

Community Institute for Psychotherapy

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2021-2022 News & Notes



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Preventing Adolescent Substance and Behavior Problems

By Robin Joy Berenson, PhD, LMFT

Adolescence (ages 11-27 years) is a unique developmental stage characterized by several traits that make teens vulnerable to problem behaviors. A primary concern of this age group is belonging and fitting in. There is a drive to seek out the new and novel, accompanied by a sense of omnipotence (“it won’t happen to me”), but also underdeveloped self-monitoring and judgment. Above all, teens experience great anxiety and uncertainty about the future.

In every era there societal and global issues, which Jed Purses described as “background forces,” that contribute to teens’ natural stress and anxiety. Today, these are considerable: climate change, racism and global polarization, gender ambiguity, college admissions, and pressure to surpass parental achievements, as well as parental indifference or distractibility. At the same time, the “foreground forces” of today include technology advances without guidelines, social media, the global pandemic and resultant loss of structure, and teens’ easy access to high potency marijuana, among others.

Dr. Perlmutter pointed out, given these forces, “consider . . . how little control we have as parents.” It is unrealistic, he explained, to expect teens to respond to parents’ prohibitions and efforts — including “battling, begging, berating, bribing, blaming, and bargaining” — to proscribe problem behaviors when, in fact marijuana, screen use, and other dangerous behaviors meet teens’ urgent need to quell anxiety and uncertainty. Reasons teens give to explain why they use substances or engage in dangerous behaviors include their ability to numb and help kids avoid or decrease unpleasant feelings and increase pleasurable feelings, making them “feel alive.” They give kids a sense of confidence, which can help them socialize, connect with others, and initiate interactions. They make the pain, memories, and/or nightmares go away. They are “something to look forward to” and they “always work.”

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“Every behavior,” stressed Dr. Perlmutter, “is structured to relieve a universal need. To understand that need is to be able to help meet that need in positive ways.” This is the key to helping teens.

Dylan Kersh explained that parents can begin to help their teens by choosing to forge an authentic connection with them, rather than being concerned about “being right.” He suggested several strategies to achieve this.

“Develop compassion for the teen brain.” Remembering back to your own adolescence, and the experiences, concerns, and stresses you had, can provide insight into what your child is going through. Rather than judging their behavior, you can validate their discomfort and anxiety by letting them know you understand how hard it is. Share stories from your past, what you wish you had known, what you did to cope in difficult times. While keeping parental information separate, Kersh advised, it’s important that you share your authentic self, with transparency and honesty.

Let your child know that their opinion matters. “I believe in you.” As you spend time with your teen, listening and sharing, you can learn their concerns, what they enjoy, what they consider fun. Discover ways to provide opportunities for fun time together as a family. Provide occasions for them to relax and de-stress. Take trips and engage in activities together as a family.

Among the “solutions and key take-aways” from Dr. Perlmutter is his reminder that “Teens use (and develop addiction) because they have developmentally ordinary problems and conflicts that substances/screens seem to solve.” It may also be appropriate, to “question the effects of the coping methods you model (Over-work? Alcohol? Materialism?)”