



DECEMBER 2008

Issue No. 72

OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

# *IN SIGHT* for Oregon Lawyers

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

## YOUR CHILDREN AND DRUGS: ARE THE KIDS ALL RIGHT?

All parents want to believe that their children are protected and insulated from negative influences, yet the evening news regularly reports tragic stories of teen binge drinking, illegal drug use, and abuse of over-the-counter drugs as well as seemingly innocent household products. Television, movies, and the Internet expose kids to daily scenes of alcohol use, violence, and drugs. Parents may be concerned about their children yet unsure of how to effectively talk to them about alcohol or drugs. Or worse, parents may know that their teens are experimenting with chemical substances yet not know how to effectively intervene. This article provides facts and effective methods for dealing with the issue of alcohol and drug use by young people.

### What Parents Need to Know

Experts agree on one crucial fact: the best way to prevent alcohol and drug problems later in life is to delay the age of first use as long as possible, ideally until age 21 or later, as science now shows that brain development continues until the mid-twenties. New research shows that alcohol can damage the brains of adolescents who drink regularly, making it harder for them to learn and remember. Parents can take some comfort from statistics showing that the percentage of youth using illegal drugs has generally declined or held steady in recent years. The majority of children ages 9 to 13 do not use alcohol, although there is a growing rate of alcohol use among Oregon youth in grades 8 through 11. Marijuana is the most commonly used illegal drug, followed by prescription drug abuse. (In

2007, one in every 20 high school seniors nationally reported that they had tried the narcotic OxyContin in the past year.)

Studies also show something that most parents intuitively know: as children become teenagers, they may listen more to their peers than to their parents. From ages 9 to 11, children improve in their ability to plan ahead and are better at cooperating with adults. Kids ages 12 to 13 gain more independence from their family and place great importance on having friends and being with friends. Although students through grade 6 increasingly believe that alcohol is harmful, that belief reverses during the junior-high transition (through grade 9). Among 12-year-olds, 1 in 16 reports using alcohol in the past year. Among 14-year-olds, the rate jumps to more than 1 in 4.

While peer pressure and media messages affect teens, parents can also exert a powerful influence on their children, particularly by modeling healthy behavior. Sometimes, parents need to reevaluate and possibly change their own attitudes. Experimentation with alcohol and drugs can have serious consequences for youth. Underage drinkers are more likely to binge drink, consuming four to five drinks in an hour. Marijuana has increased in potency 151% from 1983 to 2007. For younger users, this potent drug is more addictive, resulting in more admissions to treatment for users in the 12-to-17 age group than any other drug. Studies have also shown a link between teen marijuana use and depression, suicidal thoughts, and suicide attempts. Setting limits and being clear

### OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

503-226-1057  
1-800-321-OAAP  
[www.aaap.org](http://www.aaap.org)

#### Lawyers Helping Lawyers

- Alcohol & Chemical Dependency
- Career Change & Transition
- Gambling Addiction
- Mental Health
- Procrastination & Time Management

A free, nonprofit,  
confidential  
program for you.

## How to Talk to Your Teen About Alcohol and Drugs

How do you actually begin this very difficult and potentially awkward discussion? Here are some sample phrases to get the conversation started:

"It seems like something unusual is going on. Is there something we should be talking about?"

"I love you and I'm concerned about you."

"I'm sensing that something serious is going on in your life. Can you tell me what's happening?"

"We're pretty sure that you've been (smoking pot, drinking, taking prescription meds). Your mom and I are asking you to be honest and tell us what's going on."

What if your child gets angry and says, "Leave me alone! You're always coming down on me!?" First, remember to stay calm and remain in the adult role. Your response could be something like, "You're right. I am coming down on your drug/alcohol habit. I love you and want to help. Let's start over."

If your teen announces, "Leave me alone! I hate you!" one helpful response would be, "It sounds like you are really angry at me. But I can't leave you alone, even if it makes you angry. Believe me, it's painful to me that you hate me. However, I have a responsibility to you and for your safety."

about a "no tolerance" policy for youth drinking or drug use is a first step toward preventing problems.

### Educate Yourself

Even if parents are vigilant about teen alcohol and drug use, they are frequently unaware that kids can abuse a number of over-the-counter products, including using cough and cold medicines to get high. These products can be in caplet or liquid form and usually contain the active ingredient dextromethorphan, or DXM. While dextromethorphan is an effective cough suppressant when taken according to label instructions, higher doses can produce altered mood and hallucinogenic effects. Students in grades 8, 10, and 12 have reported using DXM products to get high in the previous year – 4%, 5%, and 7%, respectively. This trend held steady in 2007, except that use among 12<sup>th</sup> graders decreased by 1%. Use of some over-the-counter products, like cough medicine or inhalants (e.g., glue, paint, markers, or nail polish), may decrease among older teens as they move to alcohol, marijuana, or prescription drugs.

The array of possible substances of abuse may seem overwhelming to parents, particularly when mixed with popular, rapidly changing slang terms for drugs and the habits of teens to regularly – if not constantly – communicate by text or Internet "instant message." Tools are available to help decipher what seems like code to many adults. The National Youth Anti-Drug

Media Campaign sponsors an online site called Parents: The Anti-Drug ([www.theantidrug.com](http://www.theantidrug.com)), which features information and news on substances of abuse, teen online access, and tips on how to talk to your teen – in English, Spanish, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, and Vietnamese. The Office of National Drug Control Policy maintains an online database of street terms at [www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/streetterms](http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/streetterms).

### How Parents Can Make a Difference

Parents can make a difference if they open a dialog with their children about crucial issues like alcohol and drugs early on and continue that connection through the teen years. Twelve- to seventeen-year-olds who had *at least one conversation* with their parents about substance abuse in the last year had lower rates of alcohol, drug, and tobacco use than kids who did not talk with their parents. Use everyday moments, like riding in the car or watching television, to open a dialog. ("Do you know kids at school who drink or use drugs? How do you feel about that?") Or: "Do you have friends who drink or use drugs? Do you feel pressure to do it, too?") Don't use scare tactics, particularly with teenagers. Learn the facts. While baby boomer parents may feel self-conscious talking about alcohol or drug use in light of their own experimentation, disclosure can be used to make a point. ("I tried drugs when I was younger because my friends were doing them and I wanted to fit in, but I'm sorry I did. I was too young to make a good decision.")

What if you suspect your child is using alcohol or drugs? Parents in the habit of having open and honest talks with their children may choose to address the matter directly. Try to stay calm and avoid anger and hostility. Having both parents present a united front can be helpful, as well as rehearsing the discussion in advance. For some parents, the prospect is daunting to approach, but it is too crucial to ignore. You can start by preparing to have the conversation. Organize your thoughts. List the facts as you know them (e.g., changes in behavior, finding drugs or paraphernalia), and consider writing down key points. Remember to listen to your child's response. If your teen becomes angry or hostile, don't let yourself get pulled into a confrontation. Be firm, take a "time out," but be clear that the conversation will continue. Consider whether you need professional assistance.

To avoid abuse of prescription drugs, whether they are prescribed to your teen or to another family member, restrict access and monitor quantities. Discard unused prescription drugs by putting them in the trash (not dumping them down the toilet!) and mixing them with something like used kitty litter. Set an example for kids by not using someone else's prescription medicine and only taking medication as prescribed by a medical practitioner.

In Oregon, the nonprofit Oregon Partnership ([www.orphnership.org](http://www.orphnership.org)) provides statewide services for drug prevention and teaches parents strategies for dealing with these issues at home. It also operates various crisis intervention and referral services 24 hours a day, including a suicide intervention line (800-SUICIDE), a confidential crisis and referral line for adults (800-923-HELP), and a peer-to-peer crisis line for teens (877-553-TEEN). A call to the Oregon Attorney Assistance Program can be a place to begin. The OAAP provides confidential expert advice and referrals to counselors, treatment providers, and interventionists.

Meloney Crawford Chadwick  
*OAAP Attorney Counselor*

## Did You Know . . . ?

- Young girls in Oregon drink at higher rates than young boys. In 2006, nearly 34% of 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls reported drinking alcohol in the last month, compared with almost 30% of 8<sup>th</sup> grade boys.
- Oregon youth marijuana use largely equals or surpasses cigarette use. Oregon 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> graders were as likely or more likely to use marijuana than smoke cigarettes in the past several years.
- In 2006, one in 10 Oregon 11<sup>th</sup> graders reported having smoked marijuana three or more times in the past 30 days.

**Source:**

Oregon Partnership, [www.orphnership.org](http://www.orphnership.org).