



Lea Goldstein, PhD
The Challenges of Teens and Risky Behavior
Attendee Notes for Menlo School Workshop: Feb. 4, 2012

Lea Goldstein, PhD, is a licensed psychologist and specializes in working with teens and families with a focus on healthy adolescent development, transitions to adulthood and substance abuse issues. She is president of the San Mateo County Psychological Association and co-author of the book *Drugs and Your Kid: How To Tell If Your Child Has a Drug/Alcohol Problem and What To Do About It*.

Intro: What is the most outrageous story you have heard, experienced personally or witnessed about teenagers? Did it involve sex, drugs or alcohol? Risky behavior? All of the above?

Background Info:

Brain development. Last part of brain to develop is the pre-frontal cortex, which is responsible for reasoning, judgment, decision-making and cognition. In teens, this has not developed. Dr. Goldstein recounted a story of her son who drove a safe car – a Volvo station wagon. He thought it would be fun to pull emergency brake to impress his friend. Ended up in a ditch. What was he thinking?

Adolescence is a normal stage of development, in which kids need to accomplish specific tasks to prepare them for adulthood. These tasks are to (1) form an identity and sense of self, (2) separate from caregivers and (3) get an education. To form an identity, teens “try on different things,” including clothes, styles and friends. Disagreement is a key tool. Teens must also learn to deal with experiences of inadequacy and alienation as they ask “who am I?” and “who will I be?” Separation is characterized by disagreement, with family, increased peer group exposure and testing limits. Education is broad-based and includes formal school, extracurricular and religious learning as well as informal learning of “life skills.”

Risky Behavior of teens today includes substance abuse, hooking up (sex), social media and other thrill seeking behavior. Dr. Goldstein showed a slide showing statistics of substance use by teens.

There are 4 stages of adolescent drug use: (1) experimentation, (2) regular use/misuse, (3) abuse and (4) dependence/addiction.

Experimentation involves gateway drugs (cigarettes and marijuana), is unplanned, infrequent and has very few negative consequences.

Regular use is planned in advance, consumption amount increases, includes perception that everyone does it and still has few negative consequences. This is usually when parents become aware of drug use and may involve lying, excuses, hiding things, drop in grades or extracurricular activities; though teen is still plugged in and engaged with parents and old friends.

Abuse is when they drink alone, increased tolerance and increased frequency, gateway to other drugs, and there are negative consequences. The alcohol becomes more important than the activity.

Addiction is similar to abuse but there is a compulsion and there is continued use in spite of negative consequences. Addiction is chronic and progressive and can be fatal.

This progression happens faster than in adulthood. 2 years. Also, the younger a teen begins drinking, the more likely they will develop dependence/abuse. Similar results have been seen in Europe.

Factors contributing to use: genetics, stressors (as ways to relax), parent attitudes, environment.

Parents live in states of denial. They underestimate their teens' stages of use/abuse.

Sexual Activity:

Almost half of high school students have had sex. Teens are sexual beings. Younger teens are not necessarily having serious relationships. They are having casual sex. Intercourse is the only "sex."

Dr. Goldstein read the following quote from a recent article in the New York Times¹:

Female adolescence is — universally — an emotionally and psychologically intense period. It is during this time that girls become aware of the emergence of womanhood, with both the great joy and promise that come with it, and also the threat of danger. Much on their minds is their new potential for childbearing, an event that for most of human history has been fraught with physical peril. Furthermore, their emergence as

¹ Opinion: Hysteria and The Teenage Girl, by Caitlin Flanagan, January 29, 2012, can be found at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/29/opinion/sunday/adolescent-girl-hysteria.html?_r=1&emc=eta1

sexual creatures brings with it heady excitement and increased physical vulnerability. They are also sharply aware that soon they will have to leave home forever, and at the very moment when they are most keenly desirous of its comforts and protections.

What teens need is a stable and supportive place to work all this stuff out.

Half of teens have intercourse in High School. Most wish they had waited.

As parents we should encourage them to DELAY DELAY DELAY!

Social Media:

Includes email ,texting, etc.

High use and most multitask

Sexting: many teens consider this to be flirty behavior!!

Other thrill seeking behaviors include:

The auto is a weapon of mass destruction.

Sports can be a good thrill seeking behavior unless it becomes unsafe because limits are pushed (e.g. no harness when rock climbing, no helmet when biking).

Feeling good is the driving force, and impulse control is not important.

Role of Parents:

Teen will push limits and disagree. The will assert that we do not know what we are talking about. Don't take to heart the insults and the "I hate you."

Your goal changes gradually from manager to a coach/consultant.

Be the stable force your teen pushes against. If you wobble they can take things to the next point. Be stable and clear. They do not yet have the ability to reason shades of gray. You must be black OR white. Rule is no drugs; not drugs okay sometimes. Rule is no alcohol; not alcohol okay at home but not out.

Communicate all the time. Establish family rituals during the week, i.e. dinners, media, car rides. Listen more than you talk. Be honest and model integrity.

The One Minute Rule.... you get one minute to make your point, then all they hear is blah blah blah!!!!!! Bring it up again one week later.

Parents need to stay in touch with each other – be the one who calls other parents (can even be anonymous)!! Confirm your teen's whereabouts with other parents.

What you do as a parent is as important as what you say.

Take your head out of the sand...

Get curious.

Ask questions of your teens about what is going on.

Be vigilant.

Develop a sense of communication.

RULES are Black and White. Consequences should match the behavior.

How do you get your child to open up? Need to establish family rules of confidentiality so your teen is more likely to talk to you.

In all of this: SAFETY is paramount. Leave the small stuff... like clean rooms. May withhold drivers' license if 15 yr old is caught drinking; explain your concern that s/he might drink while driving and therefore, you may have to delay the privilege. Driving is a privilege, not a right.

Drug testing is a wonderful way for parents to help their teens say "no." Keep one handy. You can be the bad guy. You are not your child's friend.

For times when your teen is out with friends and does partake, have a *no questions asked* rule... code words can help. Have conversations ahead of time with your teen. Make the plan to be there as a safety net.

Harm reduction...SAFETY is the top priority. e.g., condom distribution.

Drinking at home does not constitute harm reduction.

Realize teens will be on their own soon!

Questions:

Are national statistics reflective of our community? More privileged areas have higher rates of substance use. California and our area is almost exactly the same.

How to deal with teens who are experimenting? What do you do?
How do you encourage your teens to say no?

You continue to have those conversations. You can and should take the hard line. Don't move with them as they continue on the continuum, because they will see that as a sign to move further down the continuum. There has to be some limit. But you still might lose.

Seniors in high school: Parties are where parents are not home. What do you do as a parent? All actions will go underground. Some things are going underground; kids will lie and sneak. Keep enforcing your rules. BE VIGILANT. e.g., Stanford professor arrested for teens drinking at his house.