



CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Prescription meds can pose temptation to kids

By Jane Sutter

When parents worry about where their kids might get drugs for recreational use, their own homes or their kids' friends may not be top of mind.

Yet prescription medicines can be a temptation for an adolescent seeking to alter his or her feelings or looking for a way to make some extra cash.

The Monroe County Youth Risk Behavior Report for the 2021-22 school year, prepared by the county's Department of Public Health, asked more than 19,000 public school students about their usage of drugs and other risky behaviors. The survey revealed:

- 8.4 percent of respondents had misused prescription pain, sedative and or simulant medicine.
- 5 percent had misused pain medicine (such as OxyContin, Hydrocodone, Percocet).
- 4.6 percent had misused stimulant medicine (such as Adderall, Ritalin and other medicine for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder).
- 2.1 percent had misused prescription sedative medicine (such as Xanax, Zannie bars, Klonopin, K-pins and Valium).
- 2.5 percent had taken an over-the-counter drug to get high.

While the number of adolescents misusing prescription drugs is lower than the number using alcohol or marijuana, according to local and national surveys, there are still medical dangers involved. Robyn Oster, senior research



associate at the national non-profit Partnership to End Addiction, noted in an email interview with *Safe Environment* that barbiturates (prescription sedatives) and benzodiazepines (prescription tranquilizers) slow normal brain function, which may result in slurred speech, shallow breathing, sluggishness, fatigue, disorientation, lack of coordination and dilated pupils. Higher doses can cause impaired memory, judgement and coordination, irritability, paranoia and thoughts of suicide.

On the other hand, stimulants increase blood pressure and heart rate, constrict blood

vessels, increase blood glucose and increase breathing, which can cause rapid or irregular heartbeat, delirium, panic, psychosis, paranoia and heart failure, Oster stated.

"These risks exist for both adolescents and adults who misuse prescription drugs," Oster said. "However, many of the risks are heightened in adolescents and young adults, whose brains are not fully developed. A younger age of initiation of substance use increases the risk for addiction."

Ignorance about substances

Leah Hill spends a lot of time with teens and young adults in her role as a clinical/engagement specialist/senior chemical dependency counselor for the Strong Recovery Adolescent and Young Adult Program at the University of Rochester Medical Center. She also is on site at Fairport High School one day a week as a consultant for different cases involving students.

While the misuse of prescription drugs to get high isn't as prevalent among adolescents as is using cannabis, which contains THC (tetrahydrocannabinol), Hill said, it's not unusual for

Practical advice for parents:

As a parent, teach your teen to:

- **Respect** the power of medicine and use it properly.
- **Recognize** that all medicines, including prescription medications, have risks along with benefits. The risks tend to increase dramatically when medicines are abused.
- Take **responsibility** for learning how to take prescription medicines safely and appropriately, and seek help at the first sign of a problem for their own or a friend's abuse.

Source: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration SAMSA also has many helpful resources for parents and teens.

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such drugs to come up in a screening.

Recently, Hill has seen a spike in TCH, fentanyl and amphetamines showing up in drug tests. The adolescents screened “don’t use fentanyl or amphetamines as far as they know, so they are equally as shocked by the outcome as I am when I look at the results of the urine screen” and see these other substances showing up.

The young person is surprised, Hill said, because they think they are only ingesting THC through a cartridge or vaping pen, and the drug fentanyl comes up in their drug screen along with the THC.

With all the information available about the dangers of misusing opioids and opioid addiction, Hill said that she and her colleagues have seen a significant decrease in opioid use among adolescents. “Kids are not fools; they are aware enough to know that (opioid addiction) is a problem.” Consequently, Hill and her colleagues have seen a shift and see more misuse of benzodiazepines like Xanax and stimulants like Adderall.

Adolescents may be ordering products online or getting them through friends or other people, and they don’t know where the products are coming from, Hill said. “They don’t know what’s in it, if it’s been tampered with, if it’s pure, etc. and they’re ingesting these substances with no idea of about what is actually being consumed.”

How teens get meds

Still, an easily accessible place to get meds may be in the home, so that’s why it’s imperative that parents are vigilant about how prescription drugs are stored and dispensed, both Oster and Hill said.

“Parents should ensure that both over-the-counter and prescription medications are kept out of sight and out of reach of children and are secured in a safe place adolescents and others cannot access them,” Oster said. “Helping adolescents receive needed mental health care and develop positive coping strategies for stress can help avoid diversion of prescription medications for this purpose.”

Hill noted that parents may be taking a medication such as Xanax or Prozac, of which their kids are unaware, which is another reason to lock the meds up. “Even if they (medications) are prescribed by a doctor and they are used and taken as needed by the person that they’ve been prescribed to, there’s still the opportunity for an adolescent to find their way to that particular pill or drug and just give it a try. They may find that they like it.” Hill said that she recommends locking up prescriptions because it’s something that parents have control over.

Once a kid goes to school, parents can’t control what they’re being introduced to or what they have access to. “Start at home, create that safe space by managing those medications, and you cut off an access point,” Hill stated.

How should parents handle medicines that have been prescribed to older adolescents (such as those in high school) to treat ADHD, anxiety, depression, etc.?

Hill noted that this is an opportunity for parents to teach responsibility. Even if a parent trusts the teenager to take the medication as prescribed, the parents should still keep an eye on how many pills are in the prescription. “Because it’s really easy for a kid to skim off the top, especially if they want to make some extra money, to use for other recreational things. A lot of times the kids who are prescribed and actually need those medications aren’t abusing them themselves; it is an opportunity for them to move that product through their friends, through the school ...” So parents should have conversations about responsibility and the potential consequences of engaging in that type of behavior.

Students also find it easy to get prescription medicines to abuse. In a national survey of students conducted in grades eight, 10 and 12 in 2021, by an agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, many adolescents said that prescription drugs would be “fairly easy” or “very easy” to get. Among 12th-graders, 18.7 percent said it would be easy to get narcotics other than heroin; 29.4 percent said it would be easy to get amphetamines; 16.3 percent said sedatives; and 25.5 percent said tranquilizers.

A different survey, the 2020 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, sponsored by the federal government, showed that 51 percent of adolescents who misused prescription pain relievers in the past year said the pain relievers for their most recent misuse were given to them, bought from, or stolen from a friend or relative. While this survey was taken in 2019 with results published in 2020, there’s no doubt the opportunity to purchase drugs online has grown since then.

Hill describes the online market for getting substances as “crazy.” She recently talked to a young man who uses an app that’s similar to a food-delivery app; he orders the product via the app and gets it delivered that way. “So the accessibility of these substances has increased significantly.”

What about pain medication?

Playing sports is often a big part of an adolescent’s life, and that means injuries and broken bones can happen. Doctors may pre-

scribe a painkiller such as an opioid. This is an opportunity for parents to express concerns and to monitor the prescription for their child. “Prescription medications have important uses and can be critical to treatment when used as prescribed and directed,” Oster said. “However, when taken in a dose or duration or for reasons other than that prescribed, they can be dangerous. Prescribers should limit their prescriptions to the lowest dose and duration possible to treat the problem, while minimizing other risks. Parents and adolescents should discuss the risks of prescription medications and the risk factors for addiction with their providers.”

Parents and adolescents should let their doctor know about risk factors such as a family history of addiction, prior substance use or addiction, mental health concerns, etc., according to Oster. “Parents should also discuss the risks with their children. When adolescents are prescribed a prescription medication, parents should monitor use and make sure that any unused medication is safely disposed.”

Both Hill and Oster encourage parents to talk with their children in an age-appropriate way about the dangers of misusing prescription drugs (or any drug for that matter).

“Our kids are going to do what they are going to do, and we should expect them to be curious because their pre-frontal cortex, their decision-making (part of the brain), isn’t fully developed yet,” Hill said. “They’re going to explore, they’re going to have questions, they are going to want to try things but that doesn’t mean we cannot armor them with some facts about the nature of substances, their own family history and the risks that are involved.”

Oster stated that parents have the largest influence over their children’s decision and actions when it comes to substance use. “Parents should initiate conversations with their children at a young age and have frequent, open, honest conversations with teens. Parents should ensure these conversations include the dangers of prescription drug misuse. Parents should also model safe and appropriate behavior around use of medications and try not to convey that they ‘need’ a pill to relax, reduce stress, have fun, or cope.”

Finally, parents should consider why their adolescents are trying prescription pain meds, other substances or alcohol. Most likely, they want to change the way they are feeling, to find relief from anxiety or depression. Hill said she tells teens that “usage is almost always a symptom for something else if they are starting to use habitually.”

Jane Sutter is a Rochester-area freelance writer.

Being mindful of medications:

The Social Institute

The Partnership to End Addiction offers these three steps to monitor, secure and properly dispose of unused and expired prescription and over-the-counter medicine in your home.

1. Monitor:

How aware are you of the prescription medications currently in your home? Would you know if some of your pills were missing? From this day forward, make sure you can honestly answer yes.

Start by taking note of how many pills are in each of your prescription bottles or pill packets, and keep track of refills. This goes for your own medicine, as well as for your kids and other members of the household. If you find you need to refill your medicine more often than expected, that could indicate a problem.

If your child has been prescribed medicine, be sure you control its use by monitoring dosages and refills. You need to be especially vigilant with medicine known to be addictive and commonly abused such as opioids (prescription pain relievers), benzodiazepines (sedatives and anti-anxiety medications) and stimulants (ADHD medications).

Make sure your friends, parents of your child's friends, neighbors and relatives — especially grandparents — are also aware of the risks. Encourage them to regularly monitor the medicine in their homes as well.

2. Secure

Approach securing your prescriptions the same way you would other valuables in your home, like jewelry or cash. There's no shame in helping protect those items, and the same holds true for your medicine.

Remove prescriptions from the medicine cabinet and secure them in a place only you know about. If possible, keep all medicine, both prescription and over-the-counter, in a safe place, such as a locked cabinet your teen cannot access.

3. Dispose:

Safely disposing of expired or unused medicine is critical to helping protect your kids, family and home. And it decreases the opportunity for visitors in your home, like your kids' friends, to misuse medicine as well. The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation offers tips on this topic and has a link to an interactive map to find drop-off locations near you.

The Partnership to End Addiction has numerous resources. Here are links to a few:

- Talking With Your Kids and What to Say to Prevent Medicine Misuse
- PARENT TALK KIT: Tips for Talking and What to Say to Prevent Drug and Alcohol Abuse

- **General "Get Support" link:** <https://drugfree.org/get-support/>
 - **Partnership Helpline:** <https://drugfree.org/article/get-one-on-one-help/>
 - **On-Line Zoom-based parent support meeting:** <https://drugfree.org/article/online-support-community-for-parents-caregivers/>
 - **Automated text messaging program (Help & Hope by Text):** <https://drugfree.org/get-help-hope-by-text/>
 - **Spanish Language text messaging program:** <https://drugfree.org/recursos-en-espanol/recibe-ayuda/>
- **Risk Assessment Tool for parents:** <https://drugfree.org/substance-use-risk-assessment/>



Watch for These Warning Signs of Abuse in Minors

No longer wants to see a **particular person** they had been close to

Declining **academic** performance

Tries to hide use of **technology**

No longer interested in **activities** they used to enjoy

Changes in **personality**

Demonstrates **aggressive behavior** or constantly angry

Tries to get minors **alone**



Commits physical and emotional **boundary violations**

Withdraws from family or friends

Keeps **secrets** with minors

Gives lavish **gifts** to minors

Allows or encourages minors to **break laws** or rules

Is overly interested in **spending time** with minors

Has **inappropriate** or suggestive conversations with minors

Does not believe the **rules** apply to them (or, does not follow rules or protocols)

Takes **photos** without approval, or asks minors to send them photos

... and These Warning Signs of Perpetrators



ROMAN CATHOLIC
DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER

Creating a Safe Environment Newsletter

is published quarterly by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester with the aim of helping all of us keep children and vulnerable adults safe at home, at church and in all places in our community.

Comments can be directed to:

Tammy Sylvester,
Diocesan Coordinator
of Safe Environment Education
and Compliance,
585-328-3228
or Tammy.Sylvester@dor.org.

Victims of sexual abuse by any employee of the Church should always report to the civil authorities.

To report a case of possible sexual abuse and to receive help and guidance from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester, contact the diocesan Victim Assistance Coordinator:

Deborah Housel
(585) 328-3228, ext. 1555;
toll-free 1-800-388-7177,
ext. 1555
victimassistance@dor.org.

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ADDITIONAL SAFETY RESOURCES

ONLINE SAFETY RESOURCES

CHILDREN & TEENS' SAFETY SITES:

Webonauts Internet Academy:

<http://pbskids.org/webonauts/>

PBS Kids game that helps younger children understand the basics of Internet behavior and safety.

NSTeens:

<http://www.nsteens.org/>

A program of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children that has interactive games and videos on a variety of Internet safety topics.

FOR PARENTS:

Common Sense Media

<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/parent-concerns>

A comprehensive and frequently updated site that is packed with resources. Dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing information and education

Darkness to Light organization:

www.d2l.org

Darkness to Light is a non-profit committed to empowering adults to prevent child sexual abuse.

Family Online Safety Institute:

<http://www.fosi.org/>

iKeepSafe:

<http://www.ikeepSAFE.org/>

Resources for parents, educators, kids and parishes on navigating mobile and social media technologies

LOCAL RESOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Bivona Child Advocacy Center

(Monroe, Wayne counties):

www.BivonaCAC.org

585-935-7800

Chemung County Child Advocacy Center:

607-737-8449

www.chemungcounty.com

Child Advocacy Center of Cayuga County:

315-253-9795

www.cacofcayugacounty.org

Finger Lakes Child Advocacy Program

(Ontario County):

www.cacfingerlakes.org

315-548-3232

STEBEN COUNTY: Southern Tier Children's Advocacy Center:

www.sthcs.org

716-372-8532

NYS State Central Registry

(Child Abuse Reporting Hotline):

1-800-342-3720

NYS Child Advocacy Resource and Consultation Center (CARCC)

866-313-3013

Tompkins County Advocacy Center:

www.theadvocacycenter.org

607-277-3203

Wyoming County Sexual Abuse Response Team:

585-786-8846

Yates County Child Abuse Review Team:

315-531-3417, Ext. 6