

# Adult Attitudes and Hidden Heroes

## Two Overlooked Keys to the Problem of Student Alcohol and Other Drug Use

By Renee Soulis and Alex Packer, Ph.D.

As we struggle with the problem of adolescent drug-taking, we often neglect to consider the impact of our own values, attitudes, and beliefs on teenagers' decisions and behaviors. It's pretty easy to know where we stand on kids smoking crack, shooting heroin, or sniffing glue. But very few of our students are using "hard" drugs. They're using tobacco, marijuana, and alcohol. Yet many of us are unsure as to our own feelings and attitudes toward teenage use of these substances.

Consider the following questions:

- Is it all right for a five-year-old to have a sip of wine at the dinner table?
- Is it all right for a 16-year-old to have a glass of wine on special occasions with her parents? How about every night as part of a civilized, meal-time ritual? Does it make a difference if she's French?
- Is there anything wrong with a high school junior getting stoned two or three times a month as long as he's doing well socially, emotionally, and academically?
- Should schools be able to randomly test students for illegal drug use?
- Should schools be able to randomly test *teachers* for illegal drug use?
- Your son has several college friends spending Thanksgiving vacation with him. They're all underage, but, as long as they don't leave the house, would you mind if they had a few beers?
- When kids have a "designated driver", does it encourage them to use alcohol irresponsibly?
- Is it hypocritical for a boarding school to claim to act *in loco parentis* and then establish a "zero tolerance" policy towards drinking?
- Should schools look the other way as far as student smoking is concerned as long as drinking and other drug use is minimal?

If you were to pose these questions at a faculty meeting, the debate would rage for hours. Agreement would be unlikely. But how do *you* feel? Uncertain? Conflicted? When we're not sure where we stand as educators and parents, we give children mixed messages. We may even inadvertently reinforce or glamorize the use of chemicals.

How?

- A new father hands out chocolate cigars to his pre-teen nieces and nephews.
- We call the time adults start to drink "Happy Hour".
- A restaurant serves kids drinks with parasols that look just like grown-up drinks.
- Movies portray drinking and pot smoking as the norm for cool kids.
- Mom comes home from a hard day at work and says, "Boy, do I need a drink!"

Several years ago, Renee Soulis was teaching the Freedom from Chemical Dependency (FCD) four-day course when a faculty member came up to her. He seemed anxious to unburden himself and began to relate an incident that was troubling him. "I was with some kids in my dorm and they were asking me about the Vietnam War. I told them about the lottery and how I'd just left school and was terrified of being drafted. But then I got my number and it was 324! I was ecstatic. So the kids asked me what I did. I said, 'I went out and got bombed.'"

Renee agreed with this teacher that getting bombed to celebrate good fortune was not necessarily the best message to send to a group of high school students.

"But that's not the worst of it," he said. "I never even *got* bombed! I made it up."

In exploring this incident, the teacher realized he wanted the students to think he was "cool." He was envious of the bonding that occurs through the adolescent use of chemicals - an experience he had never had.

This example shows one way in which school faculty and staff may inadvertently encourage alcohol and other drug use. But there are many others:

- Denying that the problem exists
- Covering up incidents to protect the school's reputation
- Avoiding locations where smoking, drinking, and other drug use are known to occur
- Hearing about off-campus parties and under-age drinking and not speaking up
- Failing to create clear policies and procedures
- Enforcing rules and applying penalties inconsistently (i.e., favorable treatment of children of trustees, benefactors, alumni and/or faculty)
- Developing confusing "on-campus" and "off-campus" policies
- Serving alcohol at school events (which may include students and underage alumni)
- Permitting students to keep their own prescription medications
- Allowing students to insert "drug pictures" into yearbooks, dress up as bongos or joints for school Halloween parties, or simulate drug-taking in school plays
- Allowing drug related symbols on clothing or in dorm rooms
- Failing to intervene on faculty members with drinking problems.

That is not to say that schools should ban alcohol from alumni events, test all students for drugs, or censor student creativity if it contains references to illegal drinking or drug use. But any school seeking to establish an effective drug education program must know how it feels about the issues raised by the above list. For example:

- How is trust best built in a community?
- How do you balance the school's interest in maintaining a drug-free community with students' rights to privacy, creative expression, and freedom of speech?
- To what extent is a student's off-campus behavior the school's business?
- What responsibility do faculty, staff, and alumni have for modeling appropriate behavior?

These are questions that can only be answered by each school community. But they must be asked. Otherwise, we remain unaware of the ways in which our own family histories, and past and present-day experiences with alcohol and other drugs influence our policy making, disciplinary measures, and relationships with students.

### **Finding the Hidden Heroes**

Another overlooked prevention strategy concerns the identification and encouragement of young people who don't use alcohol or drugs.

An FCD teacher once asked a group of fourth graders, "When do adults drink?"

"When they take their coats off," a boy replied.

Unsure what he meant, the teacher asked him to explain. "Whenever anyone comes to our house, my father says, 'May I take your coat and would you like a drink?'"

This father may not realize that he is sending a message that says *alcohol is part of every adult social interaction in this household.*

Of course, there's nothing wrong with moderate and responsible adult drinking, and at FCD we take pains to point this out. But we do wonder why the third of adults who *don't* drink are so invisible. Why aren't kids getting equal exposure to a message that says *if you choose not to drink, this is also normal and rewarding?*

There *are* kids who choose not to use. But you may not know who they are. This is because they are often embarrassed and ashamed of their decision. They have never been told that their choice is valued and respected.

There are many reasons why students choose not to use:

- Peer group attitudes
- Parental expectations
- Effective drug education
- Prior trouble with drugs
- Tragedy and/or family disintegration linked to substance abuse

Whenever we ask a group of kids why they choose to abstain, they say things like:

- "A friend of mine was killed driving drunk."
- "My father is an alcoholic and I never want to be like him."
- "My parents don't drink and that's just how I've been brought up."
- "My first group of friends didn't use."
- "I've learned how drugs can mess you up."
- "I don't like the feeling."
- "I don't want to lose privileges."
- "I don't want to disappoint my parents/coach/team."
- "I enjoy being my own person and not following what everyone else does."
- "There's too much I want to do to waste time getting high."

Students who choose not to use can feel isolated and marginalized. Inquiring minds constantly want to know why they don't drink. Peers label them as nerdy, goody-goody, uptight, and self-righteous. They are judged for their choice. A student once confided to us that when she told her father she didn't drink, he responded, "You've always been so square I figured you wouldn't."

Students who choose not to use are excluded from social activities that revolve around chemical use - or are sworn to conspiratorial silence. These kids have to learn how to have fun (or at least *look* like they're having fun) while hanging out with intoxicated friends. They have to deal with the stresses of adolescence without the "aid" of drugs. They are placed on the defensive by cultural attitudes and behaviors. They are constantly asking themselves:

- How responsible am I for stopping my friends from doing stupid things when they are drunk or high?
- If I go to a party and I'm the only one who isn't drinking, do I *have* to drive everyone home?
- What do I say when people ask me why I don't drink?
- Why do people think *I'm* weird just because I don't throw up every Friday night?
- If I'm with people who are getting stoned, am I just as guilty even if I don't smoke?
- Why do *I* have to go to the library just because my roommate wants to party?

Recent research conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health reveals an alarming rate of binge drinking among college students. Until now, media attention and intervention efforts have focused on the harm binge drinkers cause for themselves: hangovers, accidents, academic trouble, unplanned or unprotected sexual activity, etc. Recently, however, attention has been drawn to the serious problems binge drinkers cause for others: having one's property damaged, having one's sleep or studying disturbed, getting into a fight or argument, being a victim of sexual assault or unwanted sexual advances, having to "baby-sit" a drunken friend or roommate.

While this is not to suggest that the problem at the primary and secondary level is of the same magnitude as that on college campuses, the focus of intervention efforts on *users* has been similar.

Consider how much time you spend at faculty meetings talking about students who are in trouble with alcohol and other drugs; how much time you spend discussing policies and disciplinary measures for dealing with drinking and drug-taking infractions. Now consider *how much time you spend creating ways to support students who contribute to the health of your school community by choosing not to use.*

It is more important than ever that school administrators develop comprehensive prevention and intervention strategies, not only to deal with substance abuse, but to *support students who opt for drug-free lifestyles.* In the same way that non-smokers have the right to a smoke-free environment, students who choose not to drink have the right to attend school without being harassed, hurt, intimidated, compromised, or disturbed by the drinking and drug-taking behavior of their peers.

How can school communities support and encourage non-use of alcohol and other drugs?

- Encourage adults who don't use to reveal and celebrate their choice.
- Implement comprehensive drug prevention and education programs.
- Develop groups such as SALSA (Students Advocating Life without Substance Abuse). \*
- Organize "lock-up" parties.
- Address some of the contributory factors to alcohol and other drug use (e.g., anxiety, isolation, depression, poor social and refusal skills) through health services, counseling, and course offerings.
- Consider non-use contracts for athletes and others who represent the school.
- Have coaches talk to athletes about their influence as role models.
- Incorporate recovering people into drug education programs.
- Avoid preaching and/or moralizing. Focus on drug use as a health issue.
- Run "confidentiality groups" in which students can discuss their use and/or non-use.
- Provide a means by which students in trouble who take the initiative to help themselves and/or their friends can do so without incurring disciplinary penalties.
- Train teachers, advisors, and dorm prefects to reinforce non-use as a healthy norm, and to recognize the subtle ways in which drinking is condoned or winked at.
- Create a structure by which all students can find adult mentors and advisors with whom they can develop close and continuing relationships.
- Maintain an active student assistance group that actually intervenes when it suspects or identifies a problem.
- Reinforce non-use by adhering to penalties and disciplinary measures laid out for infractions.
- Let drug-free kids show new students around.
- Make sure that all candidates for admission understand and agree to abide by the school's drug policies.
- Sponsor lots of "alternative high" nights.
- Verbalize your school's respect and gratitude for students who choose not to use.

It is hard to imagine a more serious problem threatening our schools and students than alcohol and other drug use. But if we can clarify our own values and attitudes, and enlist the support of the brave students in our schools who choose not to use, we will continue to make progress in our efforts to encourage young people to make intelligent, healthy choices for themselves.

\*For more information on the mission and activities of SALSA, contact the FCD office at the phone number and address below.

Renee Soulis is director of client relations at FCD Educational Services, Inc., a nonprofit organization that has been providing alcohol, tobacco, and other drug education to schools in the United States and abroad for over 20 years. Dr. Alex Packer is president of FCD and the author of *How Rude! The Teenager's Guide to Good Manners, Proper Behavior, and Not Grossing People Out* and *Highs! Over 150 Ways to Feel Really, REALLY Good...Without Alcohol or Other Drugs*. FCD believes that the issues raised in this article are of critical importance to parents, faculty, and school administrators. If you are interested in having FCD speak at your school or work with your school community, please contact us at 398 Walnut Street, Newton, MA 02460; (617) 964-9300; Fax: (617) 964-9449; Email: [info@fcd.org](mailto:info@fcd.org); or through our web site: [www.fcd.org](http://www.fcd.org).

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