

3 Ways to Prevent Teen Drug and Alcohol Use

by David Smith



There's plenty of work left to do when it comes to teens' use of drugs and alcohol.

From *Animal House* to the days that were *Dazed and Confused*, all the way through the *Pineapple Express*, young people have a storied past with drugs and alcohol.

Hmmm...am I seeing a connection between control substances and Hollywood?

Good News or Bad News?

We've addressed [teens' use of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco in the past](#), but new research is always coming out on this important subject. For example, in some of the [Center for Disease Control's \(CDC\) latest research](#), they found that 41.8% of high school students had used alcohol within the past month in 2009. That same stat was 50.8% in 1991.

So...we're moving in the right direction, right?

On some accounts, yes. But the CDC also claims that more young people drink alcohol every month than smoke cigarettes or use any illegal drug. Further, they found...

- that 6.6 million young people reported binge drinking (consuming five or more drinks within two hours).
- that alcohol is involved in more than 4,600 deaths of persons under 21 each year.

It looks like there's plenty of work left to do when it comes to teens' use of drugs and alcohol.

Is Joe Camel to Blame?

Adults who parented during the 80's and 90's will remember [the debate over Joe Camel](#), the cartoon character who sold billions of dollars worth of cigarettes for the brand that gave him his name. Back then – *the days following Ronald Reagan's "war on drugs"* – adults wondered about the connection between media and risky teen behavior, specifically, the use of controlled substances.

It looks like nothing's changed in the past 20 years.

[Research from the Partnership for a Drug-Free America](#) shows that more than one-third of parents are concerned that TV (38%), computers (37%) and video games (33%) make it harder for them to communicate with their media-saturated teens about the dangers of drug and alcohol use. Many of the same parents blamed their communication woes about substance abuse on newer forms of media like texting (27%), Facebook (25%) and Twitter (19%), as well.

Many parents are worried about media's message to their kids. And parents *should* be worried. After all, [kids spend an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes of every day](#) soaking in media...*and its messages.*

With a known connection between teens' alcohol use and alcohol marketing targeted at teens, some watchdog groups are convinced that monitoring advertisements is crucial to lowering the number of teens who drink. As recent as two decades ago, alcohol marketing was self-regulated, but research agencies like The Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth have involved themselves in the business of selling spirits.

[Their study, which spanned almost a decade](#), found (some) encouraging data: between 2001 and 2008, youth exposure to alcohol advertising in magazines fell by 48%.

Ummm...who cares about magazines? Many of those [publications are no longer in print](#). *Let's talk TV!*

The same report found that "exposure to alcohol advertising on U.S. television increased 71% between 2001 and 2009."

Wow! That's not encouraging at all!

They also found that the average number of alcohol ads seen each year by young people watching TV increased from 217 in 2001 to 366 in 2009 (which is approximately one alcohol ad per day). The culprits behind these numbers are easy to spot. In 2009, the five cable networks most-likely to expose youth to alcohol advertising were Comedy Central, BET, E!, FX and Spike.

But TV isn't the only player in this game. The fastest growing form of media entertainment, "music/audio," has its fair share of voices, as well. Grammy Award winner Melissa Etheridge has lent her support for the [legalization of medicinal marijuana](#)...and the [legalization of recreational marijuana](#), as well. The same LA Times article quotes Etheridge as saying, "I don't want to look like a criminal to my children anymore. I want them to know this is a choice that you make as a responsible adult."

Even more recently, Bruno Mars has commented on his run-in with the law over a [cocaine possession charge from 2010](#). In the [April 2011 edition of GQ](#), the incredibly talented singer (of *Grenade* and *Just the Way You Are* fame) said, "I'm not gonna preach that I'm a role model. I'm a f**king musician! But I've learned people are watching, so don't do nothing stupid."

Sorry, Bruno. I'm not buying it. You're a celebrity who's already sold millions of singles, and have captured the attention of the world, including millions of young kids. Just because you decry being a role model doesn't let you off the hook. You're being watched. Act like it.

No Big Deal?

So, what's the fallout when teens use alcohol and drugs? Bad grades? Bad attitudes? Bad breath? Yeah, all that, and unfortunately, a lot more.

The relationship between teen drug use (illegal *and* prescription) and teen suicide has been well-documented. During 2008 (the latest year for available data), an estimated 263,871 drug-related Emergency Department visits were made by young people. In their [recently published](#)

[report](#), the Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN) found that nearly one tenth of these visits (8.8%, or 23,124 visits) involved a suicide attempt. Other related findings are eye-opening:

- Pharmaceuticals were involved in 95.4% of drug-related suicide attempts among adolescents
- 72.3% of these emergency visits for drug-related suicide attempts were made by females

If that percentage of female use seems high to you, *don't be surprised any longer*. For several years now, our [Youth Culture Window articles](#) have talked about the [devastation many girls' self-esteem is undergoing](#).

Wanna take a guess as to how they're coping?

That's right; new survey results from [the Partnership for a Drug Free America](#) show that girls seem more inclined than ever to reach for drugs (and alcohol) to help them emotionally. While guys tend to use drugs for a thrill, or a high, most girls confess their drug use is related to self-esteem issues.

Commenting on the report, addiction specialist Heather Hayes says, "We used to believe that boys were more likely to use (drugs) than girls and that there were more boys out there using than girls, and what this study has shown is that the numbers are the same now."

By the way, it looks like [teen girls in Europe](#) are facing the same reality.

Media's Megaphone

When it comes to drug and alcohol use, media has a really loud voice in the lives of teens. Many parents and youth workers might understandably assume their words of wisdom and counsel fall on deaf ears. But that's not the case...*at all*. In fact, there are some really simple ways adults can level the playing field when it comes to putting media's message in check.

- **Talk, talk, talk.** Without exception, every researcher and analyst involved in these studies found that parents who intentionally invested time into "preventive maintenance" conversations with their teenagers routinely experienced lower instances of drug and alcohol use in the life of their families. The research above states that media's marketing engages our teenagers at least once every day with its message; it wouldn't hurt to touch base with our teenagers at least weekly to offer a counter message.
- **Stay educated on trends.** Unfortunately, new forms of control substances appear on the market at the same frequency that Lady Gaga changes outfits at award shows. For instance, hookah, a relatively unheard of utensil for smoking tobacco and marijuana, experienced a popular sweep in clubs during the last 5 years.

More recently, K-2, also known as Spice, is a synthetic form of marijuana that has a special appeal to athletes. "We're receiving more reports of its use in the athlete population," says Frank Uryasz, director of the National Center of Drug-Free Sport. "It appears to be marketed heavily to young people -- high school age and below, and college. We're getting reports from colleges, where athletes are asking about it."

In fact, in [an article by The Post Game](#), one NFL veteran speaking on the condition of anonymity said, "I go straight weed in the off-season. Then, in-season, when they test, I go to [K2]." K-2's position in the mainstream drug scene ticked up several notches when it was connected to [the suicide of 18-year old football player, David Rozga](#).

Parents and youth leaders will do well to stay on top of the trends, instead of playing continual catch up. Knowing about the “options” facing teens today greatly affects how we help them...*on the front end.*

- **Watch what they watch.** No, I don’t mean curl up on the couch and watch [Skins](#) together. I mean, monitor what they’re watching and pull the plug on dangerous TV programming, music, and movies. The danger isn’t restricted to actual TV programming anymore; these days, the ubiquitous advertising is just as impacting on their lives. Yes, I know that some of today’s TV content can be used to jump start conversations and serve as “teaching moments,” but there are many elements on TV that just aren’t redeemable. So steer your teens away from those influences.

The problem of drug and alcohol use in the lives of teenagers can have devastating effects. However, the prevention of these problems can be surprisingly simple. Taking these proactive steps will help ensure that no matter how many messages our teens get from culture (and media in particular), we get the last word. 🇺🇸

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