would not make can be difficult. Allowing them to make mistakes and experience consequences can support learning, growth, and independence.
- **Address Problems Constructively**
  Disagreements are normal. Listen to their perspective, communicate respectfully, and focus on understanding rather than winning. You can disagree while still maintaining a strong relationship.
- **Live Your Own Life**
  Continue to nurture your own interests, friendships, and goals. A fulfilling life outside the parent-child relationship gives both you and your adult child healthy space and independence.
- **Cultivate Connection**
  Continue investing in your relationship by showing genuine interest, offering support, and spending time together without pressure or expectations. Connection can be as simple as sharing a meal, asking their opinion, enjoying a shared activity, or sending a thoughtful text.

## There is no Single Timeline for Adulthood

- A 19-year-old attending college and living at home may have different needs from a 19-year-old working full-time.
- A 22-year-old living independently may still seek significant emotional support from family.
- A 24-year-old may be financially independent but regularly seek parental advice.
- Another 24-year-old may live with family while saving money or completing education.
- None of these circumstances alone tells us whether someone is successfully becoming an adult. The parent role doesn’t disappear; it becomes more flexible. At different times, a young adult might need a parent to be:

- a listener;
- a source of information;
- someone to talk through options with;
- emotional support;
- practical assistance;
- a source of financial support;
- a connection to other resources;
- or simply a parent who trusts them to handle something themselves.

***A useful question isn't simply:*** "Am I helping too much?"

**I*t may be more useful to ask*:** "Is the support I'm providing helping my young adult develop greater responsibility and confidence over time?"

## Social Connection as a Protective Factor

Social connection is about the relationships young adults build with others and the sense of belonging, care, support, and value they experience through those connections. As young adults become more independent, it is important for them to have opportunities to develop meaningful relationships beyond their parents and immediate family. These may include relationships with:

- friends
- siblings
- romantic partners
- extended family
- mentors
- coworkers
- classmates
- community groups
- trusted professionals

Parents should not be expected to meet every social or emotional need. However, a supportive parent-young adult relationship can be one important part of a larger network of connection. During a stage characterized by significant transitions, supportive relationships can provide stability, encouragement, practical assistance, and people to turn to during difficult experiences. For parents, this means the goal isn't to keep your young adult dependent on you, it is to maintain a relationship in which connection remains possible while encouraging them to develop additional relationships, resources, and sources of support.

## Boundaries & Privacy

Young adulthood naturally raises new questions about boundaries. Parents and caregivers may need to rethink how they offer guidance, support, and expectations. Boundaries can shift from rules and limits set by parents to mutual respect, open communication, and agreements that recognize the young adult's growing independence while maintaining a supportive relationship. Questions may include:

- **Privacy**
  How much information does the young adult want to share?
    - How much information does the parent want to hear?

- **Communication**
  How frequently does each person expect calls, texts, or updates?
- **Living at home**
  What household expectations apply to an adult living in a shared home?
- **Relationships**
  What information about friendships or romantic relationships is private?
- **Finances**
  What financial assistance is available? What expectations accompany it?
- **Decision-making**
  Which decisions belong to the young adult?

## When You're Concerned About Your Young Adult

When you're concerned about your young adult, connection over control doesn't mean ignoring genuine concerns. It means staying connected, listening without judgment, and approaching difficult conversations with care while still addressing concerns and offering support when needed.  Parents may notice changes involving:

- Alcohol or substance use;
- Relationships;
- Isolation;
- Work or school;
- Finances;
- Self-care;
- Unsafe situations.

Parents can express genuine concern while recognizing that their adult child has increasing authority over their own life. The goal is to communicate care without taking away their independence:

**Express concern + listen + maintain connection + encourage support when needed.**

## Parents Are Going Through a Transition Too

Young adulthood isn't only a developmental transition for the young person—it is also a time of change for parents and caregivers. As young adults become more independent, parents are learning to adjust their role, expectations, and ways of offering support while maintaining a strong and caring relationship.  Parents may experience:

- **Uncertainty** — *When should I step in?*
- **Loss** — *They don't need me the way they used to.*
- **Worry** — *What if they make the wrong decision?*

- **Pride** — *They're becoming their own person.*
- **Conflict** — *We see things very differently now.*
- **Adjustment** — *What does being their parent look like now?*

It is reasonable for parents to need time to adjust. Parents can also maintain their own friendships, relationships, interests, activities, health, and identity outside of parenting. A healthy transition allows **both people to grow.**

## Greater Lowell & Regional Resources

**Health Departments:**
Billerica Health Department – Kristel Bennett, kbennett@billerica.gov.
Chelmsford Health Department – Taryn Angel, tangel@chelmsfordma.gov
Dracut Health Department – Carolina Bencosme, cbencosme@dracutma.gov
Lowell Health Department — Anjali Bhagat, abhagat@lowellma.gov
Tewksbury Health Department – Maria Ruggiero, mruggiero@tewksbury-ma.gov
Tyngsborough Health Department – health@tyngsboroughma.gov
Westford Health Department – Srey Neang, sneang@westfordma.gov
Town of Westford – Nicole Laviolette, nlaviolette@westfordma.gov
Town of Wilmington – Samantha Cavanaugh**,** scavanaugh@wpd.org

**Prevention Partners of Northern Middlesex** — Regional prevention professionals serving Billerica, Chelmsford, Dracut, Lowell, Tewksbury, Tyngsborough, Westford, and Wilmington, with substance-use prevention and harm-reduction information. Learn more

**Greater Lowell Health Alliance — HYPPE** — Healthy Youth & Parents Through Partnership & Empowerment (HYPPE) is a youth-driven Greater Lowell initiative focused on youth development, health equity, family engagement, leadership, mental health, financial health, and health-care/college pathways. Youth can participate in community health initiatives, internships, mentorships and college/career preparation, while parents and households are engaged through workshops and support. Learn more
HYPPE is led by the Greater Lowell Health Alliance in partnership with organizations including the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell, Project LEARN, Butler Middle School, Sullivan Middle School, Lowell High School, Lowell General Hospital/Tufts Medicine, Front Line Services, and additional Lowell Public Schools partners.

**Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell** — Youth development, teen programming, enrichment, recreation, academics, leadership opportunities, and community connection. Learn more

**NFI Family Resource Center of Greater Lowell** — Family support, caregiver resources, navigation, referrals, and community-based assistance for families. Learn more
**Wayside Youth & Family Support Network** — Behavioral health and family support services for children, adolescents, young adults, and caregivers. Learn more.

## School-Based Counseling & Student Support Resources

Schools can be an important first point of connection when a young person is experiencing academic, social, emotional, behavioral, or mental health concerns.

School counselors, adjustment counselors, social workers, psychologists, and other student support professionals may be able to:

- Provide short-term school-based counseling and emotional support
- Help students navigate academic, peer, family, or social concerns
- Support social-emotional skill development
- Help identify when additional support may be needed
- Connect students and families with community-based mental health and other resources
- Work with families, teachers, and other school staff to support student well-being

**Not sure where to start?** Contact your student's school counseling office, Student Services Department, or main school office and ask how to connect with the appropriate support professional.

**BILLERICA PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

**District Office**
365 Boston Road
Billerica, MA 01821
Phone: (978) 528-7900
Fax: (978) 528-7909

**School Counseling & Guidance:** Billerica Public Schools provides counseling and student support services focused on students' academic, social, emotional, and future development. Learn more

**CHELMSFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

**District Office**
230 North Road
Chelmsford, MA 01824

Phone: (978) 251-5100
Fax: (978) 251-5110

Coordinator of Social and Emotional Learning and Counseling Services, K–12
Phone: (978) 251-5111 ext. 5601

**District Counseling Contact**
Shannon Bischoff

**School Counseling:** Chelmsford Public Schools provides a comprehensive K–12 counseling program supporting students' academic, career, personal, and social development. Counseling and behavioral health supports are available throughout the district and may include school counselors, social workers, and school/clinical psychologists. Learn more

**Additional Counseling Resources:** Learn more

## DRACUT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

**District Office**
2063 Lakeview Avenue
Dracut, MA 01826
Phone: (978) 957-2660

**Student Services**
Kimberly Lawrence
Director of Student Services
Phone: (978) 957-4633
Email: klawrence@dracutps.org

Families looking for counseling, behavioral health, special education, or other school-based support can contact their child's school or the district's Student Services Department for assistance identifying the appropriate resource. Learn more

## LOWELL PUBLIC SCHOOLS

**District Mental Health Contact**
Andrew Rosenshine
Director of Mental Health, SEL and Behavior
Phone: (978) 674-2137
Email: arosenshine@lowell.k12.ma.us

**District Office**
155 Merrimack Street
Lowell, MA 01852
Phone: (978) 674-4320

**Mental Health & Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)** Lowell Public Schools provides school-based mental health and social-emotional support for students and families. The district's Mental Health & SEL resources include information on mental health support, parent and caregiver education, social-emotional learning, bullying and vaping prevention, and connections to school and community-based services.

Families who are concerned about their child's mental health can also use the district's **"Need Support? Start Here"** resources to explore available school and community support options for SEL. Learn more

**Need Other Support?** Start Here:

**Community Resource Guide:** Lowell Public Schools also maintains a **Community Resource Guide** to help students, parents, caregivers, and school personnel locate services available in Lowell and surrounding communities. Learn more

**TEWKSBURY PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

**District Office**
139 Pleasant Street
Tewksbury, MA 01876
Phone: (978) 640-7800
Fax: (978) 640-7878

**Student & Family Support:**
studentfamilysupport@tewksbury.k12.ma.us

**Student & Family Support:** Tewksbury Public Schools provides Student & Family Support services across grade levels. Learn more

**TYNGSBOROUGH PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

**District Office**
50 Norris Road
Tyngsborough, MA 01879
Phone: (978) 649-7488
Fax: (978) 649-7199

**Student Services:** Tyngsborough Public Schools provides student services designed to support students academically, socially, and emotionally. Counseling resources are available at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Learn more

**WESTFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

**District Office**
23 Depot Street
Westford, MA 01886
Phone: (978) 692-5560
Fax: (978) 392-4497

**Office of Special Education & Social-Emotional Learning**
23 Depot Street, Westford, MA 01886
Phone: (978) 692-5560 ext. 2111

Melissa Boylan
Director of Special Education and Social-Emotional Learning

Westford Public Schools provides school-based counseling, social-emotional learning, special education, and other student support services. Learn more. The school also partners with **Cartwheel** to help provide access to mental health care and family support resources. Learn more.

**WILMINGTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

**District Office**
146 Middlesex Avenue
Wilmington, MA 01887
Phone: (978) 694-6000

Director of Student Support Services
Phone: (978) 694-6032
Fax: (978) 657-9764
Email: christine.murray@wpsk12.com

**Student Support Services**
Christine Murray
**Student Support Services:**

Wilmington Public Schools provides behavioral, social, emotional, counseling, and other student support resources. Learn more

Wilmington Public Schools also provides access to **Care Solace**, a care-navigation resource that assists students, staff, and families in finding mental health and substance-use treatment resources. Learn more

# Resource Library

**Understanding Emerging Adulthood**

The Family Institute — Emerging Adults' Relationships With Their Parents
For understanding the developmental stage, changing parent roles, independence, finances, and communication.

National Academies/NCBI — Parenting During the Transitions to Adulthood
A more detailed research-based resource covering communication, social support, finances, responsibility, and connections with other adults.

**Relationships & Communication**

American Psychological Association — Parent–Adult Children Relationships
Expert discussion about how parent-adult child relationships change.

Parents Letting Go — Tips for Engaging With Your Young Adult
Practical guidance about engaging with young adults as they develop identity and independence.

**Supplemental Communication Resources**

Wellspring Center for Prevention — Family Communication and Risky Behavior
Useful communication concepts, although primarily focused on adolescents.

Ask-Listen-Learn: How Alcohol Affects the brain, A guide for Parents
The information provided throughout the program guides adults with ways to start communicating with kids about alcohol and the developing brain– and how to continue talking to them as part of a lifetime of conversations. Both science- and evidence-based, Ask, Listen, Learn is the most widely distributed underage drinking program of its kind.

Confident Parents Confident Kids — Connection Over Correction. Useful background concepts around connection, listening, emotional safety, and regulation, but primarily written about children/adolescents.

## Connection is prevention.

Stay curious. Keep talking. Listen more than you lecture. Help your teen belong. Keep the door open.