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HEALTH &amp; WELLNESS

# Getting Through to Your Teen About the Dangers of Vaping

As vaping-related illnesses and deaths mount, it's even more important for parents to talk with their kids. Here's how to have an effective conversation.



Nearly 28% of high school students have used e-cigarettes in the last 30 days, according to a recent survey. PHOTO: GABBY JONES/BLOOMBERG NEWS

*By Andrea Petersen*

Sept. 21, 2019 9:00 am ET

## How can parents convince their children not to vape?

The question has taken on new urgency. Health officials are investigating 530 confirmed and probable cases of lung illnesses in the U.S. related to e-cigarettes. Eight people have died. Many teenagers use e-cigarettes: 27.5% of high school students used them in the last 30 days, according to preliminary data from the 2019 National Youth Tobacco Survey released earlier this month. That is up from 20.8% in 2018.

Vaping's new dangers and ubiquity at high schools—and even middle schools—is causing understandable parental concern. But parents need to be strategic when talking to their children about e-cigarettes, psychologists and pediatricians say. Here are some tips:

## Don't Be Direct

A parent's first instinct may be to blurt out: "Are you vaping?" or "You'd better not be vaping." Starting the conversation that way, however, is not likely to be successful or yield the information you're after.

"There's a good chance that they are going to deny it" if they are using e-cigarettes, says Bonnie Halpern-Felsher, a professor of pediatrics at Stanford University and founder and executive director of its Tobacco Prevention Toolkit. "Young people don't want to disappoint their parents and they are afraid of getting into trouble."

Instead, Dr. Halpern-Felsher suggests that parents begin with what's in the news and use it to launch a back and forth with their child. "Now is a really good time for parents to say, 'I've been hearing about all the deaths and illnesses related to e-cigarettes. I'm really concerned. Have you heard about this? What do you know?,' " she says. And make sure you're not doing all the talking.

Teens may be more likely to open up if parents ask what's going on in school and among their friends. "They are more likely to talk about them versus themselves," says Sarper Taskiran, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at the Child Mind Institute in New York. When parents take a more curious, nonjudgmental stance, kids will be more willing to talk—and even reveal if they have tried e-cigarettes, he says.



Meredith Berkman, Dorian Fuhrman and Dina Alessi founded the group Parents Against Vaping E-cigarettes because they were concerned about the marketing of flavored e-cigarettes to children, including their own teenage sons. PHOTO: SASHA MASLOV FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

## Avoid Scare Tactics

Once you’ve got teens talking about vaping, one of the biggest mistakes parents make is exaggerating the very real dangers. “If you lead with, ‘You’re going to die,’ they tend to not believe you,” says Jonathan Avery, director of addiction psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medical College in New York, who leads monthly parent information sessions on e-cigarettes in Weill Cornell’s pediatrics department.

It is important for parents to educate themselves about the actual risks of e-cigarettes for teens —like nicotine’s harmful effects on brain development and how it can increase the risk for other addictive behavior—and learn some of the terminology. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is a good resource. That way they can calmly give children accurate information—and clear up any misinformation teens have picked up.

One message that particularly resonates with kids is how they are being targeted by e-cigarette companies, with candy-like flavors and promotion by cool-looking influencers, says Dr. Taskiran from the Child Mind Institute. “Teens are at an age that they want control and they want to be autonomous. Pointing out that [those who vape] are being controlled by a multibillion-dollar company is something that is very upsetting to them,” he says.

### Be Persistent

This isn’t a one-time conversation. Keep the lines of communication open, says Dr. Halpern-Felsher. She also recommends that parents encourage children to talk to another adult—a favorite aunt, a teacher, an older sibling—if they feel like they can’t share concerns with parents. “You are giving them permission to reach out,” she says. And with more middle schoolers trying e-cigarettes, Dr. Avery says to start the conversation with your kids early, by age 9.

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SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

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How can parents persuade their children not to use e-cigarettes? Join the conversation below.

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the risk-takers who are using e-cigarettes. “There’s no parent in America who can say with certainty that their kid is not using these devices,” says Meredith Berkman, a founder of the advocacy and education group Parents Against Vaping E-cigarettes.

### Stay Calm

What do you do if you find out your child is vaping? If this is a first offense, stay calm and resist the urge to punish, says Mary Alvord, a psychologist in Rockville, Md., and the author of “Conquer Negative Thinking for Teens.”

“Say, ‘I’m so glad that you trust me enough to tell me this’ instead of being judgmental and critical. Because we know if that’s how you respond, are they going to come back to you and share anything? Not likely,” she says. Punishment pushes kids to “get sneakier.”

Then ask questions to try to find out why teens might be vaping. Is it because their friends are doing it and they want to fit in? Are they anxious or depressed and using e-cigarettes to try to ease those feelings? Knowing their motivation can help parents and teens think of other, healthier ways to address those needs, Dr. Alvord says.

It is best for parents and teens to work together to come up with an appropriate consequence—losing car privileges, for example—if the teen vapes again, says Karen Wilson, division chief of pediatrics at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York and chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics’ Tobacco Consortium. “Make them help decide,” the consequences for using. “They will have some more self-efficacy.”



Doctors recommend that parents educate themselves on vaping terminology and health risks so they can give teens accurate information. PHOTO: STEVEN SENNE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

## Know When to Get Help

If your child can’t stop using e-cigarettes or if there might be underlying anxiety or depression, talk to your pediatrician. Teens may be addicted to nicotine. While the FDA has not approved nicotine patches or gums for children under age 18, some doctors are using them with kids who have developed a physical dependence.

Talk therapy, like motivational interviewing or cognitive behavioral therapy, can address addiction, anxiety and depression.

Dr. Avery at Weill Cornell says more clinicians and families are using regular urine screens (which you do at a lab or buy over the counter) to test for nicotine. He says that parents can sell the idea as a replacement for more intrusive monitoring, like searching a teen’s room.

“It takes the conflict out of the home,” he says. “You don’t have to go through their backpack, you have the data.” The testing also gives kids an easy out when their friends are vaping. “When parents are on your case, everyone understands that,” he says.

## Talking to Your Kids

**Don’t be confrontational.** Asking your kid directly whether they are vaping can trigger denial and make them clam up.

**Ask about their friends.** Teens may be more willing to talk about friends’ habits, which might open the door to talk about their own.

**Don’t exaggerate.** The dangers are real, but exaggerating them can make kids tune out.

**Keep talking.** Be persistent—this isn’t a one-time conversation.

**Stay calm.** If it’s a first-time offense, resist the urge to punish. Build trust instead.

**Start early.** With more middle schoolers trying e-cigarettes, experts recommend broaching the subject by age 9.

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