

The Whys of Risky Teen Behaviors

During adolescence, children's bodies become more adult each day. While parents are amazed at the physical changes, it can be difficult to cope with the emotional and social ones. Who hasn't been frustrated by a teen's inability to organize multiple tasks, grasp abstract concepts, and control their emotions? Different parts of adolescents' brains mature at different rates. The part used for predicting future consequences of current activities, decision-making, prioritizing tasks, and tempering emotions is not yet fully developed. This is why adolescents can be so impulsive and why some exercise poor judgment and engage in risky behaviors.



While there's not much data, there are indications that teens with special health needs and/or disabilities may be even more likely to engage in risky behaviors. Recent studies from North Carolina and Washington State surveyed youth about behavioral risk factors. In both states, youth with disabilities reported higher tobacco, alcohol and drug use than youth without disabilities.

Smoking and drinking negatively affect teens' still-developing bodies and brains. In fact, nicotine and alcohol, both legal, are the two most widely used addictive drugs in the U.S.

Teen Smokers: The good news is that the number of high school students who smoke is on the decline. The bad news is that more than one fourth of students, 28.5%, still smoke (www.lungusa.org).

Call to Action on Underage Drinking: The bad news is that there are 11 million underage drinkers. The good news is that in March 2007, acting U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Moritsugu recognized that, "Too many Americans consider underage drinking a rite of passage to adulthood." He outlined six goals for supporting healthy teen development and called on parents, schools, communities, and other systems and individuals who interact with teens, including teens themselves, to help raise awareness about the consequences of underage drinking and ultimately reduce and prevent teenage drinking. Read more at www.hhs.gov/news/press/2007pres/20070306.html.

Healthy Teens: The Call to Action encourages all levels of society to work together to ensure teens are surrounded by a caring community that empowers them to make healthy choices. This same approach helps teens avoid other risky behaviors, such as drug use and unhealthy relationships. The Search Institute has created a wonderful list of positive qualities, called developmental assets, at www.search-institute.org/assets/ (English *en Español*), with information about how to help all youth acquire these assets so they grow up to be responsible adults. Youth with special health needs can find specialized resources and supports to help them understand, manage and make decisions about their health at www.hrtw.org and www.fvkasa.org.

Adolescence is the time when teens become more independent, develop new skills, meet new people and seek out new experiences. The teenage years are also the time when children are most vulnerable to peer pressure and most exposed to risky behaviors. It is important to make sure teens have plenty of healthy experiences and stimulation so they don't resort to unhealthy behaviors.



Parents are the biggest influence on their children's behavior. Below are some suggestions for establishing and keeping open communication.

- ♥ Be a role model for your kids; practice the behaviors you want them to learn
- ♥ Talk to your teens about the risks of smoking & drinking
- ♥ Make time to listen when they want to talk
- ♥ Acknowledge the things your child does well and give lots of praise
- ♥ Make time for family fun

For more ideas, visit www.tnpc.com/parentalk/adoles.html.

Family Voices is a national grassroots network of families and friends speaking on behalf of children with special health needs. Our children are also part of the wider world of children. With an Improving Understanding of MCH grant, Family Voices works to encourage partnerships between families and professionals for children's good health. **Bright Futures: Family Matters** is a publication to share with your networks. Check out our Family Voices web sites at www.brightfuturesforfamilies.org and www.familyvoices.org.

Partners...



The National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices supports governors and their staffs by developing responses and workable solutions for policy challenges states face. The five best practice areas include education and health. Many of the education programs focus on high school improvement, providing post-secondary education opportunities for low-income students and increasing college and career readiness. For example, Missouri has initiated a "Show-me Scholars Initiative." Local scientists visit schools and talk to students to emphasize the connection between high school course work and achieving future career goals. At a time when there is so much focus on teens' misbehaviors, it is encouraging to know about efforts to support healthy behaviors and provide positive educational opportunities. Learn more at www.nga.org/center.

NGA Center for Best Practices

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Family Resource Corner

If your teen smokes and is ready to quit, there's a clever booklet to support your child's efforts at: www.cdc.gov/tobacco/quit_smoking/how_to_quit/00_pdfs/IQuit.pdf or *en Español* at www.cdc.gov/spanish/tabaco/teen_tabaco.htm.

Prom and graduation season is just around the corner. Read the publication at http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/GraduationFacts/Graduation_Fact_Sheet.html and talk to your teen about how to celebrate these occasions safely, without alcohol.

The Cool Spot at www.thecoolspot.gov was created to educate kids, 11 - 13 years old, about alcohol use and its consequences. It also provides strategies kids can use to resist peer pressure.

Everywhere we go, we're bombarded with advertisements, many for cigarettes and alcohol. Encourage your children to become "advertising detectives" and talk with them about the underlying media messages. Visit www.media-awareness.ca/ (English *en Français*) for information about becoming media-savvy.

What's new in research?



Alcohol & Cigarettes in the Media

Many young people drink alcohol because their parents and friends drink. Even when someone else's behavior does not influence a teen to drink, research shows the media is a powerful influence on a teen's decision about whether or not to engage in underage drinking. Research published in the January 2006 issue of *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* (<http://archpedi.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/abstract/160/1/18>) found a direct connection between exposure to alcohol advertisements and the incidence of underage drinking. In fact, 12 year olds who saw beer commercials thought beer drinking was a desirable behavior, as compared to 12 year olds who were not as exposed to these same advertisements.

In December 2006, this same journal published a research study about cigarettes in the media (<http://archpedi.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/abstract/160/12/1285>). Tobacco manufacturers specifically target young and female smokers. However, the researchers concluded that cigarette makers do not need to advertise their products in order to tempt people to smoke. Of the 1.4 million young people who take up smoking every year, more than half of new smokers under the age of 18 begin smoking because they see TV, movie and video stars smoke cigarettes. Moreover, children who already smoke are 42% more likely to smoke more. Childhood habits follow kids into their adult years. Ninety percent of adults who smoke started before they were 18 years old.

Tidbit for the Month



As we enjoy the warmer weather, it's important to be mindful about all the things that bloom in spring, including the less welcome signs of the season - ticks! May is Lyme Disease Awareness Month. Learn more about Lyme and other tick-borne diseases and prevention at www.lyme.org.

Share your news with others!

We love to hear from partner and family organizations and programs and invite you to share news about your organization's programs and activities. To share your tidbits and/or subscribe to this publication email Betsy Anderson at banderson@familyvoices.org.

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