Reflections on Adolescent Substance Use and Abuse
by John A. Lewis, Headmaster

Introduction

Let me begin by quoting from one of my favorite authors about adolescence, Dr. Lawrence Steinberg:

The mixed signals sent to young people about drugs reflect, no doubt, the inconsistent way that we view these substances as a society: Some drugs (like alcohol or Prozac) are fine, as long as they are not abused, but others (like cocaine or ecstasy) are not; some drinking (enough to relax at a party) is socially appropriate, but too much (enough to impair an automobile driver) is not; some people (those over 21) are old enough to handle drugs, but others (those under 21) are not. It is easy to see why teenagers do not follow the dictates of their elders when it comes to alcohol and other drugs. How, then, should we view substance use and abuse among teenagers, when our backdrop is a society that much of the time tolerates, if not actively encourages, adults to use these same substances? (from the book, Adolescence)

As you are keenly aware, adolescence marks the transition from childhood to adulthood, and is defined by physical changes, identity formation, moral development, and community awareness. Moreover, this developmental stage is distinguished by increased emotional understanding (or misunderstanding), heightened peer pressure, individuation, and exploration of human relationships, sexuality, substance use, and values. In short, adolescence is characterized by increased experimentation as well as healthy and unhealthy risk taking.

As educators and parents, we know the challenges of guiding children through the stormy waters of adolescence, and this essay aims to address one of the most challenging issues arising during this challenging stage: the use and abuse of substances. I’ll begin by sharing some current data relating to adolescent substance use. I will then talk about the risk and protective factors that lead students either to avoid or indulge in substance use, as well as some thoughts about how you, as parents, might play an active role in helping your child to avoid substance use and abuse. Finally, I will talk about the ways we can work together to ensure that our students make healthy choices in relation to drugs and alcohol. Having spent my entire adult life working with this population of students, I know that no amount of prevention can guarantee that students will always make good choices. However, as with all the work we do with adolescents, we can guide them—through information and adult modeling—so that when they make their choices they know our values as well as “the facts.”

Current Data and Health Risks

Here are the facts on the ground. According to the most comprehensive annual study of adolescent substance use and abuse, the “Monitoring the Future” study done through the University of Michigan (www.monitoringthefuture.org), the majority of high school
students in the United States experiment with alcohol, and have been drunk at least once before they graduate. Almost half of American high school students have experimented with marijuana, and about one-fifth of students are using marijuana regularly (at least once a week) by 12th grade. By the 10th grade, 32% of students have tried marijuana, 62% have tried alcohol, 41% have been drunk at least once, 32% have tried cigarettes, and nearly 16% have tried or used “harder” drugs like ecstasy, cocaine, or heroin. When students reach 12th grade, these numbers rise even higher. 42% of 12th graders have tried marijuana, 72% have tried alcohol (with 57% reporting that they’ve been drunk—and 27% saying they’ve been drunk in the last 30 days.) Since the “Monitoring the Future” study relies on self-reporting as its primary vehicle for data collection, the actual numbers may be even slightly higher. Perhaps the most disturbing trend for professionals who study adolescent substance use and abuse is that students are starting to experiment at an earlier age, and the earlier one starts, the more likely they are to develop a serious problem.

Thus, the facts are clear: high school students drink, smoke, and take drugs. Even if we suspect that Gunston students use substances at a far lower rate than the national average, the aforementioned statistics should make us stand up and pay attention. A former colleague of mine once said, "If you have a high school, you have an issue with drugs and alcohol," and when one says or thinks “not my child,” they are not likely—statistically—to be correct. It would be even less statistically correct for one to assume, “my child has no access to drugs and alcohol,” as approximately 90% of students report that they have “easy access” to these substances.

The consequences of substance use and abuse for young people can be dire. Beyond breaking the law and being subject to arrest, students who use and abuse substances can be hurt or injured. Accidents, especially in relationship to driving, are the number one killer of teenagers, and a high percentage of these accidents involve drug-and-alcohol use. Research also demonstrates just how profoundly substance use and abuse can affect the adolescent brain, which is in a key stage of neurobiological development. A July article in the New York Times entitled, "The Grim Neurology of Teenage Drinking," notes that:

Mounting research suggests that alcohol causes more damage to the developing brains of teenagers than was previously thought, injuring them significantly more than it does adult brains. The new findings may help explain why people who begin drinking at an early age face enormous risks of becoming alcoholics. (NYT 07/04/07)

Adolescents can also be severely harmed by the epidemic of "Binge Drinking"—defined as the consumption of five or more drinks at one sitting—as research shows that a majority of accidents and violence related to alcohol consumption (including sexual assault and alcohol poisoning) occur when students binge.

In the face of this, the difficult reality is that our students are going to experiment, and while we can do our best to prevent them from experimenting, no amount of prevention
can avert a certain amount of unhealthy risk-taking. The good news, of course, is that a large majority of students survive adolescence without becoming alcoholics or drug addicts, they don’t get injured in an alcohol or drug-related accident, they don’t get arrested for illegal substance use, and they reach adulthood happy, healthy and fulfilled. However, what I frequently hear—both from adolescents and adults—is that, since the number of people who end up with a serious drug or alcohol problem are relatively small, we as a society make “too big a deal” about underage substance use. Of course, the converse of this argument—one that I find very compelling, and which is the central premise of this letter—is that the numbers are small because we make a big deal out of underage substance use. Despite our occasional frustration with them, young people eventually absorb a significant part of the value system imparted to them by adults.

Prevention: Risk and Protective Factors

Once one accepts that the rate of adolescent substance use is a problem, and that adolescent substance use and abuse is important to prevent, the question then becomes: What can we do to prevent it? Dr. Steinberg’s book identifies four factors that place students at special risk for substance abuse. The first is psychological. Students with a history of impulsivity, inattentiveness, and chronic anger are at higher risk for substance abuse. The second is familial, with student at higher risk if they have “distant, hostile, or conflicted family relationships,” and if their parents are “excessively permissive, uninvolved, neglectful, or rejecting.” The third factor is peer relationships. Simply put, if your child’s friends are engaged in drug and alcohol use, the chances that your child will be involved rise exponentially. Finally, if students are provided a social context in which substance use and abuse are tolerated (and even encouraged), students are at higher risk.

However, Dr. Steinberg also identifies a number of “protective factors” that make students less at risk for substance use and abuse:

- Positive mental health
- High self-esteem
- Absence of depression
- High academic achievement
- Engagement in school
- Close family relationships
- Involvement in religious activities

The Role of the School

Noting these risk and protective factors, we at Gunston understand that we play a holistic role in preventing substance use and abuse among our students, a role that extends well beyond any single health assembly or program. One of the great benefits of studying in small independent school is that the school environment positively reinforces almost all of the protective factors mentioned above, while mitigating many of the risk factors. Our small classes, teacher-student ratio, and advisory system aim to keep a close eye on each
student’s self-esteem and overall mental health. We work actively to help all of our students experience success and build confidence through the myriad of athletic, arts, and extracurricular activities available to them, and offer a venue where students can spend their time in a positive and productive way. Our rigorous academic program creates a culture of academic achievement, and our Community Character Expectations foster an environment characterized by clear behavioral standards and high expectations. On campus and at school-sponsored events, we maintain a "zero tolerance" policy in regard to drugs and alcohol so that students can exist in a substance-free peer environment, and which provides a strong deterrent to those young people who might be tempted to push the boundaries.

**What Can I Do as a Parent?**

Of course, as parents, you have a powerful effect on your child’s attitude towards substance use and abuse, and noting the factors above, here are some simple, straightforward things that you can do to lower your child’s risk:

- Support activities that build your child’s self-esteem, and be involved in your child’s life both at home and at school.
- Ensure that your child is involved in a myriad of school and extracurricular activities in areas like arts and athletics.
- Maintain close contact with the parents of your child’s peers, and always be informed about your child’s whereabouts and their activities.
- Support your child’s academic achievement through the close monitoring of their academic progress, and be in close communication with their teachers, their advisor, and the school if you have a concern, or if you see a major decline in achievement.
- Know your child, and pursue therapeutic intervention if you have concern about any of the familial, psychological, or peer relationship issues noted above.

Here are some additional thoughts, insights, and guidelines from noted psychologist and school consultant, Dr. Charles Diament, regarding a parent's role in helping to address substance use with your children:

1) As your child grows, your role as parent also changes. While you remain concerned about your child’s safety, your role now should predominantly be one of coach and guide. Your child still needs your support and love, but they want to be able to make some decisions on their own. “Just say no” is unrealistic advice to give teens when it comes to drugs, sex and alcohol. It oversimplifies complex issues and does not reflect both the reality and intelligence of teenagers. “Just say no” is derived from a mindset that believes, despite all evidence to the contrary, that “good” kids don’t use drugs or alcohol and/or remain celibate and that just repeating instructions in an absolute and unyielding fashion will accomplish one’s goals. Actually, what “just say no” does is stop young people from “hearing” anything else we have to say on the subject.
2) You can prohibit your teens from drinking or taking drugs but that does not mean you can prevent it. However, this does not mean you should casually and passively accept your teen’s experimentation and say, “it’s normal so I just won’t do anything about it since all teenagers do this sort of thing.”

3) You can help your child by LISTENING to what they have to say and keeping lines of communication open. Encourage them to ask questions about these issues and respond in a reasonable and non-judgmental way.

4) While your opinion about such matters is important, choose the right time and place to share it, preferably when you’ve been asked for an opinion. Always provide facts, however, since ACCURATE information is invaluable when it comes to influencing teen behavior. Therefore, educate yourself first and obtain up-to-date information on the substances “in vogue” and most likely to be used by your child.

5) Scare tactics, exaggeration, and threats don’t work. However, you should state the contingencies, guidelines, and consequences in your home of substance usage but be careful of your tone and power status and try to be as matter of fact as possible. Set clear limits and FOLLOW THROUGH.

6) Help your child role-play scenarios they may encounter with friends, substances, and sexuality to help them practice and “rehearse” an appropriate response to challenging situations. Discuss ways for them to make responsible choices.

7) Provide your child with alternatives to drinking or using substances in combination with driving. Entertain using the concept of “amnesty” if they call for a ride after having used a substance. Of course, this can only be done in moderation and should not be used as the only remedy for your child’s substance usage behavior.

8) Practice what you preach. Be an honest, sincere, and non-hypocritical role model for the values you are trying to instill concerning these subjects.

9) Don’t miss an opportunity to praise your children for what you consider to be appropriate behavior in these arenas and never miss an opportunity to build their self-esteem in any context.

10) Finally, as uncomfortable as it may be, some of you may have children who have gone beyond “normal” substance experimentation. Familiarize yourself with the current “norms” and don’t be afraid to acknowledge to yourself that your child may require more intervention and that they have a “problem” regarding substances.

The School/Family Partnership

Finally, the close relationships in our community that exist among parents and between the parent community and the school foster an environment of open and effective communication regarding the ways our students spend their time. This tight communication loop creates a strong web of safety. As a school, we are an integral part of this loop; thus, we see it as our duty to communicate with families if we become aware of behavior and activities outside of school where we learn that students might be engaging in at-risk behavior, and/or intervening if the behavior disrupts the learning environment at school or presents risk to an individual student or group of students. Our
approach aims to balance an educational and therapeutic approach with a clear set of high behavioral expectations. Currently at Gunston we have offered a comprehensive substance use and abuse prevention program—Freedom from Chemical Dependency (FCD)—and our programs will become even more comprehensive over the next twelve months. With respect to high behavioral expectations, our school handbook makes it very clear that students who engage in illegal activity related to drug and alcohol consumption, either on or off campus, are subject to disciplinary action, including the possibility of dismissal from school.

Conclusion

I'd like to conclude this letter by talking about healthy risk taking. All true courage involves risk. In his groundbreaking work, *Moral Courage*, author Rushworth Kidder notes that acts of moral courage involve three things: principles, endurance, and risk. Our students want to take risks; in fact, some would argue that they have a biological imperative for risk-taking. Thus, our aim with adolescents should be to provide them with an environment where they can take emotional and intellectual risks each and every day—maximizing the opportunity for them to take healthy risks, while attempting to minimize unhealthy risk taking. By embracing the notion of “healthy risk,” we give students an environment in which to take these risks in a way that leads to their own betterment, as well as the betterment of our society at large.

As always, I look forward to working in partnership with you on these issues, and please be in touch with me if you have any questions, concerns, or feedback.

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