

## AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION

There isn't a child in America who won't be faced with the decision of whether or not to try drugs. The average age teens begin using alcohol is thirteen, and the average age they first try marijuana is fourteen. For nicotine, the average starting age is twelve. Why, because, in America, they are readily available.

We can keep the liquor cabinet locked, the drug dealers in jail and the cigarettes expensive, but what we really need to do is talk to our kids.

Talking to kids about the dangers and risks is important. What they often fail to mention is that substance use damages their developing brains. Findings show that "a child's brain develops twice as many tobacco brain receptors as an adult's brain. This means that children are twice as likely to become lifelong smokers as if they didn't use nicotine until they were adults."

The brain is the most precious of bodily organs because, like a computer, it manages all our physical circuitry; how we reason, how we behave, how we have relationships, how we plan our future and how our body will operate throughout our lifetime. Substance use is like throwing water on the circuit board. We won't know the extent of the damage until it dries out.

Studies of substance abuse and the affects on the brain, its links to mental, emotional and future addiction issues, are well known. Substance use impacts adolescent brain maturation and development, period. In a Dakota County Health report, "*The adolescent brain gets addicted more easily and younger brains are particularly vulnerable to the damaging affects of alcohol and other drugs. Brain damage is greatest among youth who begin using at younger ages and who continue using for long periods of time.*" The report also notes: "*Serotonin, the brain's naturally occurring mood stabilizer, is at its lowest level during teen years. Low levels of*

*serotonin cause young people to act impulsively and engage in risky behaviors.*” Risk taking is part of being a teen. Drinking and doing drugs are just risks they cannot afford to take.

It is also well known that “alcohol mimics GABA, the brain’s natural tranquilizer, giving the user relief from anxiety.” It’s estimated that eighty percent of teens in treatment for chemical dependency have an underlying anxiety disorder. Alcohol also shuts down the hippocampus, which is responsible for memory. Marijuana damages the hippocampus too, also resulting in memory loss and difficulty concentrating. The hippocampus can be permanently damaged from using significant amounts of alcohol or marijuana. Youth who drink alcohol also show more signs of depression and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

In America, the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) found 66.5% of high school seniors reported drinking alcohol and 31.5% reported using marijuana in the last twelve months.

We have some talking to do. But no matter what educational foundation we lay down for our youth, experimentation with drugs can happen. For those who don’t listen, we hope it won’t be too late. Because, although there is treatment available to those who suffer with addictions, we never know if treatment will be successful, if they will avoid permanent physical or psychological damage, or if they live long enough to have any options at all.

That same Dakota County report concludes with “teenagers who say they’ve learned a lot about the risks of drugs from their parents are much less likely to try illegal drugs, than those who say they’ve learned nothing from them.”

If you don’t know how to begin talking with your kids go to [www.parentstheantidrug.org](http://www.parentstheantidrug.org)

### **Gary Swoboda**

Author of *Hungry Tigers: A Candid Account of Addiction and Recovery*, is in recovery from addiction and has suffered the loss of two sons to addiction-related causes. He writes: “*These boys were beautiful, loving, kind human beings whose lives were senselessly cut short. And*

*though the pain of their losses will never completely leave us, we hope that their memories can be kept alive through carrying a message of prevention and recovery to those still here.”*

For more information, please visit his website at: [www.garyswoboda.com](http://www.garyswoboda.com).

\* The GGAPP (Greater Gresham Area Prevention Partnership), works to “Build a Drug Free Community Future”. Please visit their website at [www.ggapp.org](http://www.ggapp.org).

**Sources for this article:**

The Dakota County Health Department

Barbara Strauch, “The Primal Teen”

Ken Winters, “Adolescent Brain Development and Drug Abuse”