

PARENTS: Maximizing Your Role as a Teen Influencer

As a parent you may have spoken to your teen about the harmful effects of alcohol, tobacco and illegal drugs, such as marijuana or ecstasy. But did you know that legally prescribed drugs are also a cause for concern? Prescription drugs are fast becoming the new drug of choice among teens; and they may be as close as your or a grandparent's medicine cabinet.

While the rates of tobacco, alcohol and illicit drug abuse are down overall, more and more teens are abusing prescription drugs—the same ones used to legitimately relieve pain and treat conditions such as anxiety and sleep disorders, depression and attention deficit disorder. One in five teens (or 4.5 million) report using prescription medication recreationally to get high or help manage stress or depression. It's surprisingly easy for teens to get their hands on prescription drugs from their families' medicine cabinets, someone's purse, online, or even a schoolmate's locker.

As you might remember, the teen years can be among the most difficult in a child's development. Teens find themselves on an unsteady road of self discovery, constantly comparing themselves to their peers, wanting to be accepted and, at the same time, pushing the limits of their independence. They feel the pressure to do well at school and get into a good college, all the while dealing with the angst of puberty including physical changes and surges in hormones. At some point, even the most reliable of teens may feel the pressure to start drinking, smoking pot or experimenting with other drugs.

The desire to feel good or get high ranks much lower as a motivation when misusing prescription drugs as compared to other types of adolescent drug use. More often, teens turn to prescription drugs to help manage their daily lives—to lower stress and anxiety, boost their mood or increase performance.

Unfortunately, many teens falsely believe that prescription drugs are less dangerous than other substances. They may not know what drugs they are taking or how they will affect them. The hidden dangers of prescription drug misuse include dependence, slower brain activity, irregular heartbeats, dangerously high body temperature, heart failure, or potentially deadly seizures. Parents can help shape teens' decision-making about drug use by educating them about the dangers of prescription drugs and promoting healthy alternatives.

Don't assume alcohol, tobacco or illegal drugs are the only threats!

The abuse of prescription medications is an under-recognized problem that puts young lives at risk.

Parents often play a greater, more protective role than peers in terms of influencing adolescent decision-making about drug use. Yet only one in three parents discusses the risks of abusing prescription drugs with their kids.

Parents Matter

- Contrary to what many might believe, teens care very deeply about what their parents think.
- Many teens report that their parents have the greatest influence on their drug use attitudes and decisions.
- Kids who continue to learn about the risks of drugs at home are up to 50 percent less likely to use drugs than those who are not taught about these dangers.
- When parents express strong disapproval of drug use, teens are far less likely to engage in substance use.
- Parents (and other family members) are in the best position to reduce access to prescription drugs by locking them up and properly disposing of expired or unused medicines.

10 Things You Can Do to Make a Difference

Below are some things you and other parents can do to help protect teens from prescription drug abuse and other high risk behaviors.

1. **Listen up.** Listening to and empathizing with your teen are among the most important things you can do. Doing so will help create a loving, safe and open environment for your teen to talk about everyday concerns—even tough topics like alcohol and drugs.
2. **Make time to talk.** Talking with teens on an ongoing basis can help motivate them to make smart, healthy choices. Of course, figuring out when and exactly what to say to your teen about high risk behaviors like alcohol, tobacco, illicit and prescription drug use can be difficult. Use news reports or scenes of popular movies to help start the conversation. Stay involved in your teen's life and ask open-ended questions (How are you doing? What are the big social plans this weekend? Is anything bothering you?).

Don't lecture—that's a sure way to get your teen to tune you out. Let teens know you are there whenever they need to talk about something that's troubling them, even if it relates to topics they might be nervous to bring up (drugs, alcohol, sex).

In talking with teens, don't simply instruct them not to misuse prescription drugs. Explain *why* this behavior is harmful. Remember, as tall as they're getting, the teen brain isn't fully developed. That means their impulse control, judgment and ability to understand the consequences of certain behaviors is not as good as they (or you) might think. Be their voice of reason. What can they expect will happen tomorrow if they (or their friends) decide to misuse drugs today? Give concrete examples of the risks and dangers of prescription drug abuse. Misusing or combining these drugs can cause permanent organ damage, lead to addiction, and ruin their chances of getting into a good college.

When appropriate, try to use humor and even some gentle sarcasm to start the conversation. Even a brief conversation can help steer teens in the right direction.

3. **Be observant.** Monitor your teen's use of the Internet and watch for unaccounted time away from home and other signs of trouble (for example, switching groups of friends or hangout locations, sudden mood changes, losing interest in activities or sports, lying, poor performance at school). Pro-drug web sites and illegal Internet pharmacies can provide easy access to prescription and other drugs.
4. **Set limits.** Despite the fact that adolescents are constantly challenging authority figures, they need or want limit-setting. Sitting down with your teen to set clear and consistent expectations provides them with a safe boundary in which to grow and function. According to experts, teens are less likely to engage in risky behaviors when parents set and enforce rules.

Most children—regardless of their age—want to please their parents. Send a clear message that you will be disappointed if he/she starts using drugs. Hold teens accountable when they break the rules (even though it's hard and you feel like the bad guy). The more you let them off the hook, the worse the behavior usually gets. You can be firm, while also creating an environment in which they will feel safe sharing any mistakes they've made.

5. **Talk to parents of other teens.** Make sure other parents are aware that prescription drug abuse is a growing problem. Consider sharing tips and opportunities for teachable moments with other parents by logging onto the Partnership for a Drug-Free America's *Time to Talk* chat at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/timetotalk/> or plan to give the *Maximizing Your Role as a Teen Influencer* workshop to other parents in your neighborhood or school district.
6. **Dispel myths.** It's important to set the record straight about the dangers of prescription drug abuse and present the facts. Inform teens and others that abusing prescription drugs is just as dangerous as other substances, and it can also be as addictive. There is no safe way to get "high," and it's not okay to rely on these drugs to help manage stress or get "high," even "every once and a while." And although teens might think "everyone is doing it" make sure they know that while one in five teens abuse prescription drugs, four out of five are not.

Starting a dialogue

Here are some additional resources that might help.

Time to Talk (www.timetotalk.org)

Provides practical tips and tools to help parents reach out to children of all ages about tough issues like drug and alcohol abuse to help them stay healthy and drug-free.

Not in My House (www.drugfree.org/notinmyhouse)

Gives parents tips for talking with teens, common lingo used by teens, advice from experts and how to make your house medication safe.

Students Against Destructive Decisions (www.sadd.org/contract)

SADD's Life Contract was created to help teens and parents talk about potentially destructive decisions related to alcohol, drugs, peer pressure and behavior.

7. **Help give teens an escape route.** Talk to them about alternative ways to get out of a bad situation. Offer to pick them up wherever they are if they are in trouble. Give them easy ways to say “no” so they don’t feel “uncool” when talking to their peers. Here are some examples:

“I don’t want to ruin my season/get in trouble with the coach.”

“I have to do something with my parents really early tomorrow morning.”

“I’m the designated driver.”

“I don’t need drugs to have fun.”

“I’m not interested.”

8. **Encourage healthy alternatives.** Offer teens guidance on dealing with life’s stressors. Empathize with the pressures they face at school, with friends and even at home. Suggest positive outlets to relieve stress (for example, joining a sports team or youth group, learning to play an instrument, volunteering in the community). Spend time with your teen. Plan activities you can do together—cooking, exercising, going on a weekend road trip or renting a movie. Give positive reinforce for healthy choices and draw attention to their skills and talents to help boost their self-esteem.

9. **Practice good medicine safety and disposal.** Kids learn by example. Be aware of how you and others use prescription drugs in front of teens and younger children. If you take medications, explain why and stress that these are powerful medications that are only safe to use under a doctor’s care. Talk about why it’s not safe to use someone else’s medications.

Keep tabs on the medications—over-the-counter and prescription drugs—you and other relatives have in your homes. Avoid stockpiling prescription medicines and keep them in a safe place out of children’s sight and reach. Many people will save medications, especially antibiotics, pain or sleep medications, for themselves or other family members to use in “emergency” situations and often think nothing of it.

Not only does this set a bad example, it also gives teens access to these drugs, which helps drive the teen prescription drug abuse problem. Sharing these medications can be dangerous and it may also be illegal. Take steps to promptly and properly dispose of any unused or expired prescription drugs. For more information, go to www.smartrxdisposal.net.

If your teen takes a prescription drug for a medical condition or following surgery or an injury (for example, getting his or her wisdom teeth pulled, breaking a leg), encourage him/her to talk to the doctor about side effects and what to watch for. Help prepare him/her to say “no” if a classmate asks for some of the medication.

10. **Team up with your school, the guidance department or Parent Teacher Association.** Champion the issue of preventing prescription drug abuse among teens in your community. Offer to give the *Maximizing Your Role as a Teen Influencer* workshop at your local library, at an upcoming school training or PTA meeting so that more teen influencers are in the know and can help make a difference. Find out if the school is willing to give you dedicated space to display educational materials during open houses, school orientations and health fairs. Visit www.talkaboutrx.org to download brochures and find other helpful resources.

Learn about local efforts to promote drug-free, safe schools. Many states have coalitions working on these issues. You can find out if there is one in your area by contacting the Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA) at www.cadca.org or the Partnership for a Drug-Free America at www.drugfree.org.

Help is Available! If you suspect a teen is abusing prescription drugs, there is help.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Helpline

800-662-HELP (800-662-4357) (English and Spanish)

800-487-4889 (TDD)