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OPEN FORUM

A Mother's Advice About Drugs

By *Marsha Rosenbaum*

Marsha Rosenbaum, director of The Lindesmith Center-West, a drug policy institute in San Francisco, wrote this letter to her son, an Urban High School freshman.

DEAR JOHNNY,
This fall you will be entering high school, and like most American teenagers, you'll have to navigate drugs. As most parents, I would prefer that you *not* use drugs. However, I realize that despite my wishes, you might experiment.

I will not use scare tactics to deter you. Instead, having spent the past 25 years researching drug use, abuse and policy, I will tell you a little about what I have learned, hoping this will lead you to make wise choices. My only concern is your health and safety.

When people talk about "drugs," they are generally referring to illegal substances such as marijuana, cocaine, methamphetamine (speed), psychedelic drugs (LSD, Ecstasy, "Schrooms") and heroin.

These are not the only drugs that make you high. Alcohol, cigarettes and many other substances (like glue) cause intoxication of some sort. The fact that one drug or another is illegal does not mean one is better or worse for you. All of them temporarily change the way you perceive things and the way you think.

Some people will tell you that drugs feel good, and that's why they use them. But drugs are not always fun. Cocaine and methamphetamine speed up your heart; LSD can make you feel disoriented; alcohol intoxication impairs driving; cigarette smoking leads to addiction and sometimes lung cancer; and people sometimes die suddenly from taking heroin. Marijuana does not often lead to physical dependence or overdose, but it does alter the way people think, behave and react.

I have tried to give you a short description of the drugs you might encounter. I choose not to try to scare you by distorting information because I want you to have confidence in what I tell you. Although I won't lie to you about their effects, there are many reasons for a person your age to not use drugs or alcohol.

First, being high on marijuana or any other drug often interferes with normal life. It is difficult to retain information while high, so using it — especially daily — affects your ability to learn.

Second, if you think you might try marijuana, please wait until you are older. Adults with drug problems often

started using at a very early age.

Finally, your father and I don't want you to get into trouble. Drug and alcohol use is illegal, and the consequences of being caught are huge. Here in the United States, the number of arrests for possession of marijuana has more than doubled in the past six years. Adults are serious about "zero tolerance." If caught, you could be arrested, expelled from school, barred from playing sports, lose your driver's license, denied a college loan, and/or rejected for college.

Despite my advice to abstain, you may one day choose to experiment. I will say again that this is not a good idea, but if you do, I urge you to learn as much as you can, and use common sense. There are many excellent books and references, including the Internet, that give you credible information about drugs. You can, of course, always talk to me. If I don't know the answers to your questions, I will try to help you find them.

If you are offered drugs, be cautious. Watch how people behave, but understand that everyone responds differently — even to the same substance. If you do decide to experiment, be sure you are surrounded by people you can count upon. Plan your transportation and under

no circumstances drive or get into a car with anyone else who has been using alcohol or other drugs. Call us or any of our close friends any time day or night, and we will pick you up — no questions asked and no consequences.

And please, Johnny, use moderation. It is impossible to know what is contained in illegal drugs because they are not regulated. The majority of fatal overdoses occur because young people do not know the strength of the drugs they consume, or how they combine with other drugs. Please do not participate in drinking contests, which have killed too many young people. Whereas marijuana by itself is not fatal, too much can cause you to become disoriented and sometimes paranoid. And of course, smoking can hurt your lungs, later in life and now.

Johnny, as your father and I have always told you about a range of activities (including sex), think about the consequences of your actions before you act. Drugs are no different. Be skeptical and most of all, be safe.

Love, Mom

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