

**The New Highs: The Drugs Teens Are Taking Now and What You Can Do About It
by Anthony Bruno**

Corey*, a 16-year-old high-school junior, stands before the open medicine cabinet in his parents' bathroom and pulls out his cell phone, texting his friend Melanie*.

"Got xbrs, vic, sktls kpc." Translation: "Got xanabars (slang for the antidepressant Xanax, Vicodin (a prescription painkiller), skittles (any over-the-counter cold pill containing DXM, the active ingredient in cough suppressants). Keeping Parents Clueless."

Melanie will be hosting a "pharm party" later that night. Each invited guest has to bring some pills, which will be combined in a bowl with the other kids' offerings to make what they call, "trail mix." If a guest doesn't bring something, Melanie won't let that person in, and that would be a major social disaster for Corey, who feels fortunate that his parents have a well-stocked medicine cabinet. Picking from the trail mix bowl is always an awesome thrill, because unless you're really experienced, you have no idea what you're taking.

Teens Find Highs Everywhere

Teenagers don't have to go to the streets to get illicit drugs like marijuana, cocaine, and heroin anymore. As a matter of fact, the good news is that use of illegal drugs is down in all grades of high school, according to the 2007 Monitoring the Future report from the National Institute on Drug Abuse. Instead, teens are using what they find at home, what they can buy legitimately at retail stores, and what they can buy over the Internet. Recent studies have shown that the use of prescription drugs and inhalants has increased. (Alcohol, of course, remains extremely popular and accessible.)

"The drug menu is bigger," says Steve Psierb, President and CEO of Partnership for a Drug-Free America, adding that teens stealing from the medicine cabinet is the "number one problem" in teen drug abuse today.

But prescription drugs aren't the only problem. Most parents are so unfamiliar with these new highs, they might not immediately recognize the signs and symptoms of abuse in their children.

For instance, most parents are familiar with marijuana because they might have smoked it themselves. But a parent on the look out for signs of marijuana use is probably clueless when it comes to salvia divinorum ("ska pastora", "Sally-D") (http://www.drugfree.org/Portal/drug_guide/Salvia_divinorum), a leaf that can be smoked like pot or chewed like chewing tobacco. The high comes quickly when smoked,

generally with just a few tokes, eliciting euphoria and temporary loss of motor skills. But a bad trip will bring on intense paranoia and panic attacks. Users don't have to find a shady drug dealer to buy salvia divinorum. It's legal and commonly found in head shops and stores that sell herbal remedies. Dozens of vendors can be found on eBay where it's sold as "incense."

The Internet can be a supermarket for teens in the market for prescription drugs. Painkillers, antidepressants and stimulants are readily available to anyone with a credit card, and many parents feel it's useful for teens to have their own cards. For drug novices, there are websites that provide how-to advice, personal testimonies from experienced drug users, and tips on how to obtain and prepare drugs. One of the most popular of these sites is the encyclopedic Erowid (<http://www.erowid.org/>), which presents hundreds of pages of illegal drug information.

Parents in Denial

Some parents minimize the problem, saying that they survived their own experimentation with drugs when they were young. "But the drugs of the 1970s are not the drugs of today," says Iris Koonin, Student Assistance Counselor at Hackensack High School in New Jersey, pointing out that the level of THC, the active ingredient in marijuana, is much higher today than it was in the past.

Inhalants (<http://www.drugfreepa.org/drugs/inhalants.asp>)— a category that includes glues, spray paints, nail-polish remover, cleaning fluids, Freon, and cooking sprays—are used mainly by younger teens and tweens. While parents are checking the levels in their liquor bottles for surreptitious alcohol consumption, they should also check their supplies in the basement, garage, kitchen, and under the sinks. Teens are using products as innocuous as Wite-Out to get high.

Thanks to the Internet, teens can exchange drug information with anyone around the world, so the drug scene today is constantly changing. Teens are very adaptable and can be inventive in their methods of concealment. Girls in one middle school were saturating their hair scrunchies in nail-polish remover and taking them off periodically throughout the day for a deep sniff to maintain their high.

What Parents Can Do

In this ever-changing drug environment, what can parents do? Dr. Emil Chiauzzi of Inflexion, a company that creates behavioral health solutions for prevention, education, and disease management using interactive technologies, says that parents should make themselves aware of the "road signs" of drug abuse.

- Look for all types of changes in your teen. Is your son suddenly more defiant? Are his grades slipping? Has he lost interest in how he looks and dresses?

- Does your daughter have a whole new set of friends? Is she talking too much or not at all? Does she spend more time out of the house than she used to? Do people call on the phone asking for her, but refuse to identify themselves?
- Is your teen suddenly having cash flow problems? Or conversely, is he flush with disposable income, possibly from dealing drugs? Are you discovering that items are missing from your home, items that could have been sold for drug money?

If you start to see any of these signs, it's time to take action. Dr. Glenn Zehner of Drug-Free Pennsylvania stresses the importance of taking the time to talk to your teens. "Find out what's going on in their lives and who they're hanging out with. Talk to your teen's school counselor."

The Partnership's Steve Psierb urges parents to take preventative measures to keep teens from abusing drugs. "Parents typically fear having the 'sex talk' with their kids, but they also fear having the 'drugs talk.'" He advises parents to start talking to their kids about drugs at the beginning of middle school, using television shows and celebrities in the news who have drug problems as springboards for conversations. Kids who learn about drug risks from parents are only half as likely to start using—despite what you might believe, teens will heed their parents' advice if they get it early.

If a teen already has a drug problem, Psierb advises parents to treat it as a health issue not a legal issue and avoid the "moral failing mentality."

"Treat it like diabetes or any other health problem," Psierb counsels. "Tell people, 'My kid has a health challenge and we're dealing with it.'"

If you suspect that your teen is abusing drugs:

- First, make your expectations for his behavior clear.
- Monitor his Internet use to see if he's repeatedly visiting drug sites. If you have good reason to believe that he's buying drugs online, take away his credit card.
- If the problem persists, consult school guidance counselors and addiction specialists.
- Partner with your pediatrician or family doctor to work with your teen.
- If necessary, find a treatment facility (<http://dasis3.samhsa.gov/>).

There are ways to stop this very serious problem in its tracks, but you have to be vigilant.

What You Can Do If Your Teen Is Using Drugs

- Pick up your teen's mp3 player and go to the "Top 25 Most Played" section. Listen for references to alcohol, drugs, or other risky behaviors. Use these references as talking points to start a dialogue with your teen.
- Visit social networking sites like MySpace.com, and browse the profiles of teens to see what they say, what their interests are, and what they are doing online.
- Monitor your teen's comings and goings. Get to know the who, what, where, when, and why of their daily activities.
- Can you name your teen's favorite TV show? Watch it with him or her and discuss story lines that deal with drug use.
- Go to a video sharing Web site and type in "smoking weed." Watch some of the videos and see if your teen's recent behavior matches the reactions of people who are high. If you suspect that your teen has a problem, don't wait.
- State your concerns and what you intend to do to help your teen, whether she wants it or not. Early intervention is the best intervention.
- When confronting your teen, don't get angry. Be firm but also make it clear that you love your teen and you will do anything to help them lick their problem.

* Corey and Melanie are composite characters

Additional Resources

Websites

- * Drug Free Pennsylvania, <http://www.drugfreepa.org>
- * Drug Story, <http://www.drugstory.org>
- * Erowid, <http://www.erowid.com>
- * Inflexion, <http://www.inflexion.com/inflex/inflexion.htm>
- * Monitoring the Future: National Results on Adolescent Drug Use, <http://www.monitoringthefuture.org/pubs/monographs/overview2006.pdf>
- * Parents. The Anti-Drug, <http://www.theantidrug.com>
- * Partnership for a Drug-Free America, <http://www.drugfree.org>
- * Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator, <http://dasis3.samhsa.gov/>
- * National Institute on Drug Abuse: Treatment <http://www.nida.nih.gov/infofacts/treatmeth.html>
- * Students Against Destructive Decisions, <http://www.sadd.org>

Books

- How to Keep Your Teenager Out of Trouble and What to Do if You Can't by Neil I. Bernstein, Workman.

DRUG	HOW IT'S CONSUMED	THE HIGH	HOW TEENS GET IT
DXM (dex, skittles, robo, tussin)	Swallowed	Drunken feeling, hallucinations	In over-the-counter cold medications and cough syrups
Ritalin (kibbles & bits, pineapple)	Swallowed or snorted	Increased alertness and energy, euphoria	From other kids who have prescriptions
Salvia divinorum (ska pastorum, sally-d, shepherdess herb)	Smoked, chewed, ingested in liquid form	Euphoria, loss of motor control	Not illegal in US. Can be purchased from head shops and online
Vicodin, OxyContin, Percocet, Codeine	Swallowed or injected	Euphoria, feelings of well-being, drowsiness	Stolen from medicine cabinet, purchased illegally online
Xanax (xanabar, monkey bars)	Swallowed	Euphoria, sluggishness	Stolen from medicine cabinet, purchased illegally online