

The Ugly Truth

Teenage drug addiction has become an epidemic in this country

By Lynn Armitage

The signs were there all along: muscle aches and pains, sweating, sleeping all hours of the day, mood swings, and aluminum foil and spoons gone missing. But the connection to drug addiction didn't come soon enough for Sherrie Rubin, whose son Aaron started using prescription drugs while he was a sophomore at a San Diego high school. In and out of rehab for years, Aaron eventually overdosed on oxycontin at a party when he was 23. Miraculously, he survived, but now Aaron is a quadriplegic who can no longer speak and needs 24-hour care.

“We didn't know that addiction is a disease that needs to be maintained throughout your life. We thought after seven months (of rehab) we had our son back and he was cured. Three weeks later, he was in a coma...and we were planning his funeral,” says Rubin, who founded the **H.O.P.E. Foundation** to help other families struggling with addiction. With Aaron in a wheelchair by her side, Rubin has become an outspoken advocate against the dangers of teen drug use.

Sadly, there are thousands more stories like the Rubin's. Teen drug addiction has become an epidemic in this country. While we usually only hear about it when a celebrity is involved, like Bon Jovi's 19-year-old daughter who recently overdosed on heroin – and survived – while in her dorm at college, here's the ugly truth: Drug addiction among teenagers is an equal opportunity destroyer. It moves like a black finger of death into every socio-economic strata of society, right into our own homes, picking off the most vulnerable among us.

“Deaths from accidental drug overdoses now outnumber deaths from automobile accidents,” says Dr. Damon Raskin, an addiction medicine specialist at Cliffside Malibu Treatment Center in California. “Kids are particularly vulnerable to addiction and overdoses because their brains aren't fully developed, which leads them to make bad decisions.” He says most teens won't fess up to having an addiction, because many of them don't know that they do. “They don't recognize the dangers of drugs and particularly prescription drugs, which appear to be safe because oftentimes they come from their own medicine chest or a friend's.”

While marijuana is still the most abused drug among young people, according to a study by Monitoring the Future, prescription drugs are a close

second. And the problem is only getting worse. The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy reports that more than a third of abusers of prescription drugs are between the ages of 12 and 17.

Stopping drug use among teenagers is especially important when you consider that 90% of all adult addictions start in the teen years. In San Diego, where Aaron Rubin lives, prescription drugs are now the number one accidental cause of death, as reported by KPBS.

How does it all start?

Teens get caught up in drugs for a variety of reasons. Not surprisingly, peer pressure tops the list, but social media may be to blame, too. A study by CASAColumbia found that teens between 12 and 17 years old who have seen pictures on social-networking sites of kids getting drunk, passed out or using drugs, are likelier to smoke, drink or use drugs, too.

As teenagers are learning to become comfortable in their own skin, they have a tendency to want to experiment with many things, like sex and drugs. “They are often led to believe it is exciting and fun,” says Dr. Jason Jerry of the Cleveland Clinic, “and if they don’t do it they will be the oddball shunned from the social circle.”

Add to this dangerous cocktail of peer pressure the stress to get good grades, join clubs, manage romantic relationships, lose weight, bulk up and be exceptional enough to get into a good college, and it’s easy to see why some teens might turn to stimulants and prescription drugs to cope with it all.

Parents, your children are learning from you, too. “If parents or older siblings use drugs or have permissive attitudes toward drug use, teens are more likely to use drugs, too” says Dr. Rick Meeves, Director of Clinical Services for Adolescents, CRC Health Group in Cupertino, California. It doesn’t help matters that 2.1 million children younger than 18 live with a parent who has a drug problem, based on the National Survey on Drug Use and Health.

Another growing concern is that drugs are becoming more addictive. Marijuana, the drug of choice by teenagers and one that many parents probably experimented with in their heyday, is not your grandmother’s joint anymore. Abuse experts say that marijuana is much stronger than it was 25 years ago, as drug dealers are formulating it to be more addictive so users will continue to buy it.

Consider the Monitoring the Future survey, and we have a real problem on our hands. It found that marijuana use among teens rose in 2011 for the fourth straight year. Lloyd Johnston, principal investigator of the study, says

one in every 15 high school seniors is smoking pot on a daily or near daily basis — the highest rate in over 30 years.

Your Medicine Cabinet is Public Enemy No. 1

By far, the most disturbing trend in teen addiction is the abuse of prescription medicines and over-the-counter cough remedies. According to The Partnership at Drugfree.org., 2,500 teenagers per day use a prescription drug to get high for the first time, and one in five teens say they have taken a prescription drug without having a prescription for it.

Where are these kids getting all these drugs? “The number one source of drugs that teenagers abuse is their own home medicine cabinet,” said Steve Pasierb, CEO of The Partnership at Drugfree.org. “Kids tell us in surveys that there is enough supply at home and at grandma's house that they don't have to buy them.”

The National Community Pharmacists Association reports that an estimated 200 million pounds of unused prescriptions are abandoned in our medicine cabinets, creating a pharmacological candy store for teen addicts.

To further compound the problem, teen addicts who can no longer depend on the medicine cabinet at home for a fix, turn to the streets to buy their prescription drugs. These drugs prove to be too expensive for most teen budgets, so many teens transition into the seedy world of heroin because it's a much cheaper way to get high.

In an effort to create awareness of this problem, the Medicine Abuse Project was created in concert with Partnership at drugfree.org. The multi-year awareness campaign was launched this past September, and the website contains eye-opening, helpful information on prevention and resources, as well as personal stories from other parents that you can read [here](#).

One of the best ways to protect teens from getting access to medications that someone in the family needs is to lock them up. Secure them the same way you would your jewelry or cash – hidden away in a safe place. Partnership for a Drug-Free America recommends [The Locking Cap](#), a specially designed combination lock for prescription medicine bottles and vials.

Education is the best prevention.

It's a scary world out there for teenagers, whose brains aren't fully developed, facing mounting peer pressure to let loose, have fun and fit in. As much as parents would like to keep vigil over their children 24/7, it's simply unrealistic and not healthy for these blossoming young adults. A parent's job isn't to clip a teenager's wings, but rather, to grow them.

Many experts in teen substance abuse agree that the best weapon in fighting this epidemic is education. According to Partnership for a Drug-Free America, kids who learn about the risks of drugs and alcohol from their parents are up to 50% less likely to use than those who do not.

Kim Box wholeheartedly agrees. "It's really important for parents to talk to their kids not only about how substance abuse is bad for them, but how it affects their brain. Help them understand that once they alter the chemistry of their brain, they'll have that addiction for life." With education as their rallying cry, Box and a group of Northern California moms on a mission started Pathway To Prevention (pathwaytoprevention.org), an organization dedicated to teaching teens and parents about the dangers of drug and alcohol addiction.

But how could they pack the most powerful punch? "We decided to create a documentary called 'Collision Course – Teen Addiction Epidemic,'" says Box, the group's executive director. The 30-minute film, produced by Emmy-winning producer Joyce Mitchell and director Ted Ross, takes viewers into the trenches of teen addiction through the eyes of teens, parents and medical experts. The \$125,000 documentary, funded by grants and donations, premiered on KVIE-6, a public television station in Sacramento, and won an Emmy award this year.

Since winning an Emmy, "Collision Course" has been aired more than 100 times in multiple cities across the country. "It's getting very high ratings," says Box. What's really exciting is the feedback they're getting from families. Box tells the story of a 12-year-old girl whose friends came to school drunk and she disassociated herself from them. "She told her dad, 'I saw that documentary and I don't want to do that. I know what can happen.'"

Mission accomplished, says Box. "That's EXACTLY what we wanted!" She is also the co-founder ParentPathway.com, an online community to help parents who have children struggling with addiction. The website offers information on how to deal with addiction, tools and resources, an "Ask the Expert" section and uplifting stories of hope.

You can watch "Collision Course" online at KVIE.org. Or to order a DVD of the film, [click here](#).

(Sidebar):

The Most Commonly Abused Drugs By Teens (in alphabetical order)

- Alcohol
 - Cocaine/Crack
 - Cough Medicine
 - Ecstasy/MDMA
 - Heroin
 - Inhalants
 - Marijuana
 - Methamphetamine
 - Prescription Pain Killers
 - Prescription Sedatives and/or Tranquilizers
 - Prescription Stimulants
 - Steroids
 - Tobacco
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- *Source: The Partnership for a Drug-Free America*

(Sidebar): **How do I know if my teen is abusing drugs?**

Problems at school: Frequently missing classes or missing school, a sudden disinterest in school or school activities, and a drop in grades may be indicators of drug use.

Physical health issues: Lack of energy and motivation may indicate your child is using certain drugs.

Neglected appearance: Adolescents are generally concerned about how they look. A lack of interest in clothing, grooming or looks may be a warning sign of drug use.

Changes in behavior: Teenagers enjoy privacy, but exaggerated efforts to bar family members from entering their rooms or knowing where they go with their friends might indicate drug use. Also, drastic changes in behavior and in relationships with family and friends may be linked to drug use.

Spending money: Sudden requests for money without a reasonable explanation for its use may be a sign of drug use. You may also discover money stolen from previously safe places at home. Items may disappear from your home because they're being sold to support a drug habit.

- *Source: Parentpathway.com*

(Sidebar): **What places might a teen hide drugs?**

Think like a teen, and be creative. Look:

- Behind the dryer in the vent that takes the lint outside
- In TVs, radios and any electronic device that has batteries. The battery compartment is a common hiding place for drugs
- Behind the electrical outlet cover in the wall
- Under the bed to see if the bottom of the box springs has been slit to create a hiding place
- Any device or furniture that has a possible hollow portion is an ideal hiding spot. For example, look at any lamp or desk fan with a hollow neck that can be unscrewed.
- Real looking soda, soap, shaving cream cans, etc., in which the bottom comes off provide a hollow bottom where drugs can be found.
- Behind books on bookshelves.
- Inside coat pockets and sneakers

- *Source: Parentpathway.com*

Lynn Armitage is a freelance writer and mother of two daughters.

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