



WHEN YOUR PARENT IS YOUR PUSHER

by Stephanie Abbott



“I just didn’t want her out on the streets,” says Pamela Straub, 43, the mother of a young addict in treatment. “I told her I’d rather have her do it at home where I could keep an eye on her. I smoked pot with Felicia. I can’t really say if I was right or wrong. Well, now I guess I’m pretty sure I was wrong.”

Many of us remember Timothy Leary’s call to young people to join the drug culture in the 60s and 70s: “Tune in, turn on and drop out.” Most of them dropped back in again, but a percentage of that group still use marijuana today.

This generation often believes that pot use is a relatively harmless rite of passage for young adults. But marijuana and other drugs are more potent than ever, and first time users are more likely to be in middle school rather than college. Adolescents have trouble learning to control impulses, and all drugs make that harder to do even if addiction doesn’t become a problem.

According to a new survey released recently and reported on ABC News Nightline, some Boomers introduce their own children to the drug. When asked about this practice the answer often was “I thought the drug was safe for them if I supervised it.” Another common response by these parents was “I wanted to bond with my teenager. Smoking dope together was a way to feel closer.”

The survey of 5000 adolescents in treatment was commissioned by Phoenix House, which runs treatment programs for adolescents in such locations as California, Texas, New York and Florida. Of these patients, 50 percent use marijuana as their primary drug of choice, and 20% of all of them had used drugs with their parents. There was no measurable difference in whether the children were urban or lived in the suburbs, nor was race a factor.

Of those who used drugs with their parents, 76 percent reported using marijuana, 19 percent used crack, 16 percent used cocaine and six percent used heroin. Fewer than one percent had been introduced to drugs by a professional dealer.

The Partnership for a Drug-Free America reported in 1999 that the eight percent of teens in the overall population who said they had been offered drugs also said that some of those offers came from a parent.

Two other studies released recently

reported that though use of drugs by students in grades 6 to 12 is down, twice as many students used drugs in their own home as at school. This may mean that the prevention network needs to work harder to reach parents. Of course we do know that statistically it is the children of substance abusing parents who are most at risk for using.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which has named September 2000 as “National Alcohol and Drug Addiction Recovery Month,” parents make a difference in their children’s choices about alcohol and drugs. More than 42 percent of teens who have never used marijuana say their parents play an important part in their decision not to use.

It may be that most of these families in the survey that use drugs together are seriously dysfunctional in additional ways. Or perhaps these parents function well in other arenas.

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The drug of choice for most teens, troubled or not, is alcohol so it would also have been helpful to know whether these patients had been drinking with their parents too.

Prevention experts have recommended for years that parents talk to their children about alcohol and drugs. It didn’t occur to most of us how often some parents, unfortunately, were doing more than talking.