



NICOTINE, ALCOHOL & OTHER DRUGS

A Parent Companion to Center on Addiction's
National Survey: *Teen Insights Into Drugs,
Alcohol, and Nicotine*

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Teen vaping is at epidemic proportions. The legalization of marijuana is spreading across the country. Social media is a pervasive influence in teens' lives. Under this backdrop, we conducted a [new survey](#) to give families a snapshot of what teens are experiencing in an ever-changing landscape as it relates to nicotine, alcohol and other drugs.

We surveyed more than 1,000 kids, aged 12-17, across the nation. Unlike some other national surveys of young people, our survey didn't ask teens to report on their own use of substances. We instead asked about key risk factors for future use, especially having friends who engage in substance use and an intention to try substances at some point in time.

WE WANTED TO ANSWER QUESTIONS SUCH AS:

- ▶ What sources do teens rely on to get information about substance use?
- ▶ How easy is it to get substances in their communities?
- ▶ Have teens been exposed to illegal drug use in real life? If so, where do they most often see drugs being used?
- ▶ How concerned would they be if they knew a friend was using substances?
- ▶ What are the differences between what young teens think and experience in relation to substance use vs. older teens?
- ▶ Can parents influence the key risk factors for teen experimentation and early use?

Unreliable sources of information, ease of access, seeing substance use in real life, a pro-use attitude, having friends who use substances and a poor parental/caregiver relationship are closely associated with risk of future substance use.

This guide is intended to be a parent or caregiver companion piece to the original report of the survey findings, breaking down key findings and what that can mean for you and your family.

We asked about key risk factors for future use, especially **having friends who engage in substance use and an intention to try substances at some point in time.**

Our Key Findings

WHAT INFORMATION SOURCES DO TEENS RELY ON TO GET INFORMATION ABOUT SUBSTANCE USE?

The majority of teens (67%) get their information about substances from credible sources, such as parents and school classes, especially younger teens. However, twice as many teens who have at least one friend who uses drugs report less reliable sources as their main sources of information, relative to teens with no friends who use drugs. These include other teens, the internet and social media. Often, these sources portray only the upside of substance use as opposed to providing a complete picture, and unreliable sources of information are closely associated with risk of future substance use.

Many parents and other caregivers do a great job of providing information on alcohol, nicotine and marijuana. However, our survey results showed that parents are less likely to discuss the risks of using other substances with their teens, such as the misuse of prescription medications like OxyContin, Vicodin or Adderall; the use of cocaine and other stimulants; and the use of heroin.

Nearly 1,800 teens (Partnership Attitude Tracking Study 2013) will misuse a prescription drug each day, so the importance of discussing misuse of medications and the problems associated with the use of illicit drugs can't be overemphasized.

Implications for Parents:

- ▶ Learn about substances and be a credible source of information — our [comprehensive drug guides](#) may be helpful to you.
 - ▶ Talk to teens about the importance of using medications only as prescribed, including the risks of misuse.
 - ▶ When heroin, fentanyl and cocaine are featured in the news, take the opportunity to have a straightforward talk about the risks of substance use.
 - ▶ Avoid scare tactics, as research with teens show they rarely work.
 - ▶ Ask your pediatrician how he/she addresses and screens for substance use.
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HOW EASY IS IT TO GET SUBSTANCES?

We asked teens how long it would take them to get tobacco/nicotine, alcohol, marijuana, heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine, prescription pain relievers or other prescription medicine if they wanted to get one or more of those right now. More than half said that they would be able to get at least one of these substances within a relatively short period of time. Not surprisingly, more than one-third said they could get alcohol within a day. Nearly 30% could get cigarettes or vaping products and 20% could obtain marijuana within a day.

Ease of access increases significantly among older teens and especially among teens who have a close friend using substances. For example, 53% of teens with at least one friend who uses drugs as compared to 11% of teens who don't have close friends who use drugs, said they would be able to get marijuana within a day or less.

Implications for Parents

- ▶ Secure nicotine, alcohol, marijuana and medications in the home.
- ▶ **Dispose of medications** that are no longer needed or expired instead of keeping them for a “rainy day.”
- ▶ Advocate for restrictions on sale/marketing of vaping products, alcohol and marijuana at the community level.
- ▶ Monitor teens' whereabouts, social media use, friendships and spending money to be in a better position to detect signs of risk and intervene early if needed.

HAVE TEENS BEEN EXPOSED TO ILLEGAL DRUG USE IN REAL LIFE? IF SO, WHERE DO THEY MOST OFTEN SEE DRUGS BEING USED?

Nearly 28% of teens reported that they have personally seen someone using drugs in real life as opposed to other places like TV, the internet, social media or the movies. Of great concern is that, among those who have personally seen drugs used in real life, the place most often mentioned was on **school property** (38%).

Further, teens who have personally witnessed illegal drug use were more likely to say they intend to try substances in the future compared to their peers who had not seen a person engage in drug use in real life.

Implications for Parents:

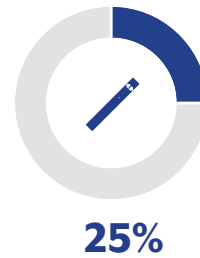
- ▶ Ask schools about measures they have in place to keep their campus substance-free.
- ▶ Know that the most likely person to offer a substance to your child is a friend or family member, like an older sibling.

Alcohol



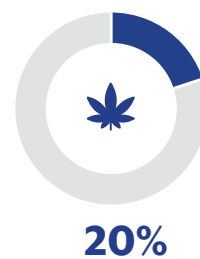
35%

E-cigarettes or Vaping Products



25%

Marijuana



20%

PERCENTAGE OF TEENS REPORTING THEY CAN OBTAIN THE SUBSTANCE WITHIN A DAY OR LESS

Of great concern is that, among those who have personally seen drugs used in real life, the place most often mentioned was on **school property** (38%).

- ▶ Teach resistance skills so that if your child is offered something at school, a friend's home or elsewhere, they would know what to say. Ask your teen, "How would you respond if you were offered alcohol, a vape, marijuana, etc.?" Rather than giving them a response, let your children choose their own words, helping only if they get stuck.
- ▶ Use a text "X" plan. If your teen texts "X," it means that they want to get out of an uncomfortable situation. Upon seeing the "X," parents can text back something to the effect of, "you have to come home now" or call their child and offer transportation if needed.

HOW CONCERNED WOULD THEY BE IF THEY KNEW A FRIEND WAS USING SUBSTANCES?

As mentioned earlier, our survey didn't ask teens about their own substance use, but we did ask about the perceived safety of using various substances and how worried or concerned teens would be if they were to learn that a friend engaged in substance use.

From a safety standpoint, teens have gotten the message about drinking and driving with only 3.5% saying they would feel safe being in a car where the driver had just been drinking. This contrasts with use of marijuana, where some older teens seem to hold on to the myth that it is safe to ride with someone who had just used marijuana.

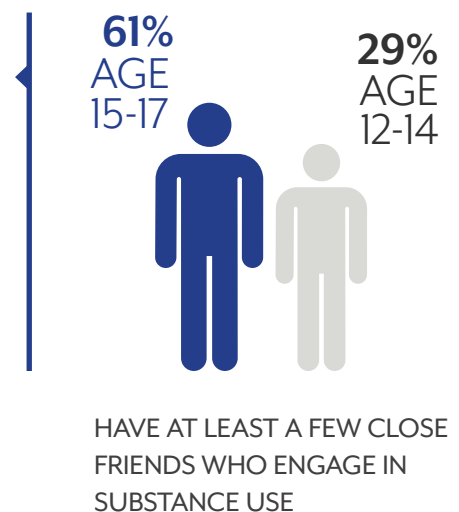
We found that 46% of teens said that they have at least a few close friends who engage in substance use, with twice as many older (15- to 17-year-olds) than younger (12- to 14-year-olds) teens saying they have close friends who do so (61% vs. 29%).

Implications for Parents:

- ▶ You are more likely to have a better conversation with your son or daughter using open-ended questions. Questions like "Do any of your friends vape or use alcohol or other drugs?" are likely to be answered with a conversation-ending "yes" or "no."
- ▶ Share concerns about substance use for young people while brain development is still under way. With respect to driving, [marijuana use impairs thinking and perception](#), and is illegal in every state for minors. [Other concerns include a decline in academic performance, accidents, poor mental health and lower earning power.](#)
- ▶ Talk with parents in your community about if or how you will communicate about your child's or a friend's substance use. Some parents are very vocal with other adults about wanting to know if their own child is using substances so that they can intervene.

TEENS HAVE GOTTEN THE MESSAGE ABOUT THE DANGER OF DRINKING AND DRIVING

Only 3.5% of teens said they would feel safe being in a car where the driver had been drinking.

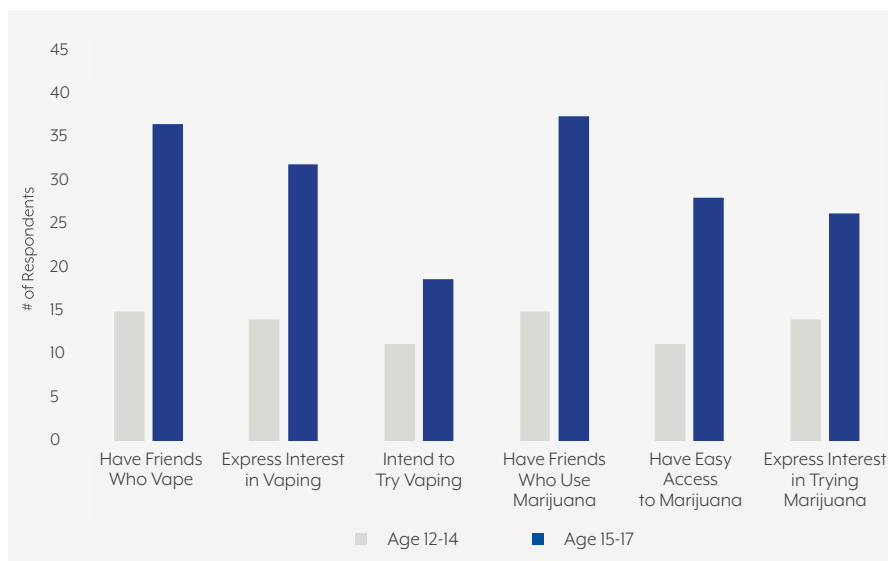


WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WHAT YOUNGER TEENS THINK AND EXPERIENCE IN RELATION TO SUBSTANCE USE COMPARED TO OLDER TEENS?

One of the major findings from our research was the **major shift in risk** that happens between younger teens, ages 12 to 14, and older teens, ages 15 to 17. As a parent, it may be helpful to think about the differences between middle school and high school kids. Older teens reported more exposure to nicotine, alcohol and other drugs; misinformation around substance use; more friends using substances; and a greater willingness to try substances in the future.

By way of a few examples, the chart below shows you the differences in younger versus older teens, related to having friends who vape or use marijuana and the likelihood of expressing intentions to try either substance in the future. Older kids are twice as likely to have friends who use substances and are significantly more likely to try them.

Twice as many older than younger teens are at risk for vaping and marijuana:



Parents may reduce their monitoring of teens in high school as compared to middle school for a variety of reasons, but this is when the risks of substance use increase dramatically. Rather than pulling back on involvement with teens, it's more important than ever to stay connected and deeply involved.

Implications for Parents:

- ▶ Have ongoing, [age-appropriate conversations](#) and be clear about your expectations related to substance use.
- ▶ Have family meals together and go out for ice cream, to the diner, a coffee shop, etc. Find tips and resources at [The Family Dinner Project](#).

Older teens reported more exposure to nicotine, alcohol and other drugs, misinformation around substance use, more friends using substances and a **greater willingness to try substances in the future.**

- ▶ Be involved in teens' interests whether they are sports, hobbies, arts, etc.
- ▶ Connect with the school as a volunteer or in other school-sponsored activities.
- ▶ [Check in on online activities](#), especially social media, which also includes having passwords and scanning apps from time to time.
- ▶ Get to know your son's/daughter's friends and their parents.
- ▶ Some parents use location tracking apps, while others find FaceTiming or Skyping in real time to be helpful in terms of knowing where kids are.
- ▶ [Leave drug tests to the professionals](#) rather than doing them at home if you're concerned.

CAN PARENTS INFLUENCE TEENS' SUBSTANCE USE?

Despite understandable doubts about the role they play in teens' substance-related decisions and behaviors, an abundance of research shows that parents and other caregivers can play a critical role in influencing teen substance use. They can do this not only through having ongoing conversations and continued monitoring, but also through the quality of the parent-child relationship. Warmth, closeness, rule-setting and spending time together are very protective and really do make a difference.

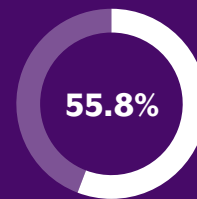
More than half (56%) of teens in our survey said that the reason some kids don't use alcohol or other drugs is because of parents, either because they know their parents would disapprove or they would get in trouble with their parents.

But what should you do if you've discovered that your teen is using substances? Lecturing and taking away privileges can work for some kids, but there are other proven parenting strategies that can help. This includes understanding why a child is using substances, knowing how to have a conversation without it imploding, motivating kids to engage in healthier behaviors and setting and enforcing limits.

Implications for parents:

- ▶ [Understand risk factors and why teens use substances.](#)
- ▶ Take early and even infrequent use seriously and intervene as often as needed.
- ▶ Try to [have conversations, not confrontations.](#)
- ▶ Learn how to [encourage healthy behaviors](#) that compete with substance use.

PARENTS PLAY A CRITICAL ROLE IN TEENS CHOOSING NOT TO DRINK OR USE DRUGS



More than half of teens in our survey said that **the reason some kids don't use alcohol or other drugs is because of parents**, either because they know their parents would disapprove or they would get in trouble with their parents.

- ▶ [Set limits and monitor your teen.](#)
 - ▶ Model healthy behaviors so that your kids learn how to handle stressors without turning to substances.
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Delaying substance use as long as possible until the brain has fully matured promotes health and minimizes the risk of developing a substance use disorder. While navigating the teen years can be a challenge for parents and other caregivers, it's even more challenging if substance use is part of the equation. It's important to take action and address risk factors and any early signs of use.

Please reach out to us for free, confidential help and support via phone, text, chat, or email. Our specialists are here to listen, assist you in developing a plan and point you to useful resources, so that you can help your child and family stay healthy.

We're here to help.

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