



PARENTS USE YOUR POWER

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88%

Respect their friend's choice to say no to marijuana

Conversation starter of the month—Ask your teen, “How do you relax each day?”

NEXT MONTH:

Party Guidelines and Social Hosting



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The Vulnerable High School Student

The teen brain is blowing up. Hyperconnected neural pathways between the amygdala, responsible for emotions, and the immature frontal lobe, responsible for reasoning, are lighting up as if it's the 4th of July. The teen brain is, at age 18, physically complete, yet, complex developmental changes continue into the early 20s, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. The frontal lobe responsible for putting the brakes on risk-taking, thrill-seeking impulses, is last to develop. Parents may observe their teen's complex behaviors occurring during problem solving. Frustrations pile up with dirty laundry, as a teen tries on 10 shirts before school. Teen brains gloss over weighing risks for the rush of immediate rewards, such as video gaming and texting into the wee hours on school nights. The next morning, the overly tired brain fails to remember to place homework in the backpack. In class, the teen realizes the error. Adrenaline explodes. Panic. Desperation. Anger. Sadness. Acceptance. A range of drama—all a day in the life of the average teenager.

Teens get bored easily because they have a higher threshold before they feel the same rush of mental stimulation as adults. Teen brains are receptive for emotions such as fear and anxiety and underdeveloped for calm, rational thinking. So while the average high school student may rarely be prone to engaging in risky behaviors, such as trying drugs, getting into fights or drinking something on a dare, it's not a far stretch to tip the scales. Genes, childhood experiences, and the environment in which a young person reaches adolescence can ignite risky behavior. Any high school student can become vulnerable—not just a class clown or chronic troublemaker. At the heart of a teenager is the desire to feel carefree, often through seeking novel experiences. Uncertain about their future, that same high schooler may become worried, or anxious and seek ways to ease it.

Teenagers are more likely to try alcohol or marijuana—repeating use to “self-medicate”—if they have 2 or more of these vulnerability risk factors, than 1 or none:

- **Family addiction history:** If someone in the family has problematic episodes of use, the propensity to use the same substance increases. Curiosity strikes: “What is the big draw?” The brain releases chemicals during an experiment with a mood-altering substance, a potent experience for a teen with the genetics for addiction.
- **Environmental modeling:** Close friends, classmates or teammates who talk about their drug and alcohol use convince your teenager that use is a widespread behavior. It's not. The District 203 and 204 Drug Use and Perception Survey* shows the large majority of high school students are free of illegal substance use.
- **Individual characteristics:** Anxiety; depression; attention deficit disorder; low self-esteem; lack of impulse control; mental illness; lack of awareness about or interest in personal health and wellness; aggressive, antisocial, or hard-to-control behavior from an early age lower the threshold to vulnerability to try an illegal substance.
- **Life experiences:** Trauma; childhood abuse; chaotic home life; failing in school; students with a history of being isolated from other children; those bullied or perceived as different; lacking consistent messages of support, boundaries, monitoring, and follow through (parents, coaches, teachers), increase the odds a teen is vulnerable to try an illicit substance.
- **Passive reinforcement by parents, peers, siblings and others in their environment who downplay or deny underage drinking is “any big deal.”** Even a grandparent, neighbor or other older person in your teenager's life who overlooks, underestimates, or is unaware of the unhealthy, illegal, potentially dangerous and addictive aspects of underage use, regardless of substance involved, teaches a teenager what is acceptable behavior. Teens surrounded by those who actively or passively reinforce the positive benefits of a substance (for example, “let's pour the teenager a little beer so she can taste it,” “let's split a bottle of wine, son, so you are prepared for college” and so forth)—provide confusing messages by giving a nod to permitting access to addictive substances.

Parenting Tips:

- ⇒ Enhance protective factors including family communication through increased bonding time. Actively listen to what your teen has to say. Ask questions daily.
- ⇒ Diminish risk factors for vulnerability to substance use or to reduce chances of reuse such as creating a home environment where substances (typically, alcohol and prescriptions including medical marijuana) are secured & unavailable for experimentation by teen or theft from visiting teens, and adults model no use or limited use of alcohol.
- ⇒ Model friendships by inviting parents over, preferably with teens their age. Know your teen's friends by first and last name. Monitor where your teen goes by address and cell phone numbers of friends. Reinforce the rule that a parent be in your home or another's home when two or more teens are gathered.
- ⇒ Assess your teen's vulnerabilities and support. Get them [more help](#) if needed.

Source: Spring 2014 Survey of 12,651 District 203 & 204 high school students. A project of 360 Youth Services, Naperville School District 203, Indian Prairie School District 204, Naperville Police Department, DuPage County Health Department, KidsMatter, Aurora Police Department and District 203 & 204 parents. Funding provided in whole or in part by Illinois Department of Human Services and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)