AS the DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) program moves out of its teenage years and turns 20, it's putting on a new face. In response to a series of negative evaluations during the mid-1990s, the popular program that started in Los Angeles in 1983 went to work to reinvent itself.

Recently, findings from the new DARE were released. In this program, seventh-graders learn that using drugs is socially inappropriate, not the norm, and dangerous. They are then taught how to "just say no." According to researchers, preliminary evaluations are "promising."

I wish, as the mother of a teenager, I could be more encouraged. Evaluations tell us one thing -- that students can regurgitate information. Young people say what they think adults want to hear -- specially about drugs. As with the old DARE, exposure to the program has little to do with what teenagers actually do when confronted with alcohol and other drugs in real life.

DARE didn't work to prevent drug use before, and it is highly unlikely that it will work now. Not because it used cops in the classroom. Not because the lessons weren't sustained. Not because its creators and supporters weren't committed enough.

DARE never stood a chance.

The notion that drug use is socially inappropriate in America today, and not the norm, is ridiculous on its face. Despite proclamations about the value of being "drug-free," Americans regularly imbibe and medicate with a variety of substances such as alcohol, tobacco, caffeine and over-the-counter and prescription drugs. The Journal of the American Medical Association reported that eight out of 10 adults in the U.S. used at least one medication every week, and half took a prescription drug. Nearly one in two American adults uses alcohol regularly. And more than one-third have tried marijuana at some time in their lives -- a fact not lost on their children.

Today's teenagers have also witnessed the increasing "Ritalinization" of their fellow students. As they watch prime-time commercials for drugs to manage generalized anxiety disorder, they see more of their parents turning to anti-depressants to cope. Some psychologists argue that given the nature of our culture, teenage experimentation with substances is normal. It doesn't mean they're bad kids or we're bad parents, simply that we live in America, which is hardly "drug-free."

Our attempt to ensure abstinence by emphasizing the dangers of drugs has backfired over and over again. Teenage, by
definition, is a time of exploration, experimentation, risk-taking and rebellion. Tell a teenage boy that an activity, any activity, is risky, and he is likely to feel challenged rather than deterred. Girls push the envelope, too, often believing that negative implications are uncertain and so far in the future as to be irrelevant.

In her book "Generation Risk," Corky Newton, a tobacco-industry executive, quotes a teenage girl: "When you're a teenager, everybody is, like, 'Oh, don't smoke, be smart.' You're just, like, 'What happens if I smoke? I'm not going to die that second.' Pretty much everyone dies. If you develop cancer, by that time you're already 65 and gross-looking anyway."

Finally, in desperation, our willingness to emphasize and inflate drugs' dangers through prevention programs such as, but certainly not limited to, DARE has produced skepticism. Young people have heard risk and danger messages all their lives -- at home, in school, and on TV. They know adults will say just about anything to convince them to abstain, and they believe little of what we tell them about drugs. Indeed, a majority of American teenagers dismisses our admonitions and experiments with illegal drugs by the time they graduate from high school. A whopping eight out of 10 will have used alcohol before their 18th birthday.

It's time we get real about teenage life in America and structure our drug education programs accordingly. Whether we like it or not, alcohol and marijuana are part of teenage culture. Telling them it just isn't so, when they see it firsthand, is contributing to our credibility problem. Best to acknowledge the reality and work within it than to deny its existence.

Our first job, as parents and educators, is to begin to dig ourselves out of the deep credibility hole we have created out of our fears and our zeal to prevent our teens from using alcohol and other drugs. There are plenty of dangers associated with substance use. We don't need to invent or exaggerate them.

Students need honest, science-based, comprehensive drug education. They should learn to "just say know" when it comes to any choice involving their health. We ought to be equipping students with research skills rather than simplistic resistance techniques. In the end, teenagers will make their own decisions. Even the most vigilant parents can't keep their kids under surveillance at all times.

The new DARE should follow the lead of modern sexuality education, urging abstinence, while acknowledging the reality of teenage life and providing a backup plan that provides sound information, respects young people's intelligence and volition, and ensures their safety.

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http://www.dailynews.com/Stories/0,1413,200%257E20951%257E1027716,00.html

* The title of this article was originally misprinted as “Teach teens to ‘just say no’ to drugs”.