

Drugs and Alcohol Among North Dakota Youth:

Not My Child

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The Facts

Drug and alcohol use can no longer be considered deviant activities that only a few of our nation's teenagers are involved with. Unfortunately, substance use is now becoming a "normal" experience for today's youth, with 92 percent of American high school seniors reporting trying alcohol. Even more disturbing is the fact that almost a full third of American teenagers report drinking on a daily basis. Teens are also beginning to experiment with alcohol at earlier ages, with 10 percent reporting trying alcohol in the fifth and sixth grade.

Teens are engaged in other forms of substance use as well. Over 40 percent of youth have reported using some kind of illegal drug, and almost 20 percent of 12th graders are daily smokers by the time they finish high school. Other recent national studies have asked how many students use illegal drugs monthly and reported a range of 10-18 percent. The results indicated the highest use rate recorded in the past 10 years.

Although it is tempting to think that drug and alcohol use is a problem primarily affecting teens living in big cities, the effects of substance use are in fact felt nation wide. Research conducted by Dr. Laura De Haan at North Dakota State University revealed that 47 percent of a group of rural North Dakota eighth graders had used drugs or alcohol at least once in the past 30 days, with over 10 percent reporting use of more than 10 times in the past month. This group did not differ from a group of inner-city youth from Chicago in their rate of substance use. Another study conducted by De Haan focused on younger students (fifth and sixth graders) and found that around 10% had experimented with drugs during the past month. Students using drugs were more likely to report a **poor relationship with parents**, including feeling emotionally separated from their parents. Students were also more likely to report **higher levels of depression** and tend to spend **more unstructured and unsupervised time with peers**. These findings point to important links for youth and provide adults with warnings signs to be aware of as a child grows and develops.

Understanding The Warning Signs

Increased amounts of unsupervised and unstructured time with peers and depression

Youth today spend less time with adults than generations before. A number of societal changes have resulted in fewer adults making special connections to youth. Yet we know that having the special support of one key adult in a child's life, outside of the family, is an important asset for any age child in protecting them from various problems facing youth.

Spending less time with adults may translate into more time with peers. This change in itself may not be the biggest concern, but rather the fact that the majority of time is unstructured and often unsupervised. All kids need structure and supervision. The structure contributes to feelings of security and belonging. When the time with peers is used to engage youth in various activities, build on their personal or individual assets or contribute to their community and family, the goal of positive youth development is reached. Everyone needs some "down time." But too much unstructured time and too few positively involved adults tends to increase at-risk behaviors and depression among youth.

The relationship with parents and other caring adults.

In many studies over the past years the parent-child relationship has surfaced as most significant. How does one ensure a strong parent-child relationship? A review of the research indicates 6 key roles that parents play in their child's life:

1. MOTIVATE

- Teach children about themselves, others and the world around them.
- Stimulate curiosity, imagination, and the search for knowledge.

- Create beneficial learning conditions.
- Help children process and manage information.

2. CARE FOR SELF

- Manage personal stress.
- Manage family resources.
- Offer support to other parents.
- Ask for and accept help from others when needed.
- Recognize one's own personal and parenting strengths.
- Have a sense of purpose in setting childrearing goals.
- Cooperate with childrearing partners.

3. UNDERSTAND

- Observe and understand one's children and their development.
- Recognize how children influence and respond to what happens around them.

4. NURTURE

- Express affection and compassion.
- Foster self-respect and hope in children.
- Listen and attend to children's feelings and ideas.
- Teach kindness.
- Provide for the nutrition, shelter, clothing, health, and safety needs of one's children.
- Celebrate life with one's children.
- Help children feel connected to family history and cultural heritage.

5. GUIDE

- Model appropriate desired behavior.
- Establish and maintain reasonable limits.
- Provide children with developmentally appropriate opportunities to learn basic human decency.
- Teach problem-solving skills.
- Monitor children's activities and facilitate their contact with peers and adults.

6. ADVOCATE

- Find, use, and create community resources when needed to benefit one's children.
- Stimulate social change to create supportive environments for children and families.
- Build relationships with family, neighborhood, and community groups.

Identifying what is important to positive youth development is an important step.

A variety of classes and workshop opportunities are available in North Dakota to help parents and youth strengthen their parent-child relationships.

North Dakota has developed many strategies to provide parent education and family supports which have been evaluated as successful.

Family support and prevention efforts contribute to youth development -- the ongoing process of providing meaningful supports resulting in capable, responsible and competent adults.

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