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# Parenting for Prevention

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Student Assistance Services Corp., 660 White Plains Road, Tarrytown, New York, 10591, February, 2008

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## Collaboration, Support, and Results



This past year a project was begun to survey parents in Westchester County about their attitudes towards their teens alcohol and other drugs use.

This project was accomplished as a result of the cooperation of the Westchester County Executive and his Office of Drug Prevention and STOP-DWI, the District Attorney's Office and Student Assistance Services.

I mention this as the results of the survey were recently released. I feel that it is note worthy to acknowledge that we live in a County that have people in positions of leadership who care deeply about the welfare of our families and children and were ready to work together to get this project accomplished.

The information that was collected about parental attitudes is going to be very helpful in planning meaningful and successful programs in the future on this topic. The input of local coalitions and continued county-wide collaboration and support will be necessary to achieve positive prevention outcomes in the future.

*Patricia Murphy Warble, Editor*

## Westchester County Releases Survey of Parents on Alcohol/Drug Use and Compares It With Teen Responses *Results compared with those of parents nationwide*

Last spring the PRIDE parent survey which measures attitudes about underage drinking and drug use was mailed to a sample of parents in Westchester County who have children between the ages of 12-17. There were 414 responses from parents which were compared to a national sample of 10,450 parents who completed the same survey.

Andrew Spano, Westchester County Executive said, "We commissioned this survey because we wanted to better understand the problem of teen drinking and drug use and the relationship between the attitudes of parents so we could shape our ongoing programs aimed at deterring drug and alcohol use....."

This project was done with the support of County Executive Andrew Spano, District Attorney Janet DiFiore, and the Westchester Coalition for Drug and Alcohol Free Youth, a countywide community coalition under the auspices of the county's Office of Drug Prevention and STOP-DWI. The survey was paid for with a federal grant obtained by the coalition

Andrew Spano, Westchester County Executive said, "We commissioned this survey because we wanted to better understand the problem of teen drinking and drug use and the relationship between the attitudes of parents so we could shape our ongoing programs aimed at deterring drug and alcohol use. The good news from this survey is that Westchester parents overwhelmingly disapprove of teen alcohol and tobacco and marijuana use. But the survey also shows that they have more permissive attitudes than their national counter parts, especially when it comes to beers and wine coolers and punishing teens when they break rules. In addition, it appears that as a group they are underestimating their own teen's use of drugs and alcohol."

The parent's survey was also compared to the results from surveys of 7,484 secondary school students from 11 school districts in Westchester County that were taken between 2005-2007. The analysis of the findings was undertaken by Student Assistance Services,

Here are some of the highlights:

- Westchester parents were more likely to report that their children had used alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs in the past year compared to parents in the national sample. Approximately 7 % of Westchester parents reported their child used tobacco or marijuana during the past year compared to 4% of parents reporting that their child used tobacco and 3% reporting their child used marijuana in the national sample.
- The contrast between Westchester parents and those in the national sample was greatest with their children's use of alcohol. 25% of Westchester parents versus 6% of parents in the national sample reported their child used beer in the past year. This trend was also true for coolers and liquor use.
- Westchester teens are slightly to moderately more likely to use alcohol, tobacco and marijuana monthly, than students from a national sample. The exception is that Westchester 8<sup>th</sup> grade student's use of marijuana is lower than their national counterparts.
- Westchester parents are still greatly underestimating their children's use of these sub-

stances once parent attitudes are compared to what teens themselves said they do. By the time Westchester teens reach 12<sup>th</sup> grade, 52.5% reported drinking alcohol, 22.0% reported using marijuana and 18.4% reported smoking cigarettes during the past month..

- Westchester parents were more likely than parents nationwide to report that their child has friends who use alcohol, tobacco or other drugs "often or "a lot, compared to parents in the national sample. Approximately 15 % of Westchester parents reported that their child has friends who used tobacco, 22% reported that their child has friends who use alcohol, and 9% reported that their child has friends who use drugs. In contrast, only 8% of parents in the national sample reported that their child had friends that used alcohol or tobacco, and 1 % reported that their child had friends that used drugs.
- Overall, 3.6% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders, 14.5% of 10<sup>th</sup> graders, and 22% of 12<sup>th</sup> graders in Westchester reported using marijuana in the past month. For alcohol, 21% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders, 39.6% of 10<sup>th</sup> graders and 52.5% of 12 graders reported past month use. For tobacco, 4.5% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders, 11.7% of 10<sup>th</sup> graders, and 18.4% of 12 graders reported past month use.
- Westchester parents reported perceiving beer and coolers as less harmful than liquor (79% of parents report beer

and/or coolers as "harmful" or "very harmful" vs. 93% of parents reporting liquor as "harmful" or "very harmful") even though all three contain alcohol.

- Like youth nationwide, Westchester youth first tried tobacco, next alcohol and finally marijuana. Of those who used one of these substances, the first-use for tobacco was on average aged 11.7; for alcohol, 11.8 years; and marijuana, 12.6 years.
- The majority of Westchester teens believed that the regular use of alcohol (drinking 1-2 drinks every day), tobacco (smoke 1 or more packs of cigarettes per day) and marijuana (smoke marijuana regularly) causes moderate or great risk. As Westchester teens got older, a greater percentage of them believed that the regular use of alcohol and tobacco was harmful. In contrast, fewer Westchester teens perceived the regular use of marijuana as harmful, as they got older.
- Over half (57%) of all Westchester parents perceived that drugs and alcohol were a big problem facing youth "often" or "a lot" in their community. This was the same as in the national sampling.
- The vast majority of Westchester parents strongly disapprove of youth alcohol (93%) and marijuana (94%) use. When compared to a national sample, the Westchester parents were slightly less disapproving.

## Parental Attitudes Make A Difference

Parental attitudes matter when it comes to drug and alcohol use. Previous experiences with alcohol and drugs, perceptions of the prevalence of alcohol and drug use, and the underestimation of risks are some factors that influence parents' messages to their children regarding alcohol and drugs. Parents can have a profound effect on the alcohol, drug, and tobacco use of their children with some simple steps, including talking to their children about why they do not want their children to use, staying involved in their lives, providing supervision, and making sure they only go to safe settings where a responsible adult is present.

Parents' attitudes are different if they have used drugs in the past. A study was conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services between 1979 and 1996 and included surveys of 9,463 parents and children. The study found that parents who used marijuana multiple times and don't view the drug as risky were more likely to have children who felt the same way.

Many of today's parents (those with pre-teens and teens) were high school students themselves during the late '70s and early '80s, a period when teen drug use reached its absolute high point. In fact, when compared to high school seniors today, teen drug use rates were significantly higher in the '70s and early '80s.

Surveys have found that one in four parents think their children should be able to drink at home if a parent is present. Many adults see drinking as a rite of passage. Today, prevention professionals are trying to change attitudes, in the same way that attitudes have changed about tobacco.

Additionally, parents underestimate the prevalence of drugs in their community. The 2004 Partnership Attitude Tracking Study (PATS) surveyed 1,205 parents across the country. Despite their first-hand knowledge about the issue, the Partnership's study finds that today's parents significantly underestimate the presence of drugs in their teens' lives.

- Just one in five parents (21 percent) believe their teenager has friends who use marijuana. Yet 62 percent of teens report having friends who use the drug.
- Less than one in five parents (18 percent) believe their teen has smoked marijuana, yet many more (39 percent) already are experimenting with the drug.
- This perceptual disconnect is even more pronounced when it comes to drugs that weren't around when today's parents were teenagers.

Only one of every 100 parents, – one percent, believes their teen may have used MDMA, commonly referred to as Ecstasy. The reality is quite different: Some nine percent of all teens, – 2.1 million teens in America – used Ecstasy for the first time

last year, down from a peak of 12 percent in 2001

"Survey data also show parents and teens underestimate the specific health risks of these drugs," said Steve Pasierb, Chairman of Partnership For A Drug Free America. "Risk-related attitudes correlate strongly with trends in drug use; for example, when teenagers see greater risks associated with a particular drug, use of that drug declines. Unfortunately, the opposite holds true as well"

Even though parents know it is important to talk to their children, many still are not. The 2004 Partnership Attitude Tracking Study (PATS) surveyed 1,205 parents across the country :

- The number of parents who report never talking with their child about drugs has doubled in the past six years, from 6 percent in 1998 to 12 percent in 2004.
- Just 51 percent of today's parents said they would be upset if their child experimented with marijuana.
- While most parents believe it's important that parents discuss drugs with their children, fewer than one in three teens (roughly 30 percent) say they've learned a lot about the risks of drugs at home. Research from the Partnership has shown that kids who learn a lot about the risks of drugs from their parents are up to half as likely to use; however only one-third of teens says they learn a lot about drugs from their parents.

According to the 2003 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, anti-drug messages inside and outside of school, participation in religious and other activities, parental disapproval of substance use and positive attitudes about school are linked to lower rates of youth marijuana use. For example, those exposed to anti-drug messages outside of school had rates of current marijuana use that were 25 percent lower than those not reporting such exposure (7.5 percent vs. 10.0 percent). Youth who believe that their parents would "strongly disapprove" of marijuana had use rates fully 80 percent lower than those who reported that their parents would not "strongly disapprove" (5.4 percent vs. 28.7 percent).

It is also important to talk to your children about the dangers of smoking. And it is not only the non-smokers who should discuss the dangers of smoking with their children. A three-year study found that kids whose parents smoke were half as likely to try cigarettes if their parents instituted a home-based anti-smoking program. The study of 776 children and their parents was published in the January issue of the Archives of Pediatrics & Ado-

lescent Medicine, a journal of the American Medical Association.

Parents' smoking habits can greatly increase the risk of their children smoking. Research shows that if one or both parents smoke, children may have at least twice the risk of becoming habitual smokers by the time they graduate from high school.

"The fact that parents who smoke can exert a protective anti-smoking effect on their children might seem counter-intuitive," said study author Christine Jackson, Ph.D., a senior research scientist at PIRE Chapel Hill Center. "Other research has already found that strong parental attitudes and actions against smoking reduce the odds of children using tobacco. Our study found that the same is true even when the parents themselves are smokers."

"Parents who smoke feel guilty about being role models for smoking; they feel hypocritical about trying to prevent their children from smoking," Jackson said. "For these reasons, it's difficult to persuade parents who smoke to become anti-smoking advocates in the home." For more information on Smoke-Free Kids, please visit <http://www.familyhealthresearch.org/index>.

## Upcoming Events

**March 10** **7:00pm**  
John Jay High School  
*Parents, Kids, Drugs and the Law*  
District Attorney Janet DiFiore  
Contact: 234-3227

**March 10** **7:30pm**  
Harrison High School  
Risky Business Panel  
Contact: 835-5471

**March 13** **7:30pm**  
New Rochelle High School  
Parents Who Host, Lose The Most  
Contact: 576-4284

**March 25** **10:00-11:30 am**  
Katonah Village Library  
*Bully-Proofing Your Child*  
Joel Haber, PhD  
Contact: 234-3227

**March 18** **7:45pm**  
Pelham HS Cafeteria C  
Pelham University  
On the Rocks; The Epidemic of Teen Drinking  
Video screening, followed by grade level groups discussions.  
Contact: 738-6941

**March 31st** **7:30pm**  
Bell Auditorium, Chappaqua  
Risk & Protective Factors in Affluent Communities  
Suniya Luthar, PhD  
Contact: 238-0907.