

What They See

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You learn a lot when you raise teenagers. They challenge your long-standing beliefs, ignore your sage advice, and generally try to prove that what you say isn't true. They appear to be contrary by nature.

As a person who doesn't drink alcohol, doesn't smoke and probably hasn't taken two aspirin over the course of five years (let alone stronger drugs), it was very hard for me to watch my son work his way through alcohol and cigarette use (fortunately, no drugs). And while I would have had a harder time talking about it back then, now that he is no longer using either substance, I can reflect on this period with more clarity.

The biggest issue seemed to be his lack of concern for the consequences of smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, or taking drugs (illicit or otherwise). He seemed to believe that there couldn't be any real risks, or his fellow teenagers wouldn't be doing it.

A recent study, "Substance Use in Popular Movies and Music," brings this point into sharp focus. It was commissioned by the Office of National Drug Control Policy of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The complete study can be found at www.health.org/mediastudy.

The study was relatively straightforward. It examined the 200 most popular movie rentals and 1,000 most popular songs of 1996 and 1997 to see what percentage of them depicted or talked about the use of tobacco, alcohol or drugs.

As you might guess, the numbers were staggering:

"Findings revealed that 98 percent of movies studied depicted illicit drugs, alcohol, tobacco or over-the-counter/prescription medicines. Alcohol and tobacco appeared in more than 90 percent of the movies and illicit drugs appeared in 22 percent. About one-quarter (26 percent) of the movies that depicted illicit drugs contained explicit, graphic portrayals of their preparation and/or ingestion. Substance use was almost never a central theme, and very few movies ever specified motivations for use. Less than one-half (49 percent) of the movies portrayed short-term consequences of substance use, and about 12 percent depicted long-term consequences. Of the 669 adult major characters featured in the 200 movies, 5 percent used illicit drugs, 25 percent smoked tobacco, and 65 percent consumed alcohol. One or more major characters used illicit drugs in 12 percent of movies, tobacco in 44 percent, and alcohol in 85 percent."

Popular music was almost as bad. The genres studied were country-western, alternative rock, top-40, rap and heavy metal:

"Illicit drugs were mentioned in 63 percent of rap songs versus about 10 percent of the lyrics in the other categories. Similarly, alcohol references appeared in almost half of the rap lyrics, but in 13 percent or fewer of the other genres. In song lyrics that mentioned illicit drugs, marijuana was by far the most frequent of the illicit drugs

mentioned (63 percent). In general, 27 percent of the 1,000 songs contained a clear reference to either alcohol or illicit drugs. There were almost no references to tobacco.

So if your children (or the children of your patients) listen to any form of popular music, they will hear about drugs or alcohol every fourth song. Twenty songs a day equals five "messages" about the use of drugs or alcohol. That's almost 2,000 messages each year. Alcohol, drugs and cigarettes are in almost every movie, with graphic drug use in almost every fourth. Assuming just two movies per week (104 per year), the kids are seeing explicit, graphic portrayals of their preparation and/or ingestion about twice a month, or 26 times during the year.

What does all this mean to you, the practicing doctor of chiropractic?

With this kind of overwhelming exposure, substance use easily becomes an accepted way of life before most kids leave high school. This translates into an obvious predilection for medication dependency: reaching for a pill to ease aches or pains; taking diet pills to control weight; popping Prozac when feeling depressed; downing a "downer" for a good night's sleep, and an "upper" to get going in the morning.

As a doctor, you may be one of the few (if not the only) authority figure(s) in the lives of children that can present an understanding of wellness versus the use of drugs (in any form). Your patient education efforts should include information specifically designed for children and young teens. This is the time to teach them wellness concepts, not after they're rolling joints, dropping ecstasy, or drinking from a bottle.

Every day, the tobacco, liquor and drug companies make less-than-subtle inroads into the minds of millions of the world's children. But those messages lack the personal human connection. They may be able to show children what's "cool," but they can't teach them what's good.

As a doctor of chiropractic, you are the one to introduce wellness. Make children a priority in your practice and spend meaningful time with them. Equip them with the understanding needed to keep their feet on the path of health.

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