

Bottom Line PERSONAL

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Robert Stutman ■ The Stutman Group

KIDS ARE GETTING THEIR DRUGS FROM YOU The appalling truth about teen substance abuse today

America's drug problem is staggering. Illegal drug use has climbed to 20 million Americans.

Even more shocking: Many addicts began abusing drugs or alcohol as kids under the watchful eye of well-intentioned parents.

Parents fail to take steps that might steer their kids away from addiction because they don't understand how much drug use has changed since they were young. Today there are different drugs, different dangers and a different demographic of young people at risk. Here's what parents need to know now...

■ **Drug abuse begins early.** A generation ago, the average age of first drug use among eventual users was 15. Today that average starting age is alarmingly low—12 or 13. This is a huge problem because the younger people are when they first try drugs, the greater the odds that they will become addicted.

Important: Start talking with your kids about the dangers of drugs before they set foot in junior high school (see box on page 14). By high school, it may be too late.

■ **The drugs teens abuse today are not the ones your generation used.** Today young people are much more likely to abuse prescription medications than marijuana or LSD. In fact, one in five high school students have taken a prescription drug that they didn't get from a doctor. Teens almost always get their pharmaceutical drugs from their parents' medicine cabinets or the cabinets of friends' parents.

Dozens of different pharmaceuticals can be abused. As a rule of thumb, if there's a sticker on a pill bottle warning against driving after use, it's likely that teens take the drug to get high. Even over-the-counter medications such as cough suppressants are abused.

If anyone in your house is prescribed a medication that has a warning sticker about driving after use, buy a lockbox or a safe and lock up these pills. Do this even if you trust your kids completely—you don't want your kids friends or your babysitter to be tempted.

■ **Abusing prescription drugs often is riskier than abusing illegal drugs.** Many teens—and even parents—incorrectly assume that anything prescribed by a doctor can't be all that dangerous. In truth, many prescription medications are extremely dangerous when not used as intended.

Example: OxyContin is a time-release pill designed to suppress pain over six to eight hours. Drug abusers crush these pills into powder so that the full dose is absorbed at once.

Fact: Either this year or next, fatalities from misuse of prescription medications are likely to surpass auto accidents as the single leading cause of accidental death in the US.

Robert Stutman

www.TheStutmanGroup.com

716-969-2579

■ **Drug abuse is not just a problem for cities, minorities, the poor and kids who underachieve in school.** Rural and suburban kids are just as likely as city kids to abuse drugs or alcohol—perhaps even slightly more likely. White kids are as likely as African- American kids to do so. Private school kids are as likely as public school kids. Teens on sports teams are just as likely to use drugs as any other teen. Kids who do well in school are somewhat less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol than those who do poorly, but good grades are not the ironclad evidence of nonuse that many parents imagine them to be. Even smart kids can be drug users, and some of them are smart enough to maintain their grades after they start using.

■ **Those who start drinking as teens are almost twice as likely to become alcoholics.** Alcohol is the most socially acceptable drug in our culture, but that doesn't mean it's not dangerous. Consuming one or two alcoholic drinks is not a problem for most adults, but when teens drink, they almost never stop at just one or two— they drink until they are intoxicated. The teenage brain is especially prone to addiction, including alcohol addiction, because it is still developing. Those who start drinking as teens or preteens are approximately twice as likely to become alcoholics as those who wait until their 20s.

Do not drink to get drunk in front of your child—even if your child is still too young to fully understand what drinking means. As early as age two, children begin forming lifelong beliefs and behaviors based on what they see their parents doing.

Certainly never allow your teens to get drunk in your presence. Some parents permit their teens to drink at home because they think this is safer than the teens drinking elsewhere and then driving home. I am somewhat sympathetic to this thinking, though studies suggest that teens who drink with their parents are slightly more likely to become alcoholics than those who do not. I am not sympathetic when parents allow kids to drink to the point of drunkenness at home. That only increases the odds of future drinking problems.

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WHAT EVERY PARENT MUST DO

Many parents believe that nothing they do or say about drugs gets through to their teens. While it's true that parents cannot control their teens completely, all kids learn important life lessons from their parents—even when neither parent nor child realizes that learning is taking place.

■ **Have dinner as a family as often as possible.** Families that eat together are much less likely to have kids who become addicts. Children who have dinner with their parents at least three times a week are less likely to develop drug or alcohol problems.

■ **Tell your children regularly and emphatically that you want them to stay away from drugs,** including alcohol and prescription medications. Your teens might roll their eyes, but at some level, your words are likely to have an effect—studies show that kids who know their parents care whether they use drugs are less likely to use them.

Helpful: For information about talking with children about drugs, read *How to Raise a Drug-Free Kid* by Joseph Califano, Jr. (Fireside)...and explore the links section on my Web site (www.TheStutmanGroup.com, then click "Links").

■ **Confront your teen if you smell cigarette smoke on his/her clothes or discover other evidence of tobacco use.** Teens who use tobacco are at greater risk than nontobacco users of becoming drug addicts. If you smoke, quit.

■ **Inform your teens that if one of their peers ever passes out from drinking or drug abuse in their presence,** they should immediately roll this person onto his/her side (to prevent suffocation if the person vomits), then call 911. Thousands of lives would be saved if every teen knew this. ■

Robert Stutman, a 25-year veteran of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). He served as special agent in charge of several DEA field divisions, including the New York field division, the nation's largest. In 1990, Stutman founded The Stutman Group, a consulting company that designs and implements substance-abuse prevention programs. He was special consultant on substance abuse for CBS News and speaks to more than 100 groups a year.

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