

## EDUCATORS: Maximizing Your Role as a Teen Influencer

There's a new drug of choice among teens these days; and it's as close as the nearest medicine cabinet.

While the rates of tobacco, alcohol and illicit drug abuse are down overall, more and more teens are abusing prescription drugs. One in five teens (or 4.5 million) report using prescription medication recreationally either to get high or because they believe these medications might help mitigate stress or depression. It's surprisingly easy for teens to get their hands on prescription drugs from their families' medicine cabinets, someone's purse or even a schoolmate's locker.

Schools are uniquely positioned to identify and help prevent prescription and over-the-counter drug abuse among teens. Whether you are a teacher, athletic coach, librarian, guidance counselor or other school-based mentor, you can take steps to help prevent prescription drug abuse.

### Educators & Schools Matter

Students spend at least 7 hours at school each day; for some students this is actually more time than they spend with their parents.

For students who don't have strong support at home, school may be the only place they have a supportive adult to speak to.

Because adolescents can sometimes "tune out" their parents, teachers have the chance to make a connection and reinforce healthy life choices. A teen may roll their eyes at a parent, but may listen to a teacher they trust.

Teachers and coaches are often the ones who overhear Monday morning conversations about the weekend's activities. Teens often speak more freely in front of teachers or coaches than parents.

Teachers and coaches may see behavior changes before parents do—a slip in academic or athletic performance, acting out in class or unexplained absences—and can intervene early.

*The best lesson you can give is helping teens know how to make healthy life choices and avoid prescription drug abuse and other high-risk behaviors. Teachers, coaches, administrators and other school-based educators can make a difference.*

## 10 Things You Can Do to Make a Difference

Below are some strategies to help in your efforts to educate teens and other teen influencers about teen prescription drug abuse and help mobilize your school and local community to take steps to prevent prescription drug abuse.

No matter what your role in the school, it's important to look for teachable moments—a window of time to increase awareness of the problem and relay important drug prevention messages. Whether it's in the hallway, on the field or during other after-school activities, take advantage of opportunities to educate teens about the dangers of prescription drugs and promote healthy alternatives. Even a brief conversation can help steer a teen in the right direction.

All schools are different. Check with your school's administration and guidance department before implementing these ideas.

1. **Get on the health or science education agenda.** Talk with the health education/wellness and science teachers, student assistance coordinators or school nurses at your school to make sure they include information about the dangers of misusing or abusing prescription drugs as part of their regular drug and alcohol prevention classes. Inform or remind your colleagues that prescription drugs have become the new drug of choice. More teens are abusing prescription medications than any illicit drug, except marijuana, and they are every bit as dangerous. The most commonly abused prescription drugs are strong pain medications like hydrocodone (Vicodin, Lortab) and oxycodone (Percocet, OxyContin), sedatives including Ritalin or Adderall or stimulants like Valium or Xanax.

Suggest that they make this an interactive activity, by presenting statements and asking students to indicate whether they are true or false (either with a thumbs up or down or standing up or remaining seated—this will help to avoid making it too personal). For example, "Prescription drugs are prescribed by doctors so using them even if it's not your medicine is safe. True or false?" Then give the correct answer and have teens talk about why it isn't safe. You could also consider conducting a classroom debate.

2. **Leverage your role as a mentor.** For example, if you serve as an advisor to students as part of homeroom or other mentoring program, you've probably already established a rapport and trust with these students. Try to talk about the issue of prescription drug abuse one-on-one or as a small group. You may want to start the dialogue by asking:
  - Has anyone asked if you (or your parents or grandparents) have any leftover prescription medications that they can have or buy?
  - Have you ever shared your medication with a friend?

- What do you and your friends do after school? At parties?
- Do any of your classmates use prescription drugs? Which ones?

If you do this exercise as a group, give them the option of sharing their answers aloud or by writing them on a piece of paper so their responses are anonymous.

- 3. Team up with student clubs that promote healthy decisions and behaviors.** Student-led groups like Student Against Descriptive Decisions (SADD) or peer counseling can help champion the issue of combating prescription drug abuse and may be willing to display educational materials during open houses, school orientations and health fairs. Visit [www.talkaboutrx.org](http://www.talkaboutrx.org) to download brochures and find other helpful resources.
- 4. Extend the lesson.** Offer to present the *Maximizing Your Role as a Teen Influencer* workshop at an upcoming staff training or Parent Teacher Association meeting so more teen influencers are in the know and can help make a difference.
- 5. Power of coaching.** Whether its varsity or JV athletics, coaches and athletes spend many hours together on the field. It's no surprise that coaches have more consistent opportunities to share drug prevention messages and may see changes in behaviors or mood early on. Because they are such strong role models for impressionable teens, coaches need to be aware of the trend toward misusing or abusing prescription drugs and educate their players.
  - Talk to athletes who show signs of prescription drug abuse or who you suspect are engaged in other high-risk behaviors (See *Teen Prescription Drug Abuse: Warning Signs and Symptoms* handout).
  - Take the opportunity to tell parents about this issue during pre-season meetings. You can keep it as simple as "I hope you are all aware of the growing problem of prescription drug abuse. Every teen is at-risk and they are finding these drugs in the medicine cabinet at home or through other relatives or peers."
  - Make sure that prescription drug abuse is included (along with alcohol, steroids and illicit substances) as part of the written or verbal code of conduct you have with athletes and hold kids accountable. It's important to follow through in disciplining any breaks in conduct, even with "star" players.
- 6. Listen up and intervene if needed.** If you overhear students talking about "pharming" parties or a specific student abusing prescription or other drugs, report this to the guidance department or administration and find out how best to handle the situation. If appropriate, join the conversation to correct misinformation and warn them about the dangers of abusing these medications (See *Myth Busters: 6 Misunderstanding about Teen Prescription Drug Abuse* handout).
- 7. Be a resource to parents and teens.** Alert parents to the growing problem of teen abuse of prescription drugs and refer them to the handouts, as well as other anti-drug resources (see the listing of *Resources*). Talk with parents about monitoring, safely storing and disposing prescription medications at their home and those of older relatives,

who may be taking multiple medications. Remind parents and your students that there is help within the school. Guidance counselors, school social workers, psychologists and nurses are on hand to talk with students and lend their support. These professionals can also get to the root of the problem, identifying the true motivation for using these drugs and being on the lookout for problematic behaviors.

8. **Take action locally.** Stay current about the prescription drug abuse problem, as well as any local efforts to promote drug-free, safe schools. Many states have coalitions working on these issues. You can find out if there is one in your area by contacting the Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA) at [www.cadca.org](http://www.cadca.org) or the Partnership for a Drug-Free America at [www.drugfree.org](http://www.drugfree.org). Remember that religious and community organizations that are already working with teens and their families can also help spread the word to parents and other teen influencers (e.g., Boys & Girls Clubs, YMCA/YWCA).
9. **Pay attention to the signs.** Whether you're a teacher, librarian, coach, guidance counselor or school security guard, being observant and noticing changes in student behavior and attitude is part of the job. If you suspect something isn't quite right with one of your students, pull him or her aside to find out what might be going on in his or her life. You may want to ask questions like "What's going on today?" or "How come you seem so distracted?" Keep a cheat sheet on the signs and symptoms of prescription drug abuse handy so that you know what to look for (See *Warning Signs and Symptoms of Prescription Drug Abuse*).
10. **Enlist your Title IV representatives.** Federal Title IV funding allocates money to programming and outreach for safe and drug-free schools. Educate your Title IV representatives about the growing teen prescription drug abuse problem. Enlist their help to promote prescription drug education in your local school district. Find out if they are having a meeting at which you or they could present the *Maximizing Your Role as a Teen Influencer* workshop.

For more information, visit [www.talkaboutrx.org](http://www.talkaboutrx.org) to download additional materials including brochures, checklists and more. Here you will also find a list of helpful resources and programs to enhance your efforts to stop teen prescription drug abuse.

## FROM THE TOP DOWN

**Don't forget to engage and enlist a champion within your school's administration. Make sure this person is in the know about the problem of prescription drug abuse among teens. Urge that additional steps are taken by the school system to help inform other teen influencers, including faculty and parents. Ask whether**

- The school includes prescription drug abuse as part of its survey of students so this information can be tracked and quantified.
- A prevention message about teen prescription drug abuse can be sent to the faculty via list serv or posted to a staff-only Intranet
- Prescription drug abuse can be incorporated into the school/district policy and implemented consistently
- The superintendent can address the issue in his or her newsletter to parents
- Administration can review the current health education curriculum for elementary, middle school and high schools in district and integrate the misuse and abuse of prescription drugs into alcohol and drug prevention lessons