

PARENTS USE YOUR POWER

The Importance of Substance Abuse Prevention in Adolescents

David Lott, MD, FASAM, FAPA

Substance abuse remains one of the greatest problems of our time. Annual costs are in the billions, and substance use causes more deaths, illness, and injury than other causes. Most substance use starts during the teen years, so it is especially important to focus research and treatment efforts on this critical time period.

Several scientific advances have furthered our understanding of drug use in the adolescent. Family and twin studies have shown for years that there is a strong genetic component to the development of addictions. Consensus estimates are that approximately 50 percent of each person's risk for developing an addiction comes from their genetic makeup.

While this shows the important role of genetics, it also highlights the importance of non-genetic factors (the other 50%), all the various aspects of one's environment. For instance, while someone may have a high genetic predisposition for addiction, the illness can only occur once there has been an exposure to the substance of abuse.

Therefore, one vital way to prevent addiction is to limit exposures to drugs. Most initial exposures occur in adolescence, so again this is a crucial time period to focus on in order to protect people from the hazards of drugs. What's more, studies have shown that earlier onset of substance use is associated with worse outcomes, so preventing a teen's initial exposure to drugs, even if it is only a temporary delay, can improve their outcome.

But this turns out to be another case of "easier said than done." Teens have at least three strikes against them—they have stronger tendencies toward risk-taking, they have an underdeveloped inhibitory control system, and they are more susceptible to peer influence. On top of all that, any drug exposures pose greater risk for the teen because of the continuing brain development going on.

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So how do we prevent teen drug use? Prevention can take many forms. Primary intervention involves early education and other efforts to help teens avoid initial exposures. Teens are most influenced by **"the 3 P's"** - **parents, peers, and pop culture**. So focusing on these is a good place to start.

The role of Parents is critical in guiding teens' attitudes about drug use. The family's role in a child's development is enormous, but most of the formal education about drugs occurs in schools. And since families vary in their approach to drug education, schools will continue to be a critical resource for prevention through educating students.

Peer influence is also huge, so it is helpful for our youth to be around others who are avoiding drug use. So the best strategy is to help children from an early age to cultivate interests that promote positive social interactions.

The impact of **Pop culture** can't be underestimated. Public policy efforts to reduce positive media depictions of substance use are a key front in this battle. This includes all types of advertisements as well as TV, movies, social media, and even billboards and print depictions. Finding ways to get celebrities to promote healthy living and avoid depictions of drugs in their work and in their own lives also goes a long way to help. As substance abuse trends change over time, try to remember that early action in schools and at home can help youth avoid problems later on. We hope that prevention at every level will remain a major goal for all of us.

Conversation Starter

Why do you think teens take risks like using alcohol or other drugs?

(Remember that real conversations with your teen require you to listen as much as you speak)

Since 2003, **The Power of Choice** campaign has been reaching its goal of increasing the number of students in school districts 203 and 204 who believe the true norm that most students make healthy choices most of the time. The campaign has been sharing the good news through marketing materials that highlight the healthy life choices that students are making.

Find out more at ThePowerofChoice.info



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Hey, the Power of Choice stuff is back!

Looks like 81% have been alcohol-free in the last 30 days

What do you mean only banana left?

Check out the website ThePowerofChoice.info

Where's the Laffy Taffy?

source: Spring 2016 survey of 11,774 District 203 & 204 High School Students The Power of Choice is a project of 360 Youth Services, Naperville School District 203, Indian Prairie School District 204, Naperville Police Department, KidsMatter and District 203 & 204 parents.

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