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# 'Just say no' – or 'just know'?

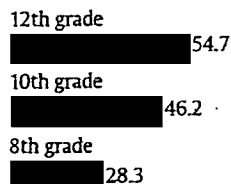
By Marsha Rosenbaum

My son Johnny, a high school junior this fall, is learning all kinds of new things — academic, social and physical. At 16, he seems fearless. And, as a typical American teenager, he faces two risk-sensitive issues: drug use and sexuality. So I read with keen interest a recent report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that addresses both of these hot-button topics.

Its gist: Teen drug use is up, but fewer young people are having sex, and more of those who do practice "safe sex." A decade ago, a third of students surveyed said they had experimented with marijuana. By 1999, almost half had tried pot. But during the same time span, the number of students having sex declined from just over half to slightly under half. Most important, of those who were sexually active, 58% reported using a condom in 1999, compared with 46% in 1991.

### They say yes

Percentage of students in each grade who admitted in 1999 to using an illicit drug during their lifetime:



Source: Drugfreeamerica.org  
USA TODAY

I wanted to know why risky teen sexual activity decreased while drug use rose. A look at our sex and drug education offers an answer: In a nutshell, while we'd all prefer that they abstain from both, we try to reason with teens about sex, but we scare them about drugs.

School-based drug education, its roots in the early 20th century's temperance movement, has used a variety of tactics to frighten young people away from using drugs. But too many still offer 1930s-style "Reefer Madness" messages. As the federal prevention budget has increased, teens have been bombarded by anti-drug school programs and media messages.

### Messages are ludicrous

My strong preference is that my son abstain. But in our zeal to deter experimentation, we may have gone too far. Many messages we have delivered to teenagers have been ludicrous ("this is your brain on drugs") or grossly simplistic ("just say no"). The result: teens who are frighteningly cynical and distrusting about what adults tell them about drugs.

Sex education began with the same basic "abstinence" tenets. During the 1970s, "don't do it" was the predominant message. Then AIDS came, and discussions about teen sexuality began to focus on the practical business of saving lives. One crucial piece of information — condoms reduce the risk of contracting HIV — gave educators the impetus to follow admonitions of abstinence with "harm reduction" information. Reality-based sex education acknowledged the value of postponing sexual activity. It also provided young people with the how-tos of avoiding sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancy.

Today's drug-education programs face the same abstinence-vs.-safety dilemma. No one wants teens to use drugs, yet government surveys indicate that by the time they reach their senior year of high school, 88% claim that marijuana is "fairly easy or very easy" to obtain. "Harder" drugs such as heroin are available as well and are cheaper and more potent than ever.

We are asking young people to abstain in a culture that is hardly "drug free." At a time in our children's lives when they're most amenable to taking risks, we not only insist that they decline, but we also offer no practical information for those 80% of 12th-graders who say "maybe," "sometimes" or "yes" to alcohol and other drugs.

### Prevention is better approach

Parents are terrified that a reality-based, safety-oriented discussion of drugs will lead to experimentation. But the door already is open, just as it is to sexual activity. Our goal ought to be drug-abuse prevention. Teenagers who are determined to experiment need to know which drugs pose the most risks; that mixing certain substances can be deadly; and that driving while under any influence must be avoided.

Young people need comprehensive information that they trust. With science-based knowledge, they will be in a better position to make reasoned decisions. Abstinence continues to be our preference, but the promotion of safety must be our bottom line, just as has been the case with sex education.

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