

# THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:  
A Letter for Parents by the  
NYU Child Study Center

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## **YOUTH SUBSTANCE ABUSE**

Over the last 15 years, researchers have found several paths that influence substance use and substance abuse by adolescents. The addicting power of some of the substances plays a major role in converting some experimenters into regular users. How a family, school district, and neighborhood handle substances also plays a role in reducing or encouraging substance use. Approximately, 25-30% of teens have tried tobacco by the time that they are seniors in high school, and 35% of those who try become regular smokers with difficulty kicking the habit. Over 70% of seniors have used alcohol at least once, with 25% reporting they get drunk at least once a week. About 20% have tried marijuana by the time they graduate and 10-15% of these teens are addicted to marijuana. Mounting evidence indicates that each of these substances has a major impact on mental functioning, school achievement, and physical health; alcohol and marijuana are not the benign substances that they are often perceived to be.

### **Preventing Substance Abuse Disorders**

To prevent substance abuse disorders and their negative consequences, we need to protect children and teens from beginning to use substances while encouraging the use of healthy responses that foster resistance to substance use. Parents, schools, and teens themselves can take actions to reduce the risk of becoming a statistic and harming their physical and mental health.

Parents can take a number of steps to keep their children substance free, including monitoring influences from within and outside the family.

- **Use by family members** – Since children and teens are influenced by actions they observe in family members, they are likely to use the substances their parents use, regardless of the substance. For parents, it is important to consider your use of substances and what your children are likely to see and hear about.
  - If you want kids to refrain from use, the best thing that you can do is to refrain. Moderate use or abstention from alcohol and cigarettes by adults can be endorsed and demonstrated for your children's benefit. It is easier to endorse non-use of illegal substances that lack benefits and are known to be harmful.
  - If you smoke or drink, you can diminish the impact of these behaviors by telling kids you expect them to not use these substances. Guilty silence or not mentioning your thoughts about your children's use of these substances does not help them resist use.
  - Be aware of the use of substances by other family members. Siblings, cousins, and other relatives influence children and teens. An older relative who the child or young teen looks up to often makes the first introduction to substances. Take a mental survey of your child's family contacts and make sure there is no exposure from these persons.
- **Family tension** – Teens that experience a high level of stress at home are more likely to use substances and seek peer contacts outside of the home for support and enjoyment. It is important to keep your home as pleasant, supportive, and conflict-free as possible.
- **Parental supervision and knowledge** – Know where your children are, what they are doing, and with whom they are spending time. Keeping track of your children and teens offers significant protection against temptation and involvement with peers that may encourage substance use. Your children may not like all of the questions, but questioning and getting clear answers play an important part in your success.
- **Parental expectations** – Spell out your expectations on substance use. Tell your kids what you want them to do and not do. They need to know what steps to take and how to respond when they are exposed to substance use. Despite unpleasant faces or statements to the contrary, kids do listen to what their parents say about substance use.
- **The neighborhood** – Take action to support reduced substance use in your neighborhood. Families that have worked together with authorities and the police have been able to take charge of their neighborhoods with dramatic results. When kids know that the adults in their lives are fighting substance use and availability, they are better able to resist substance use. With tobacco for example, New York City's indoor smoking ban has been associated with major declines in cigarette smoking by teens.
- **Popular culture** – Movies, songs, television programs, computer outlets, and print media vary in how they handle substance use. Much of the content endorses it in obvious or subtle ways without attention to the negative consequences

of such use. Exposure to these media influences kids' attitudes. For example, after observing movie stars smoking cigarettes, teens often have a more positive attitude towards use. To counteract this, know the exposure your child has to messages or programs that include tobacco, alcohol, or drug use. Reasonably limit that exposure and counteract exposure with appropriate messages.

Schools have played a major role in reducing substance use by teens. Over the last decade, several educational programs designed to teach resistance and improve social functioning have been shown to be effective.

- Skill building – Programs that provide teenagers with skills such as problem-solving, assertively resisting offers, and engaging in positive social contacts are effective. Solely emphasizing the harmful effects of substance use and scare tactics have limited influence, and programs that only provide information have not been useful.
- Providing scientifically-sound programs to students – School districts can explore availability of effective programs by contacting the U.S. Department of Education, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration who list model programs with proven track records. Parents can help by checking that health education classes and substance use prevention efforts at the school-level are based on these widely available programs rather than untested or unproven approaches.

Children and teens can also play a part in avoiding substance use. Those who have good skills in social interactions and standing up for themselves are able to avoid peer pressure and stay substance free. Additionally, when they find constructive activities inside and outside of school, they not only protect themselves from the lure of the immediate pleasure, but from the long-term harm that substance use provides.

- Comfortable friendships – Teens with good social skills who are not shy or worried about social contacts are better able to avoid substance use and are less tempted to use substances to get relaxed.
- Refusal skills – When teens are able to say “no” in firm, but acceptable ways to offers to use substances, they soon learn that most kids stop offering. Most teen groups tolerate non-users and respect their decisions.
- School and extra-curricular activities – Teens that are invested in school and are involved in activities that fit their interests use fewer substances. When they are involved in enjoyable pursuits, they are less likely to be tempted to use substances to occupy their time. Performance of many activities such as sports is harmed by substance use, and therefore many teens will avoid use in order to keep up their abilities.

Major reductions in teen substance use have been achieved over the last decade. Even greater reductions may be possible through the combined efforts of parents, school districts and teens. With guidance from the scientific study of substance use prevention, all resources can better their efforts to keep children and teens healthy.

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#### **ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER**

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with anxiety, depression, learning or attention difficulties, neuropsychiatric problems, and trauma and stress related symptoms.

We offer a limited number of clinical studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212) 263-8916.

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. The Family Education Series consists of 13 informative workshops focused on child behavioral and attentional difficulties. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-8861.

For further information, guidelines and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center's website, [AboutOurKids.org](http://AboutOurKids.org).

**AboutOurKids.org**

THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER ONLINE

**Changing the Face of Child Mental Health**  
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