

# *Parent Power: Prevent Substance Abuse Before It Starts*

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*Dedicated to*

**Margaret Saleeby**

*504 Facilitator*

*Chapel Hill High School*

*1991-2002*

*in acknowledgement of her advocacy  
and support for students and families.*

**Introduction**

A shocking reality of everyday life for middle school and high school students in the United States today is that they will encounter multiple opportunities to drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, and try a multitude of mind-altering drugs. Believe it or not, 10% of the adult population is known to struggle with chemical dependency. Ten percent amounts to a lot of people, most of whom began using substances as early teens.

The goal of the Chapel Hill High School Drug/Alcohol Awareness Task Force is to empower the parents in our community to take charge of this situation by educating and preparing parents when their students enter middle school and high school. We hope to arm parents with strategies and tips that will help to decrease teenage substance abuse. Better yet, we'd like to support parents in preventing use before it starts.

**How to Use this Booklet**

The pointers in this booklet are beginning guidelines for reflection and discussion. Although these tips are a composite of the best ideas that have been "parent-tested" and "parent-suggested" by experienced parents of older teens, all parents need to tailor their strategies to their own child.

Factors to consider are the chronological age of the child as well as his or her social and emotional maturity level. Impulsiveness, risk-taking tendencies, level of functioning, peer influences, as well as values and morals your family holds, are all important to consider.

**How Widespread is the Teenage Drug and Alcohol Problem?**

Most at-risk students begin experimenting in middle school, but local research conducted by the Chapel Hill/Carrboro City School System reveals a big jump in usage between the middle school and high school years.

The local Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data compiled in the spring of 2004 are shown in Table 1, above. The statistics are based on responses from local tenth graders in both high schools and eighth graders in all four middle schools.

**Is this Just a Local Phenomenon?**

No, it's an epidemic across every state and community in America. Table 2 (page 3) includes some 2003 statistics from the national Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance, which was published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This report summarized data from 32 states and 18 local surveys of students in grades 9 through 12 between February and December of 2003.

**Is Your Child at Risk?**

There are many risk factors associated with teens and substance-related problems. Some of them fall into categories that we have very little control over, such as growing up in poverty or in high-crime neighborhoods. At the other end of the spectrum, wealthy, indulgent families are also challenged

by substance abuse. Some of the other risk factors have to do with family dynamics that surround children. These factors require a tremendous amount of attention and work on our part as parents but, with commitment and help, they can be addressed.

- Some risk factors include
- Substance abuse or dependence of one or both parents
  - High levels of family stress (eg, financial or marital difficulties)
  - Parental absence (eg, death, dysfunction, or divorce)
  - High levels of family conflict
  - Large differences between parents regarding parenting decisions
  - Single parents without significant parenting support
  - Lack of positive family time together

- Parents who are emotionally unavailable due to their own life stressors
- Attention deficit disorder

In addition, there are the internal challenges unique to each child, such as learning differences, including attention deficit disorder, behavioral disorders such as conduct disorder, and other mental health challenges. In September of 2000, The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University released a new white paper that stated "while research has not identified a causal link between learning disabilities and substance abuse, there is a good deal of evidence that a correlation exists between the two.... Risk

Survey Questions	MS	HS
Drug abuse is a problem in their school	30.3%	69.2%
Report someone offered, sold, or gave them drugs on campus during the previous 12 months	16.0%	44.4%
Have consumed alcohol in the last 30 days	18.0%	51.9%
Have used marijuana	9.0%	50.7%
Have ridden in a car where the driver had been drinking	23.9%	26.9%
Have used inhalants	9.0%	10.4%
Have used cocaine	2.0%	8.2%
Had one drink on school property in the last 30 days	*	10.2%
Smoked marijuana on school property in the last 30 days	*	8.2%
Have used LSD	*	11.2%
Had five or more drinks at a time in the last 30 days	*	30.8%
Have never had alcohol	*	26.3%
MS = Middle School Students    HS = High School Students    *Not asked		
†All Chapel Hill/Carrboro City Schools Youth Risk Data from 2003-2004 high school students represent only those tenth graders from both high schools who were enrolled in health class at the time of survey administration and whose parent(s) signed and submitted a permission form. Consequently, this may be an underreported representation since it is limited, by definition, to more organized students and families. Fifty percent of CHCCS tenth graders take health each semester, while 25% of the eighth graders were taking health when surveyed.		

factors for adolescent substance abuse are very similar to the behavioral effects of learning disabilities: reduced self esteem, academic difficulty, loneliness, depression and the desire for social acceptance. Thus, learning disabilities may indirectly lead to substance abuse by generating the types of behavior that typically lead adolescents to abuse drugs.” There are also correlations between children who were aggressive and had low impulse control early in life with substance abuse later. Clearly, we cannot make these constitutional risk factors go away, but there is a tremendous diversity in the way parents and children respond to these issues.

**Prevention Strategies**

**Creating a Positive Home Environment.** The following suggestions are ideas that can create a positive home environment that will be more likely to discourage substance abuse.

- Keep TVs, video games, and computers out of the teen’s bedroom and in a family area. Monitor computer usage.
- Eat as many meals per week together as a family as is practical.
- Make your home “teen friendly” by providing food, games, and activities that teens enjoy.
- Talk to the parents of your teen’s friends and, if possible, meet together as a group. Parental isolation during the teen years is dangerous! The more parents talk to each other

(in spite of our teen’s pressure not to), the more we will realize we are not alone with our preferred boundaries. Teens are great at the “divide-and-conquer” strategy. We need to be the adults and support each other.

- Supervise! Be at home as much as possible when they are home. Teens need more supervision than elementary students. If you are not at home, make sure there is a responsible adult there.
- Keep discussions open and ongoing about all risk-taking behavior, including substance abuse. Be a “talkable parent” by listening a lot and not preaching. Listen, Listen, Listen!
- Predict and prepare your son or daughter to deal with offers of drugs and alcohol and other risky situations. For instance, you can say, “You will be offered drugs and alcohol. Together let’s think of some things you could say without sounding like a “nerd.”
- Practice and role-play refusal skills with your middle school teen that helps him or her become more comfortable

when high-risk situations actually arise unexpectedly. For example:

- “Nah, I’m not interested.”
- “I have too much I have to get done when I get home.”
- “No, thanks.”
- “I have a big day tomorrow.”

- Be familiar with the legal consequences teens may face, and inform them. They do not believe it is really a big deal legally . . . until they get busted. Developmentally, teenagers believe they are invincible and that consequences will never happen to them.
- Secure your alcohol supply, prescription drugs and any mood altering over-the-counter medications. Teens commonly explore whatever is available!
- Have fun together: find some activities that all enjoy. Insist

that your teenager participate in at least some family activities.

- Nourish your relationship with your teen by having fun together and keeping communication flowing on a daily, casual basis. This is sometimes challenging when teens are pushing away from parents developmentally and preferring to be with peers. Research shows that teens highly value their relationship with their parents, although sometimes this may not be obvious! Finding activities or projects to do together for fun, connecting while “stuck” in the car together, or doing vol-

Survey Questions	Students in Grades 9 through 12
Ever smoked cigarettes	58.4%
Currently using cigarettes	21.9%
Smoked cigarettes prior to age 13	18.3%
Tried alcohol prior to age 13	27.8%
Tried marijuana prior to age 13	9.9%
Ever drank alcohol	75.7%
Drank alcohol in the last 30 days	44.3%
Drank 5 or more drinks of alcohol in last 30 days	27.1%
Rode with a driver who had been drinking alcohol	30.2%
Drove after drinking	12.1%
Offered, sold, or given drugs on school property	28.7%
Ever tried marijuana	40.2%
Ever tried ecstasy	11.1%
Ever tried cocaine	8.7%
Ever tried illegal steroids	6.1%

†Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance*. Atlanta, Ga: CDC; 2003.

unteer work together can help cement the connection to your child.

- Stay involved
  - Know your teen’s peers and their vehicles.
  - Know the places your teen frequents.
  - Set curfews and stick to them—with few exceptions.
  - Check in regularly.
  - Keep a list of your teen’s friends’ home and cell phone numbers handy.
- Inform yourself with facts and researched information about substance abuse. Be aware that teens operate with a lot of misinformation, myth, and biased information. The Web sites and bibliography at the end are great resources.
- Take an honest inventory of what you are saying and modeling to your child about substance use. Parents who were raised in the 60s and 70s often have ambivalent feelings about substance use in adolescence. Without realizing it, parents inadvertently communicate confusing, weak, or mixed messages about what is okay and not okay.

## Parent Power

Sometimes what parents say and what they do may not be one and the same. Teens are hypervigilant about perceived hypocrisy from adults.

- Hold weekly family meetings to discuss
  - Fun activities to plan
  - The week's calendar
  - Chores to be done
  - Rules and limits
  - Any successes

**Tip:** Keep in mind that no one will want to come to these meetings if problems and criticism commonly dominate the meeting.

**Setting Limits.** It's the job of parents to set limits. It's the job of adolescents to test those limits. Creating effective, clear, and fair rules—as well as enforcing them consistently—is an energy-consuming task for parents! Maintaining your limits in the face of adolescent displeasure is even more challenging, but absolutely necessary. The earlier these limits are set, the easier the parents' job will be.

One factor that creates challenges for parents in setting limits is the lack of consistency within our community from one family to the next regarding rules for teenagers. For example, it creates big problems when one family allows its teen to stay out until 2:00 AM and that teen's friend has a family that requires him or her to be in at 11:00 PM. You can be sure the second teen will be more inclined to resent and defy his or her parents. This is how the wars begin: "But Johnny's parents let him" ...And parents begin to feel confused...."Am I too strict? too liberal? too gullible?" Gradually every single parenting decision evokes agonizing dilemmas and stress. Every boundary results in conflict and defiance. Parents get worn down and before you know it, they lose their authority with their own children.

Until we can change our community norms, in order to counter this teen and community pressure, expect that each set of parents will have different expectations and limits. Develop a set that is comfortable for you and your partner, and stand by them. "In this house, these are the rules...."

In addition, ignore the temptation to establish your rules based on what you think won't cause too much resistance or conflict. Set rules according to what you want your child to follow.

Work hard at setting up limits that you and your spouse or partner can enforce consistently. Teenagers are adept at using parental differences in rules to their advantage. So, if you live in a two-parent home, be sure that both parents are clear and consistent with each other as well as with the teen. If you cannot resolve your parenting differences with your partner, it is strongly recommended that you engage in couples counseling to facilitate that process. Or, if firm limit setting is not your area of strength, there are resources in the bibliography. Also, we recommend that you seek out a therapist skilled in teen limit setting.

## Prevent Substance Abuse Before It Starts

By the time children become teens, some parents are tired and are ready to get some relief from their parenting duties. Unfortunately, many teens are still emotionally, socially, and intellectually young children disguised in adult bodies. For many teens more supervision, tighter rules and consistent follow through is needed, not less. Parents need to make a judgment about the type of structure needed based on the teen's behavior, not chronological age.

Recognize that over time some rules may need to be revisited and will evolve. It can become a trial and error process; give some responsibility and a little rope and see how it is handled. Do you need to tighten up or let loose a little? Keep the end goal in mind: a self-disciplined, independent adult (with a separate checking account and address!).

**Awarding Privileges: Parents Have Much More Power Than They Use.** Parents are in charge of many privileges that can be earned for appropriate behavior. Too often parents forfeit their control by allowing teens to have these privileges without the responsible behavior that should be expected.

**Tip:** Do not give the message that your teen is entitled to privileges. This is how a parent inadvertently surrenders authority. Let your teens know they must earn their privileges.

Rules, consequences, and privileges are much more effective if they are very clearly and specifically defined on paper. The use of written contracts with everyone's signature can also make parental expectations crystal clear.

The opportunity to earn privileges is an excellent technique that can be used by every family. Even if you can afford to indulge your teen, doing so is a disservice. The world will not be so kind. Here are some privileges that can be awarded for responsible behavior:

- Cell phone
- Phone
- Allowance
- Management of one's own money
- Parental signature on work permit
- Transportation to a job
- Overnight stays at your house or at another teen's home
- Friends visiting
- TV use
- Computer use
- Weekend and evening social activities
- Privacy. Yes, this should be earned with trustworthy behavior! Untrustworthy behavior can result in random searches of your teen's belongings. (This is not a violation of privacy if teens are making decisions that put them at risk when you are still responsible for them.)
- Parental signature for off-campus lunch
- Use of car to and from school
- School parking space
- Gas in the car
- Transportation for social events
- Use of a parent's car
- Parental coverage of teen on family car insurance

## Parent Power

**Permitting Use of a Car.** Eighth grade is not too early to begin discussion about the use of a car! After all, a fifteen-year-old can get a learner's permit. Families have different expectations about whether and how much a teen should contribute to buying a car and paying for gas, insurance, and repairs. Other issues to consider are who pays for tickets, fines, lawyer fees and court costs because it is highly likely your teen will experience some traffic violations, fender-benders or worse. Holding a job, at least in the summer, starting a savings/checking account and making some defined contribution to the operation of a car are excellent ways to teach responsible behavior.

In North Carolina until age 18, some insurance policies do not allow teens to have their own car insurance; therefore, they have to be on a parent's policy in order to drive. The cost of the insurance may decrease each year that a teen driver does not receive points. At the end of three years, the cost of car insurance may decrease considerably. This can be quite an incentive for teen drivers. It is certainly to their advantage financially to stay on their parents' policy and maintain a clean driving record.

If a vehicle for the teen driver is added, it is important to consider in whose name the vehicle will be titled. If the car is in a parent's name, the parent has more control, but also more responsibility—since the insurance will have to be in the parent's name. A car titled in the teen's name could be insured by a policy in the teen's name, thereby having the teen bear the full burden of consequences resulting from accidents, tickets, or driving under the influence.

Ultimately, a parent will have the ability to oversee the use of the car no matter whose name it is in, but some parents need the clarity of ownership to feel comfortable making rules regarding its use. For instance, if the car belongs to the teen, will the parent pull the teen's driving privileges as a consequence? We recommend making decisions around ownership that will not interfere with your ability to maintain authority. Some insurance companies provide behavior contracts that parents and families can use to specify expectations and consequences of car use.

**Car-driving privileges can and should be withheld if the teen is involved in any substance abuse. This is a safety issue as well as the biggest incentive a parent can use.**

## Suggested Approaches on Key Issues

Here are suggestions of ways to approach your child on a few issues and some ideas about words you can use:

### Supervision

- If you are spending the night, going to a party or social event or spending a teacher workday at another friend's house, I will need to speak to the adult in charge to make sure an adult will be home.
- I will not go out of town and leave you and this home unsupervised.

## Prevent Substance Abuse Before It Starts

- If you plan to have friends over to our home, please check with me first.
- If you are having friends over to our house when I am not home, here are the conditions. . . .
- I need to have a parent's name and phone number for each of your friends who is visiting or spending the night in our home.

### Substance Use

- Drugs and underage alcohol use are not allowed in this house.
- I am the adult paying for this home, and I am legally responsible for anything that happens here—whether I am home or not. Parents in this community have been prosecuted for permitting use of illegal substances in their homes, as well as legal substances by underage persons.
- I am going to trust that you understand the seriousness of this and that you would not want to put our family at risk by violating my trust.
- If you do violate my trust and I find evidence of illegal substances in this house, I will call all parents (if friends are here) immediately no matter what time of the day or night.
- I will then call the police narcotics officer to meet with us and discuss the seriousness of your actions.
- I always have the right to search your room.
- If I suspect you are using drugs or alcohol, you will be expected to participate in a substance abuse assessment with a professional.

### Curfews

- I will set the curfew based on your age and the level of responsibility you show in honoring your curfew.
- I expect you to be home by the time of your curfew.
- If unforeseen circumstances delay you past your curfew, I expect you to call before your curfew.
- Changes in your curfew will occur gradually, in a step-by-step fashion, as you demonstrate compliance with the current curfew.
- "Nothing worth doing happens after midnight." The primary things that happen after midnight often involve sex, alcohol, drugs, illegal activity or rebellion of some kind.

**Tip:** For older, responsible high school students 12:30 (allowing 30 minutes for dropping off friends and transportation) is an upper limit curfew. Our community norm is much later at this time, so most of our teens will not think this curfew is reasonable. We are responsible, however, for determining the community norms, and only we can change them.

### Car Riding

- You are absolutely not to get in a car with anyone who:
  - Has had any drug or even a drop of alcohol in his/her system. (This includes marijuana, which does affect eye/hand coordination and speed of reaction—contrary to teenage myths.)
  - Isn't a licensed and safe driver.
  - Does not have a seat belt space for you.
  - Has other passengers without seat belts.
- You need to have the gumption to ask the driver to reduce speed or anything else necessary to be a safe driver or to let you out of the car.

## Parent Power

- If you ever need a ride because you or another driver are not able to drive safely, you may call me at anytime of the day or night to get a ride, no matter where you are—no questions asked.
- Your safety is what is most important to me!

**Red Flags About Substance Use.** As children enter adolescence there are many behavioral signs that say we need to be on high alert. These are often the early “red flags” that tell us our children have already begun to experiment with substances:

- Violence\*
- Expressions of suicidal thoughts\*
- Self-mutilation\*
- Drop in school performance
- Change in groups of friends
- Disturbing change in appearance and self-image
- Apathy or low motivation
- Money that appears or disappears without explanation
- Desire to be out of the house with increasing frequency and duration, at homes or places you suspect have little, if any, supervision
- Unusual odors in teen’s room with attempts to use incense or sprays to mask the smell
- Dramatic increase in levels of defiance
- Sexual risk-taking

### What to Do if You Suspect Substance Use

- Get help immediately.
- At Chapel Hill High School, call the Student Assistance Specialist at 919-929-2106, extension 1278.
- An experienced adolescent substance abuse specialist (preferably a certified addiction counselor) can be very helpful.
- Begin random, unannounced drug and alcohol testing. There are many strategies our children have for scamming their drug tests, so be sure to consult with a substance abuse professional to get tips on how to test effectively.
- Other resource options include the crisis counselors at the police department, police narcotics officer, and juvenile court counselors.
- See the community resources listed on the Chapel Hill High School Drug/Alcohol Awareness Task Force Web site, which is available at [www.unc.edu/~cory/DAATF](http://www.unc.edu/~cory/DAATF).

### Changing Community Norms

This Parent Power booklet has given many practical, concrete tips for taking back control that some parents have lost. The more we talk to each other, support each other, learn from each other and empower each other, the better we will be able to make changes not only in our families, but within our community norms. This is our vision and *Parent Power* is our contribution. Consequently, we have concluded with a Parent Power Pledge for you to consider. If the majority of our community followed this pledge, together we could make a huge impact on the problem of teenage drinking and drugging.

\*Serious warning signals that require immediate attention.

## Prevent Substance Abuse Before It Starts

### Parent Power Pledge

- I acknowledge that substance use is a very serious problem that affects all teens, even those who aren’t using.
- I will not be silent with my child or other parents about this topic.
- I will arm myself with factual information about teen drugs and alcohol.
- I will set clear and firm rules for my teen.
- I will set strong and swift consequences spelled out in advance for underage drinking and drugging in my family.
- I will provide supervision in my home and expect the same of other parents.
- I will be receptive to the expressions of other people’s concerns about my child.
- I will require responsible and legal behavior from my teen and make privileges dependent on such behavior.
- I will ask for help if needed.

**I am empowered to influence my teen with information, expectations, rules and consequences, privileges, . . . and love.**

### Suggested Reading

#### Teens

- Bradley MJ. *Yes, Your Teen is Crazy!*  
Cells SP. *Parenting Your Out-of-Control Teenager: Seven Steps to Re-establish Authority and Reclaim Love.*  
MacKenzie RJ. *Setting Limits: How to Raise Responsible, Independent Children by Providing Clear Boundaries.*  
Nelsen J, Lott L. *Positive Discipline for Teenagers: Empowering Your Teen and Yourself Through Kind and Firm Parenting.*  
Riera M. *Staying Connected to your Teenager.*  
Riera M. *Uncommon Sense for Parents with Teenagers.*  
Steinberg L, Levine A. *You & Your Adolescent.*  
Wolf AE. *Get out of my life, but first could you drive me and Cheryl to the mall?*  
Wolf AE. *It’s not fair, Jeremy Spencer’s parents let him stay up all night!*

#### Teens and Substance Abuse

- Baum J. *The Truth About Pot.*  
Becher XG, Capello D. *Ten Talks Parents Must Have with Their Children About Drugs and Choices.*  
Cohen P. *Helping Your Chemically Dependent Teenager.*  
Family Anonymous Inc. *Today a Better Way.*  
Ferguson N. *Adolescent Post-Treatment Support.*  
Ketcham K, Pace NA. *Teens Under the Influence: The Truth About Kids, Alcohol, and Other Drugs—How to Recognize the Problem and What to do About It.*  
Kuhn C, Swartzwelder S, Wilson W. *Buzzed: The Straight Facts About the Most Used and Abused Drugs from Alcohol to Ecstasy.*  
Kuhn C, Swartzwelder S, Wilson W. *Just Say Know: Talking with Kids about Drugs and Alcohol.*  
Maran M. *Dirty.*

**General Addiction**

Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. *The Big Book*. 4th ed.  
 Beattie M. *Codependent No More*.  
 Bell P. *Chemical Dependency and the African American*.  
 Black C. *It Will Never Happen to Me*.  
 Drews TR. *Getting Them Sober*. 2 vols.  
 Daley, Miller. *Addiction In Your Family, Helping Yourself and Your Loved Ones*.  
 Milam JR, Ketcham K. *Under the Influence: A Guide to the Myths and Realities of Alcoholism*.  
 Narcotics Anonymous. *Basic Text*. 5th ed.

**Web Sites of Interest**

Al-Anon/Alateen	<a href="http://www.Al-Anon-alateen.org">www.Al-Anon-alateen.org</a>
Alcoholics Anonymous	<a href="http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org">www.alcoholics-anonymous.org</a>
American Council for Drug Education	<a href="http://www.drughelp.org">www.drughelp.org</a>
Chapel Hill/Carrboro City Schools	<a href="http://www.chccs.k12.nc.us/">www.chccs.k12.nc.us/</a>
Chapel Hill High School/Drug/Alcohol Awareness Task Force	<a href="http://www.unc.edu/~cory/DAATF">www.unc.edu/~cory/DAATF</a>
Drug and Alcohol Treatment & Prevention Global Network	<a href="http://www.drugnet.net">www.drugnet.net</a>
Families Anonymous	<a href="http://www.familiesanonymous.org">www.familiesanonymous.org</a>
National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information	<a href="http://www.health.org">www.health.org</a>
National Institute on Alcohol Abuse & Alcoholism	<a href="http://www.niaaa.nih.gov">www.niaaa.nih.gov</a>
Parents: The Anti-Drug	<a href="http://www.TheAntiDrug.com">www.TheAntiDrug.com</a>
Partnership for a Drug Free America	<a href="http://www.drugfreeamerica.org">www.drugfreeamerica.org</a>
Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration	<a href="http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/">http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/</a>
Toughlove	<a href="http://www.toughlove.org">www.toughlove.org</a>

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Please freely distribute this booklet. It is available on the Chapel Hill High School DAATF Web site and at [www.unc.edu/~cory/DAATF/ParentPower.pdf](http://www.unc.edu/~cory/DAATF/ParentPower.pdf).

For any bulk distribution, we simply request that you notify the Chapel Hill High School Drug/Alcohol Awareness Task Force in writing at: CHHS, PTSA President; 1709 High School Road; Chapel Hill, NC 27516. We suggest customizing the booklet by changing local references and/or statistics to fit your own. Please send us a courtesy copy of your customized version.