

Back to school, time to talk about drugs

By Vicki Louk Balint



RESEARCH SHOWS that the kids who receive strong and frequent messages from their parents about staying away from drugs are less likely to use them. That's the word from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). As the new school year begins, here's an update for parents who want to be informed before bringing up the subject of drug and alcohol use.

Marijuana

"Weed is everywhere," says Shelly Mowrey of DrugFreeAZ, a Phoenix-based nonprofit working to prevent youth drug and alcohol use through education and awareness. "This is one of the hottest topics for parents who request information from us."

Nearly half of all 12th graders report that they have tried marijuana. In fact, the percentage of kids who smoke pot is slightly higher now than the number of kids who are using tobacco, according to the 2012 Arizona Youth Survey report issued by the Arizona Criminal Justice Commission (ACJC). Thirty-seven percent of respondents have smoked pot, compared to 36 percent who have smoked cigarettes.

Mowrey points to the passage of the Arizona Medical Marijuana Act in November 2010 as one reason for the increase. The Act allows qualifying adults with a valid I.D. card to obtain medical marijuana for certain debilitating medical conditions.

The law has lowered the barriers in terms of access and availability for kids and teens, says Mowrey, who has seen ads on Craigslist.com offering the drug.

"We are going to see a huge spike in youth use," she adds. "We are already seeing an 80 percent increase in heavy marijuana use since 2008, and it's going to get worse."

Marijuana use can cause learning and memory problems, impair complex motor skills and affect decision-making, according to the AAP. Frequent use often causes grades to drop. Teens who use the drug are more likely to take sexual risks.

Prescription drugs

The Arizona Department of Health Services reports that Arizona ranks sixth in the country for prescription drug abuse, with nearly 8 percent of Arizona youth reporting current misuse of controlled substances.

One in four high school seniors, one in

five sophomores and one in 10 eighth graders have abused addicting prescription painkillers like OxyContin, codeine, Percoset or Vicodin, according to DrugFreeAZ.

One in 10 teens reported abusing prescription sedatives such as Valium or Xanax. Abuse of the prescription stimulants Adderall and Ritalin, typically prescribed for ADD/ADHD, has increased since 2008.

Access and availability increase the likelihood of misuse. Mowrey says that parents need to learn about the medications kids are misusing and talk with children from an early age about the dangers of misusing or taking someone else's medication. Safeguard medicine cabinets and keep track of leftover pain relievers from family medical and dental procedures, such as wisdom teeth removal.

Disposal sites for medications, including needles and asthma inhalers, are available at fire and police department locations. Check first to learn what items each location will accept, as it varies. Find a map at <http://ht.ly/nAyok>.

Alcohol

Nearly 20 percent of eighth graders who responded to the Arizona Youth Survey said their parents were the ones who supplied them with alcohol. All respondents reported that drinking took place at parties.

Most parents want their kids to succeed in school, go on to college and do well academically, but alcohol use during adolescence can have long-lasting consequences, harming the memory centers of the developing brain.

Underage drinking is against the law, and is the leading cause of preventable deaths among young people in the United States. The good news, however, is that the 2012 survey showed a slight decrease in alcohol use by adolescents.

Social Host Ordinances (SHO) recently passed in Buckeye and Tempe and slated to pass in Phoenix, Mesa and Chandler may facilitate further declines in teen drinking. SHOs focus on the setting where drinking occurs, regardless of who provides the alcohol—giving law enforcement officers additional tools beyond statutes that simply prohibit furnishing alcohol to minors.

When law enforcement arrives on the scene of an underage drinking party, it can be tough to determine who furnished the alcohol. SHOs enable law enforcement to cite the individuals who hosted the party, or the owner/manager

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of the land where the gathering has occurred. Responsible individuals can include parents, landowners and tenants.

“When an adult is found responsible for youth drinking in his or her house, with or without consent, then attitudes and behaviors start to change,” says Juan Aristizábal, prevention manager with Magellan of AZ, a publicly funded behavioral health care services provider working to get SHOs passed. “No one wants to pay anywhere between \$250 to \$1,000 [in fines] and attend a [substance use education] class because they went to the movies and their kids decided to throw a party.”

Spice

K2 incense, or Spice, is a combination of herbs, spices or even shredded plant material that has been sprayed with a synthetic chemical mixture resembling tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the psychoactive ingredient in marijuana. It comes in a small, silvery pouch and looks like potpourri. The drug is typically smoked; it also can be made into a tea.

This “fake” marijuana won’t show up in a drug test for cannabis, and many drug tests do not detect it. Until Gov. Jan Brewer signed a bill banning these drugs last April, Spice or K2 was legal, adding to teens’ belief in its legitimacy.

Spice can elevate heart rate and blood pressure. Short-term effects include lack of pain response, increased agitation, loss of control, pale skin, seizures, vomiting, profuse sweating and uncontrolled body movements, according to DrugFreeAZ. The drug takes three to five minutes to take effect, and can last up to eight hours.

N bomb or Smiles

One in 10 Arizona teens admits to using a synthetic drug, according to the ACJC report. Synthetic drugs are substances produced entirely from chemical reactions in a laboratory. They are concocted with the intent of mimicking naturally occurring illegal

substances like marijuana’s THC or LSD’s lysergic acid, derived from a fungus that grows on grains.

A recent spate of synthetic drugs hitting the market has made it tough for law enforcement, as well as physicians, to keep up with these chemical concoctions.

N bomb is nicknamed for its chemical description, 251-NBOMe, and also is known as 251 or Smiles.

“It looks and smells a lot like methamphetamine—like a supercharged meth combined with Ecstasy,” says Frank Lovecchio, DO, a medical toxicologist at Banner Good Samaritan Poison and Drug Information Center, who spoke during a recent DrugFreeAZ educational webinar.

The drug causes agitation, hyperactivity and high blood pressure and can lead to fever, seizures, hallucinations and breakdown of muscles, kidneys and liver function. Another set of synthetic drugs, commonly known as “bath salts,” creates similar reactions.

N bomb is “nasty stuff,” says Lovecchio. “A lot of people feel it’s safer [than illegal drugs] because they bought it off the Internet and it comes in a nice package.”

The recent deaths of two 18-year-olds are under investigation by Scottsdale police. A West Valley 19-year-old was hospitalized after taking the drug; the teen survived, but was left with lingering effects.

N bomb is snorted, injected or taken through drops in the nose or on the tongue. The effects are delayed; that may spur impatient users to take another dose, which can be deadly.

Cigarettes

Teens are more likely to smoke if their parents smoke. Even children of “light” smokers who reduced or quit later in adulthood have a higher risk of smoking. Parental smoking at any age, even before a child is born, increases the chances that the child will smoke.

A new AAP study released in August suggests that children with an older sibling who

Having the conversation

DrugFreeAZ hosts ongoing workshops designed to help parents engage in meaningful conversations with children and teens about making good choices, resisting peer pressure and staying safe from the dangers of drug and alcohol use. The organization also offers periodic half-hour lunchtime webinars. Learn about upcoming workshops and webinars, find age-specific conversation starters and read the signs and symptoms of drug use at drugfreeaz.org.

More resources:

- Banner Good Samaritan Poison and Drug Information Center hotline: 800-222-1222.
- The Maricopa County Attorney’s Office Safe Teens AZ web page offers a free, downloadable handbook with tips to keep kids and teens off drugs. 602-506-7621 or safeteensaz.org.
- NotMYKid is a Scottsdale-based nonprofit offering prevention-focused programming on drug and alcohol abuse as well as bullying, eating disorders, self-injury, unhealthy relationships and Internet safety. 602-652-0163 or notmykid.org.

smokes are more than six times more likely to pick up the habit than children without a sibling who smokes.

If an older sibling is smoking, parents need to be proactive, says Anne Young, DO, a primary care pediatrician at Valle Del Sol in central Phoenix and a member of the Arizona chapter of the AAP. Talk to younger siblings about the importance of healthy lungs, she recommends. Describe how cigarettes stain teeth and cause bad breath, and explain the risk of developing cancers, aging skin and a shortened lifespan.

Parents (or anyone) interested in quitting can find resources at Ashline, 800-55-66-222 or ashline.org.

Vicki Louk Balint writes about health and medical topics for RAISING ARIZONA KIDS magazine. Find more of her coverage weekly at raisingarizonakids.com.



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