

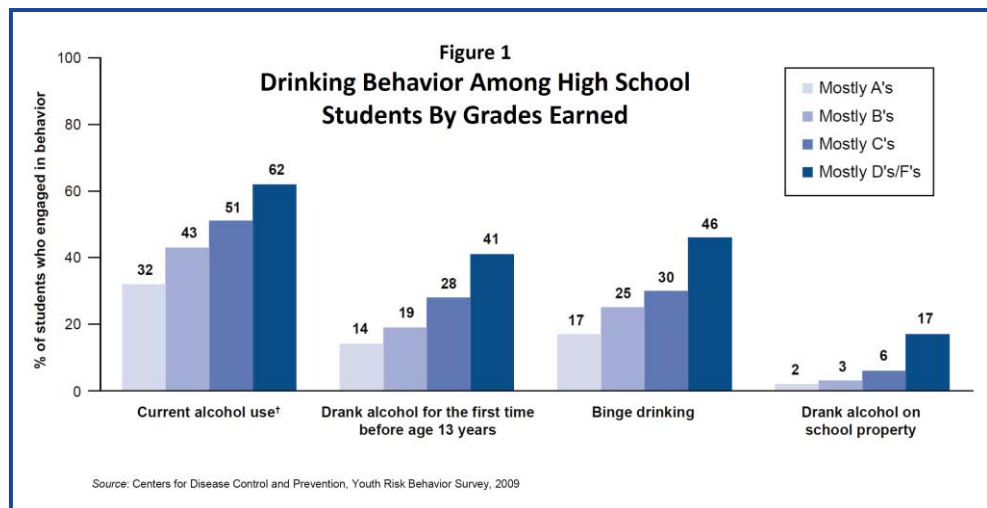
Back to School

Keeping Our Children Safe, Healthy, and Drug-Free in the New School Season

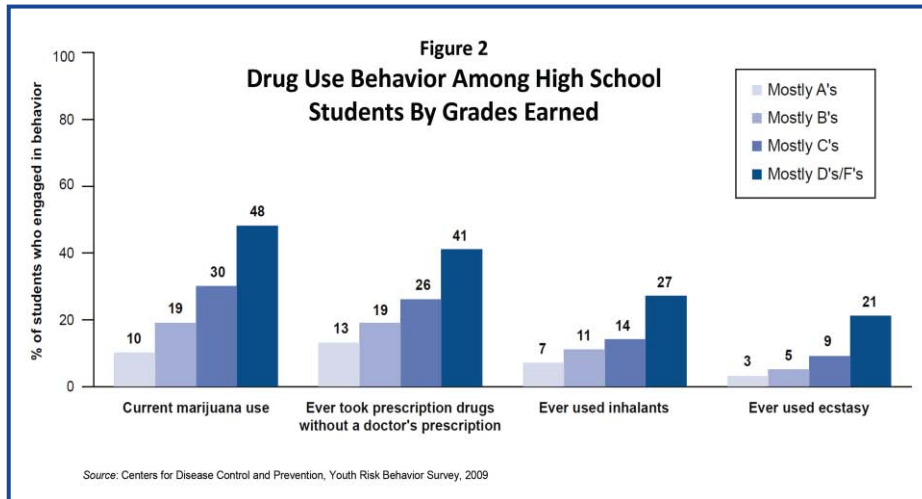
As summer draws to a close, more than 20 million American teenagers will head back to school, carrying with them their parents' hopes and expectations of a successful academic year. Many of these young people, however, will face challenges to their success and well-being, challenges such as the threat of alcohol and drugs, both illegal and legal.

Substance abuse puts teens at risk for academic failure and for an array of health, social, and legal consequences. As shown by the 2009 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey (see figures 1 and 2), students who do not use marijuana, drink alcohol, or take prescription drugs without a doctor's prescription receive higher grades than their classmates who do engage in alcohol and other drug use behaviors.

While rates of teen drug and alcohol use have remained flat over the past few years, on any given day more than 4,000 teens will use an illicit drug for the first time. About 3,500 will smoke a cigarette for the first time, almost 7,000 will drink alcohol for the first time, and more than 2,000 will, for the first time, use a prescription pain reliever without a doctor's prescription.

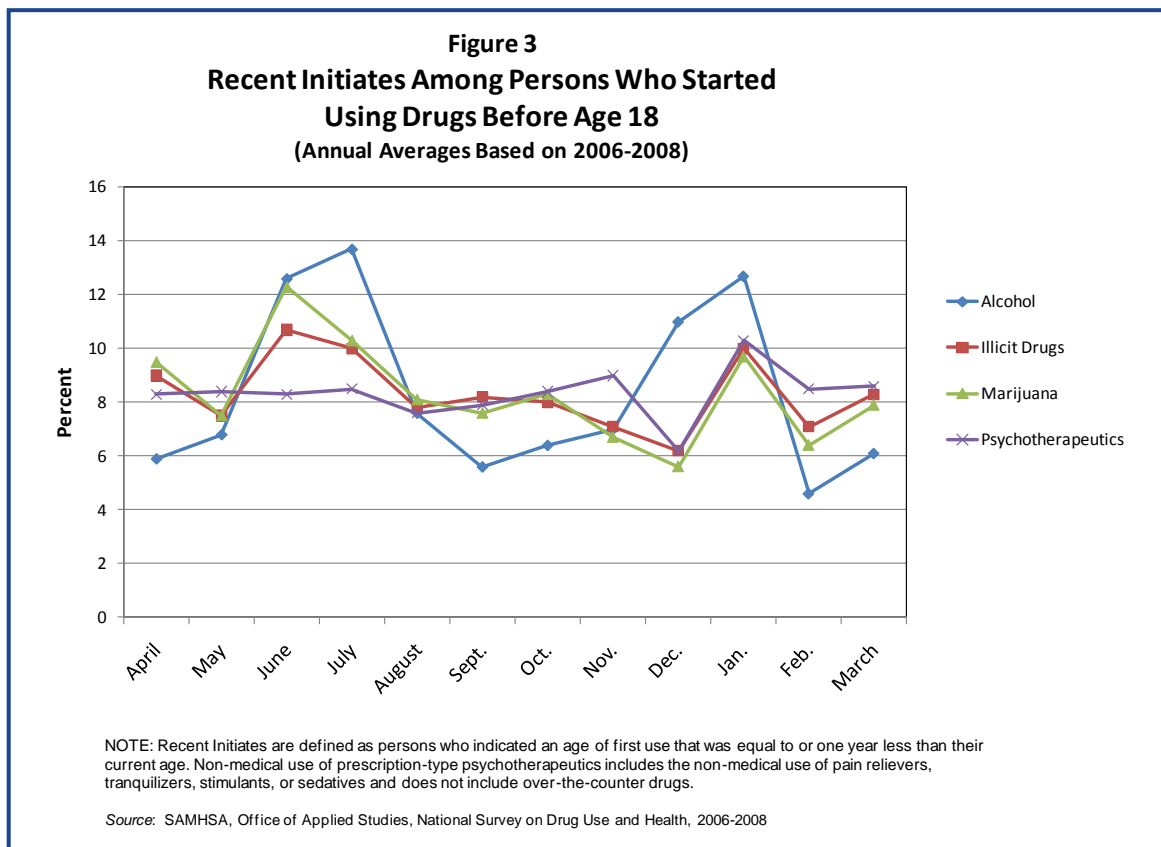


ONDCP seeks to foster healthy individuals and safe communities by effectively leading the Nation's effort to reduce drug use and its consequences.



Current use of marijuana is comparable to that of cigarettes among 8th, 10th, and 12th graders. In recent years, girls have caught up with boys in their drug use, including the misuse of prescription drugs.

Summer, when many students are out of school with free time on their hands and job money in their pockets, is the peak time of year for young people to begin using illicit drugs, as revealed by the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (see figure 3). Alcohol and illicit drug initiation rates also spike in December and January, when many students are out of school on winter break. This means many students will be returning to class with drug experience, either directly from personal use or indirectly through friends' use. Parents, teachers, and school officials should be mindful of this summertime spike in drug initiation as teens return to school grounds and classrooms in the coming weeks.



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Why do teens start using drugs? Some do so in an attempt to “fit in” to new social situations, including the school setting. Many young people overestimate the proportion of their peers who use drugs and mistakenly believe they need to use drugs to become socially acceptable. Some teens start using drugs as an experiment, others to become “more adult” or for self-medication to cope with stress and trauma.

Results of the 2009 *Monitoring the Future* (MTF) study document the disturbing prevalence among teens of abuse of prescription and over-the-counter drugs. The data show, for example, that seven of the substances most commonly abused by high school seniors are pharmaceuticals.

The MTF study also shows that the rate of current use of any illicit drug among 12th graders, at 22 percent, has dropped slightly since 2000 but remains above the 14.4 percent reported in 1992. Use among 8th and 10th graders followed a similar pattern.

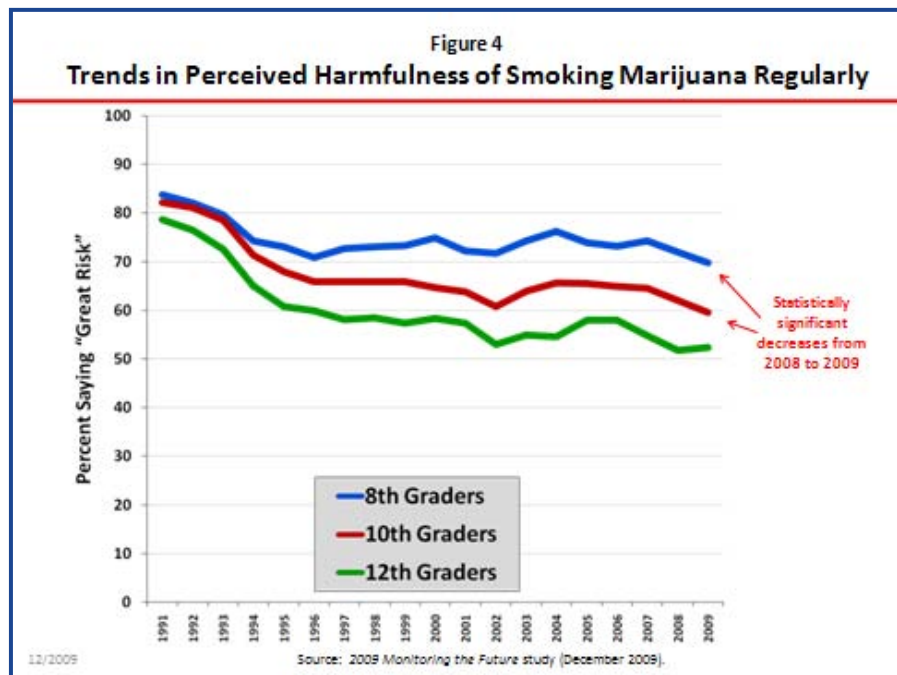
Another troubling trend, as revealed in the MTF data (see figure 4), is that teens’ perception of the harm of drug use, especially use of marijuana, is softening – a trend that generally signals higher drug use rates in the future.

Many parents believe they are powerless to influence their teens. However, research makes clear that parents remain

the single most powerful influence in their kids’ lives. Quality, evidence-based drug education in schools and well-designed after-school activities can reduce the risk that teens will use drugs. But parents remain the first line of defense.

Parents should know the warning signs of possible drug use. These include:

- ❖ Skipping classes or not doing well in school;
- ❖ Significant mood changes;
- ❖ Loss of interest in personal appearance;
- ❖ A change in friends;
- ❖ Heightened secrecy about actions or possessions; and
- ❖ A lack of interest in activities.



Teen-Parent Communication

Before their kids head back to school, parents are encouraged to visit the websites for ONDCP's Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign (www.TheAntiDrug.com) and "Above the Influence" initiative (www.AboveTheInfluence.com) for information on how to keep their teens away from drugs. A "Parent Tool Kit" developed by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America (<http://parent.drugfree.org/Home/>) offers expert advice on raising drug-free kids. These and other resources provide ideas and examples of the skills busy parents can use to turn ordinary interactions into teachable moments. Teens who learn about the risks of drug use from their parents or caregivers are less likely to use drugs than those who don't.

Teens believe they have valuable things to say, so when a parent genuinely listens, it helps build self-esteem, confidence, and trust. The better parents communicate, the more comfortable their teens will feel about discussing drugs and other sensitive issues.

Here are some tips for parents on how to talk to their teens about drug use:

- ❖ **Be absolutely clear with your kids that you don't want them using drugs.** Ever. Anywhere. Don't leave room for interpretation. And talk often about the dangers and results of drug and alcohol abuse.
- ❖ **Be a better listener.** Ask questions – and encourage them. Paraphrase what your teen says to you. Ask for his or her input about family decisions. Showing your willingness to listen will make your teen feel more comfortable about opening up to you.
- ❖ **Give honest answers.** Don't make up what you don't know; offer to find out. If asked whether you've ever taken drugs, let them know what's important – that you don't want them using drugs.
- ❖ **Use TV reports, anti-drug commercials, or school discussions** about drugs to help you introduce the subject in a natural, unforced way.
- ❖ **Don't react in a way that will cut off further discussion.** If your teen makes statements that challenge or shock you, turn them into a calm discussion of why your teen thinks people use drugs, or whether the effect is worth the risk.

The misuse of prescription medications is the fastest-growing drug problem in the United States. Because prescription drugs are legal and easily accessible (often from a home medicine cabinet), some people, particularly teens, believe they are safer than illicit drugs.

Here are tips that can help parents dramatically reduce the risk of prescription drug abuse:

- ❖ **Follow Disposal Guidelines.** "How to Dispose of Unused Medicines," a document available online from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration at www.fda.gov/consumer, offers guidance on how to dispose of unused or expired prescription drugs.
- ❖ **Utilize community prescription drug "take-back" programs.** Call your city or county government's household trash and recycling service or your local police or sheriff's department to see if a take-back program is available in your community.

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