

UNDERSTANDING THE CAUSES OF ADOLESCENT DRUG USE



For a community to be successful in combating the use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drug use by adolescents, it is necessary to be aware of how and why young people drift into the drug culture.

ADOLESCENT CURIOSITY ~

The numerous stories heard about other young people and their reactions to drugs stimulate a natural curiosity to experience these same “good feelings.” There is also an element of adventurous risk-taking that is a normal part of the adolescent growth process.

AVAILABILITY ~

Drugs are readily available in most communities. Younger children get drugs from older brothers and sisters; teenagers get drugs from friends, neighbors, and acquaintances both in and out of school, on the street, and at parties. The family medicine cabinet cannot be overlooked. The family medicine cabinet has become the “home remedy” for many young people looking for a high.

PEER PRESSURE ~

The need for acceptance and the desire to be a part of the group exert strong influence on young people to experiment with drugs. This “conversion syndrome” not only provides an affirmation to the user, but serves as a powerful force perpetuating the drug psychology of the young by creating a feeling of camaraderie and togetherness among users.

MODELING ~

For some young people, illicit drug use is a means of coping with the anxieties of adolescence and everyday stresses and frustrations of home and school. The use of psychoactive chemicals is in many ways a conditioned response.

Adolescents watch mom or dad dutifully follow the prescriptions recommended by the media. It is but a short step for the average teenager to connect this message with that of “their own local sponsor” who dispenses chemical remedies in the neighborhood and school for everything that ails today’s adolescents.

MARKETING ~

Young people are bombarded with media messages that the right chemical preparation can correct any situation in life. One in every six commercials on prime time television advertises some form of drug or chemically-related relief.

The alcohol and tobacco industries, as well as the pro-drug marketers, know that if they don't get children to start using their drugs by age 21, those children probably won't use tobacco or other drugs and will probably abstain from alcohol use or will use alcohol in a low-risk or responsible manner.

Therefore, since their best customers are those who start early, people who would profit from children using alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, or other drugs need to market directly to young people. These promoters use paid advertising that integrates humor, bright colors, music, and fast-paced audio/video to appeal to children. Children are encouraged to think of these drugs as harmless, ordinary components of having fun. Prices of these drugs are kept low because promoters know that children are their most price-sensitive customers. When price goes up significantly, use by youth goes down. The promoters also use the Internet, youth-oriented music, movies, and television, as well as entertainment promotions, contests, word-of-mouth, and other gimmicks to bombard young people with messages that promote the use of alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and other drugs.

Parents and communities must recognize the marketing techniques that are targeting young people, and they must work together to fight back.

CULTURAL ACCEPTABILITY ~

Television, movies, and the Internet carry messages and commercials that either directly or indirectly signal the acceptability of psychoactive drugs. The lyrics of many of today's popular songs carry pro-drug messages. (It is estimated that one-half of all current rock songs condone or recommend the use of illicit drugs.)

The availability of drug paraphernalia in record shops and other stores leads young people to conclude that society approves the use of drugs. Celebrities from all fields talk openly of their drug use and reports of such use are carried in local papers. Young people get the message from numerous sources that everybody is "doing drugs" and that it is okay.

PARENTAL IGNORANCE ~

Most adult members of society are woefully ignorant of illicit drugs, their composition, symptoms, use, and reaction. They are ill-equipped to discuss the topic with their children, cannot recognize its presence in their home, and consequently are unable to attack the problem of drug use as they should. Most parents ignore the symptoms of drug use and label unusual behavior as a "phase" their child will soon outgrow.

~ The Practitioner, National Association of Secondary School Principals