

The Safety First Approach to Teens and Drugs

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I ONCE HEARD George Soros say that for a politician, drug policy reform is the “third rail.” Touch it and you die. Reformers know that the issue of adolescents and drugs is the third rail within the third rail. While we have been able to win the support of an increasing number of Americans on issues like medical marijuana and treatment instead of incarceration, even those who think “Just Say No” is too simplistic are skeptical of alternative approaches to teenage drug use. Many mistakenly believe that if you’re not saying no, you must be saying yes.

I began to look closely at prevention education when in 1988 my daughter was subjected to the DARE program without my permission. I first learned then that calling such programs “drug education” was a misnomer. Adolescents and preadolescents, the targets of media and school-based anti-drug messages, were taught “refusal skills” rather than being provided with objective information.

In a nutshell, kids were repeatedly told that all illegal drugs are equally bad, and use inevitably leads to abuse and addiction. That message “took” until savvy teens figured out that drugs are vastly different from one another in terms of effects and risks; that the vast majority of users do not progress to increasingly harder drugs or become addicted; and that many legal drugs are far more toxic than illegal drugs. With this knowledge, and the realization that they’d been duped, many teenagers became cynical about any drug information coming from adults, no matter how well-meaning the source. This scared me.

By the mid-1990s, I had become convinced that the use of a harm reduction perspective was the way to go with teenagers and drugs, just as it had been with teenagers and sexuality. As a NIDA-funded researcher I was familiar with the survey data and knew that the vast majority of teens who experimented with drugs did not get into trouble with them. Having looked at a variety of programs and curricula, I also knew that teens were not getting information they trusted that might help them make responsible decisions about the nature and amounts of drugs they might use.

All this (frightening) information about drug educa-

tion was immensely personal, since by this time both my children were teenagers. I tried to convince them that I, unlike the other adults they’d heard, was objective about alcohol and other drugs; that the information I would offer was based on the latest scientific evidence rather than propaganda and hype. I gave them *Marijuana Myths Marijuana Facts* and *From Chocolate to Morphine* to read, and urged them to do their own research. Although I told them up front that I thought abstinence was the best choice, my bottom line was their safety. More than anything else, I wanted them to stay out of cars if they or their friends became intoxicated, and I was prepared to do anything to keep them out of harm’s way.

My friends who were also parents felt exactly as I did. While that was no surprise, I suspected that other, possibly more conventional, parents also honored safety above all else. In 1998 my hunch was validated. *The San Francisco Chronicle* published a letter I wrote to my son, Johnny, who was then entering high school. In the letter (which has now been

translated into ten languages and can be found at www.safety1st.org), I told Johnny about the drugs he might encounter in high school and that abstinence would be his wisest choice. What distinguished my message from that of Nancy Reagan’s were four little words, “but if you do.” That’s where harm reduction came in. I advised my son to become informed about whatever substances he chose to use, and most importantly, to “be safe.” I assured him that his father and I, as well as our friends, were available to help, if he should find himself in a compromising situation.

The response I got to that letter was overwhelming. Parents asked if they could duplicate the letter and send it to friends; schools began using it in health education classes; students thought it was the most “real” thing they’d seen about drugs.

The Drug Policy Alliance and I created the Safety First drug education project a year later, in 1999—kicking it off with a conference, “Just Say Know: New Directions in Drug Education,” and an expanded version of the *Chronicle*



letter in a booklet entitled, *Safety First: A Reality-Based Approach to Teens, Drugs, and Drug Education*.

The project was dedicated to parents and educators. We advocated abstinence while providing a “fallback” strategy addressing those teens who said “sometimes,” or “maybe,” or even “yes” to alcohol and other drugs. Our position was clear:

- Regarding alcohol and other drugs, in order to eliminate the possibility of potential problems, abstinence is the wisest choice for teens.
- Conventional prevention programs, providing misinformation and utilizing scare tactics, are ineffective because they have failed to gain the confidence of young people.
- Teens, whether we like it or not, will make their own decisions about alcohol and other drug use.
- Everyone needs honest, science-based drug education because America is a drug culture (using alcohol, over-the-counter substances, and prescription drugs, as well as illegal drugs), and we all will have to deal with a wide array of legal and illegal substances throughout our lifetimes.
- Safety should be the end result of any program or approach.

By 2002, *Safety First* had been shunned and embraced by parents all over the world. The usual cadre of zealots denounced the approach as encouraging and facilitating drug use among teens by not “drawing a line in the sand” and sticking to an abstinence-only agenda. I gave up on them early on, knowing they were mired in a moral and cultural fantasy-like belief system that forced them to use the same failed approach, over and over, despite its obvious failures.

But real parents in the real world with real teenagers have gotten and appreciate the message. The California State PTA partnered with us in 2002 to make *Safety First* available to all parents of secondary school students. We published a practical brochure, *Getting Real about Teens and Drugs*, and created the web site www.safety1st.org for parents and educators that includes facts about commonly used drugs, a question and answer column, news about drugs and drug education, and strategies for parents dealing with teens and drugs. We have conducted parent workshops all over the country, as well as in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Poland, and Slovakia, urging parents to:

- Open a dialogue by listening to what teens say about drug use.
- Get educated about teenage culture and the nature of drug use within that world.
- Remain calm, non-judgmental, and honest.
- Recognize that teens will make their own decisions.
- Be of assistance when teens find themselves in compromising situations.
- Learn how to help those teens who get into abusive patterns with alcohol and other drugs.

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Due to high demand, we are now in the process of working with the Department of Education, the Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs, and other prevention professionals in California to create a harm reduction-oriented drug education model for middle and high school students, couched in Student Assistance Programs.

Those of us introducing innovative approaches to teenage drug use know that this Drug War “issue,” more than any other, comes closer to connecting us to and alienating us from conventional America. Relatively few people know someone who’s incarcerated on a drug charge or is strung out on heroin; more know someone who needs or uses medical marijuana. But the vast majority are, were, or will be, the parent of a teenager; and over half of those teenagers admit to using an illegal drug before they graduate from high school. In this sense, the issue of teenage drug use—potential or real—touches almost all of us.

Today’s parents of adolescents were themselves teenagers in the 1960s and 1970s. The majority have used marijuana and other drugs. Most have long since quit, bowing to the pressures of parenthood and conventional life. They now struggle with

how to talk with their teens, and whether to divulge information about their past use. While they’re concerned that today’s marijuana might be stronger than the stuff they smoked, the parents I talk with repudiate the propaganda being promulgated on their kids. They know our government is waging a failed war on drugs, and prevention of teenage drug use, due to extreme Reefer-madness-style tactics, is part of that failure.

I am encouraged by the thousands of requests for our *Safety First* materials and by the enthusiasm of prevention professionals to seek new approaches. But mostly I am heartened by teenagers themselves, who have shown themselves to be resilient enough to cut through the propaganda aimed at them, and make increasingly safer decisions about alcohol and other drug use. •