

CURRENT TRENDS IN ADOLESCENT SUBSTANCE USE TODAY

Presented by David Rosenker

About the Presenter

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GENERATION'S ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS

Trends in adolescent substance use relate directly to generational attitudes and beliefs. Each generation is influenced by the cultural norms of their group. During this session, the participants were divided up according to their generation and surveyed as to their use of alcohol and other drugs in high school and the frequency that they experienced divorce in their nuclear families of origin. The survey data is included in the discussion of each generation named below.

THE WORLD WAR II GENERATION

The World War II generation, commonly referred to as the GI generation, graduated high school between 1929 and 1944. This is the Hoover/Roosevelt years and individuals in this group are now between the ages of 72 and 89. Divorce in their families of origin was uncommon for this generation and this generation holds the prevailing attitude of - you made your bed and you lie in it. Although this group no longer is parenting adolescent children of their own they may be raising their grandchildren for various reasons. Either because their parents are fed up with them, the parents are deceased or the parents are otherwise not available. Typically, this group does not relate to the issues of substance abuse and divorce and frequently blames the current generation's problems on not having control over their kids.

THE SILENT/COLD WAR GENERATION

The next group is the silent/cold war generation. They are high school graduates from between 1945 and 1963. This is the Truman/Kennedy years and they are now between the ages

of 55 and 73. While seniors in high school this group reported that those who drank alcohol were around 10 – 15% and 0-5% smoked marijuana. Less than 1% had parents who were divorced. When you talk about substance abuse and different types of drugs, date rape drugs, heroin use among adolescents, this group tends to shake their heads and say, “I don’t understand it. It doesn’t make any sense to me.” Marijuana was called dope and it was something that was mostly used by musicians and a few other offbeat characters.

THE VIETNAM EARLY BOOMER GENERATION

The next group is the Vietnam/early boomer group. Individuals in this group graduated high school between 1964 to 1974. This is also the Nixon/Johnson years, the proudest years of our country. Individuals in this group are now between the ages of 44 and 54. Approximately 20-85% of seniors in high school drank alcohol, 0-90% smoked marijuana and 0-25% had divorced parents. This group has somewhat of a split. Those graduating from 1964 to 1968 tend to have similar attitudes and beliefs to the Truman/Kennedy years, while those graduating around 1968, 1969 and into 1974 identify more with the later age of this generation.

THE HIGH TIDE “JUST SAY YES” ME GENERATION

The next generation - the high tide - is the “just say yes” generation. This is the Ford/Reagan years with high school graduates between 1975 to 1984 who are now between the ages of 34 and 43. Eighty-five to 95% of seniors drank alcohol, 15-60% smoked marijuana and 10-40% had divorced parents (this rate reported by the participants is lower than the average divorce rate nationally of 52%). Many couples in this group co-inhabited prior to marriage and the rate of divorce for those individuals increased another 8 to 10% rather than lowering the chance for divorce. Per capita this group’s use of drug and alcohol is the largest percentage we have ever seen in the United States’ history both prior to and since this time frame. These are parents now with kids in the middle and high schools. The attitudes from these parents are typically that they are tired of hearing about drugs and alcohol. They tend to have the attitude that if you just stopped talking drugs and alcohol and glamorizing it, there would be no problems. Many of them used/use drugs and feel that they have gotten to where they are without problems and hold the attitude that drug and alcohol use is to be expected in their children. In fact, the question “How many of you have used with your parents?” is now a standard question

in treatment programs. Not only are some parents using with their children, some parents are supplying for their children. Also, as this group ages we will be seeing grandparents who are addicted and/or recovering. The medical costs associated with this group will be significant over time.

THE JUST SAY NO GENERATION X BABY BUSTERS

The “just say no” generation, often called Generation X, are those representing the second Reagan and Bush years with high school graduates from between 1985 and 1992. They are now between 26 and 33 and while in high school 75-90% drank alcohol, 10-50% smoked marijuana and 10-30% had divorced parents. This group has heard more drug and alcohol prevention information, more just say no, more frying pan commercials, more McGruff crime dog commercials, than any group has ever heard in the history of the United States. However, it’s impact on their drug and alcohol use and in their kids’ use is minimal to none.

THE ECHO BOOM GENERATION

And then there is the most recent generation – the echo boom group. This is the Clinton [and now Bush] and who knows who generation whose high school graduate dates are between 1993 to 2012. They are now between the ages of 6 and 25. This group’s drug use has not decreased, even with the entire “here’s looking at you” 2000 curriculum, the entire project Charlie curriculum and the lifestyle curriculum. The substance abuse actually is on an increase as is the divorce rate.

OTHER INFLUENCES

Ethnic cultural influences on this generation’s schema have become less and less in subsequent generations because of acculturation. As an example, what we used to see was that the Jewish religion tended to have less alcohol use than any other population. However, they also had a high rate of sedative and tranquilizer use, especially among the female population. But now what we are seeing over the past 3 to 5 years is that the Orthodox Jewish adolescent population’s substance abuse is out of control. There also are genetic influences to substance use. However, there is as much data about it being genetic as there is data about it saying that it is not genetic.

WHY ATTITUDES ARE IMPORTANT

Whether you are affected by drug and alcohol abuse in your community or your own family or kids that you work with, understanding where the various attitudes come from gives you a different perception about not only the kids but also the people that you are dealing with. A lot of times we call up parents and we say, “Look, we’re concerned,” and we get so many different variables from resistant parents to parents that just seem ignorant to the whole issue and we hang up the phone and we get frustrated. A lot of it relates to whatever generation they grew up in. It does not make them right or wrong. It is what they understand and what makes sense to them.

These generation attitudes are also present in staff. The high tide generation often is complacent and becomes over saturated with information about clients. Their attitude tends to be blasé. We have to counteract this attitude and start getting outraged about what is happening.

WHY KIDS USE?

So, why do kids use in the first place? It is not a very complicated question. Kids use for some very particular reasons.

- **For one, it feels good and it works every time.**
- **It is very difficult to compete against.** For many years we tried to do these alternative high treatment programs and groups. The thought was if we could just get kids interested in rock climbing and canoeing and all those things, then they are going to want to stop using drugs. And what we found out was, we took these kids out, we did those things. They came back and said “Oh, God, that was fun. Could you imagine how much more fun it would be if we were on acid?” It had little impact. You cannot compete against it at least on the short-term basis.
- **Drugs and alcohol are readily available.** The other common myth about adolescent substance abuse is that if we could just get rid of the dealers, we would be in great shape. And those of you who work with kids certainly know that, especially looking at this information, the largest percentage of kids that get their substance abuse is from parents. Almost always first time use is with parental or brothers and sisters and then they may use

with peers or other family, like cousins, aunts and uncles.

- **They believe that they are going to live forever** so they are not concerned about their drug use. They do not think about consequences of things.

FIRST TIME USE

In the mid 70's the average age of first time use was between the ages of 12 and 13 with kids coming into drug and alcohol rehabilitation at about 15 to 16 years of age. Now the average age of reported first time use for kids that we are seeing in the facilities is between the ages of 8 and 10. So when kids come into treatment at the age of 15 or 16 years, they have had anywhere between 5 to 8 years of drug and alcohol use behind them. That is a totally different kid than it was 10 or 15 years ago. It makes a huge difference in their progression, symptomology and in the various other issues that they are bringing in with them.

RATE OF PROGRESSION

The rate of progression has accelerated over the years. The progression happens faster because they are using at a lower developmental age. So we're seeing the progression happen faster and faster as age of first use becomes younger and younger.

TYPES OF DRUGS USED

Substances around today are different than they were years ago. The marijuana's toxicity level is significantly higher. Different drugs are being used and different groups are using drugs.

There is a significant increase in heroin use among females. Heroin use among adolescent, white, suburban females has increased 5 to 8% more than any other population. Its use is attributed to its ease of use by snorting, its availability and the desirable sheik, thin, emaciated look. Inhalants also are on an increase depending upon age group. It is more popular in middle school than high school. Also some of the club drugs are being used. Ecstasy is on a real increase as well as GHB and there is a new one replacing GHB, called GBL. GHB often is called Georgia Home Boy and there are also other names for it. Within 15 minutes it causes a person to completely blank out for anywhere between 8 to 10 hours and it has been attributed to sexual assaults.

SENSE OF COMMUNITY

My belief is that the answer does not lie just within 1 person, or 2 people or 3 people. I don't believe it's the parents, although I do believe they have a significant part in it. I don't believe they are the ones that are at fault. I don't believe it's the school. I don't believe its probation. I don't believe it's the court system. I don't believe it's the managed care companies. But I certainly think it's every one of us. And as long as we continue to remain splintered, separated and not come together, that has created more and more of the problem. The difference between now and when drug use was not as out of control is the sense of community. When you look at treatment alternatives and treatment approaches, all treatment approaches are based on kids getting a sense of community back, by getting involved in the community and by getting a sense of spirituality.