



# Is Middle School the New High School?

For some teenagers, experimentation with drugs and alcohol starts early

By Amy Paturel, M.S., M.P.H.

Chase Moore started drinking in seventh grade. A star athlete with a promising baseball career, Moore got involved with the wrong crowd and began a downward spiral that culminated in his death at age 23.

Moore's introduction to drinking isn't unique. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, one out of every two eighth graders has *tried* alcohol.

"Even though the usage rates in middle school are lower than in ninth and tenth grade, kids develop the tools to make decisions about drugs and alcohol during middle school," explains Scott Swartzwelder, Ph.D., senior research career scientist at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Early decisions are critical. The younger a child is when she experiments with drugs or alcohol, the greater her likelihood of experiencing devastating long-term effects, including addiction.

"The goal is to delay initiation of alcohol and other drugs as long as possible," says Elizabeth D'Amico, Ph.D., senior behavioral research scientist at Rand Corp.

This is difficult, given the middle school social order. A study published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* linked drinking with popularity during the middle school years. Some children enter puberty as early as nine or ten, bringing an early wave of social awkwardness. These early bloomers may turn to drugs and alcohol to fit in.

## THE BUZZED BRAIN

The developing brain of a child processes and encodes information differently than an adult brain. The reason children learn more quickly is because their brain is more malleable, Swartzwelder explains. Like a sponge, the adolescent easily absorbs information, as well as foreign substances like alcohol and drugs.

Studies show that drinking translates to poor performance on memory tests and deficits in attention and spatial skills. Repeated exposure to alcohol in adolescence may even affect learning and memory later in life.

"The adolescent brain is changing so much that repeated exposure to a substance

could alter the trajectory of that development in a way that causes brain circuits to go awry," Swartzwelder says.

For example, there's no evidence that using marijuana after age 20 damages the brain, but a growing body of research suggests that adolescent pot-smokers not only have lower IQ scores than their drug-free counterparts, but they're also more likely to develop psychotic disorders like schizophrenia. Inhalants—glue, aerosols, paint and paint thinners—may be equally detrimental. They're inexpensive and readily available, and they reach the brain in record-time, causing brain damage, falls and even death.

## FAMILY CAN INFLUENCE

Middle schoolers are less likely to drink or use drugs when their parents are involved in their lives. Experts recommend taking advantage of teachable moments long before drugs or alcohol enter the picture to help middle schoolers understand that what they put into their bodies matters.

"It doesn't have to be some big, hour-long discussion," D'Amico stresses. "The key is on-going, developmentally appropriate communication."

You can even make it a game, she suggests. Pose the question: What would happen to the brain after a daily diet of donuts? Also stress that you are *strongly* opposed to recreational drugs and underage drinking. Research shows that parents who articulate that these substances are off-limits are much more likely to have children who refrain from trying them.

That said, middle schoolers may still experiment and make mistakes. Some may even get into trouble. But, a strong support system and parental involvement could distinguish the child who gracefully navigates adolescent challenges from the child who turns to drugs and alcohol to reconcile difficult emotions.

"My parents had blinders on," says Bree Moore-Meloan, Chase Moore's sister. "If they had faced the truth and gotten my brother into rehab, he might be alive today." ■

## Help Your Middle Schooler Avoid Drugs and Alcohol with These Simple Steps

- Talk to your young teen about the dangers of substance abuse.
- Clearly state that you oppose the use of recreational drugs, including alcohol for underage drinking.
- Limit your use of alcohol, and don't use drugs.
- Get to know your young teen's friends — and the friends' parents — and know where your young teen is at all times.
- Take advantage of teachable moments.
- Keep the lines of communication open so that your young teen feels comfortable coming to you with questions about drugs and alcohol.
- Keep your young teen busy with appropriate and engaging activities.
- Reward your young teen's positive behavior, and praise his or her accomplishments.
- Spend time with your young teen.
- Get help if you suspect your young teen is in trouble.