

## **The Teenage Dilemma**

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The reality of living in today's world is that teens are exposed to drugs and alcohol from a very young age. As anyone who is, or remembers being, a teen can attest to, trying to build the foundation for a whole life while navigating adolescence is hardly an easy task. The temptation and accessibility of illicit substances and the fact that teenage brains are wired to make risky decisions only exacerbates the low points of being a teen. Current programs only focus on educating teens which is simply ineffective. Teens need to stop being lectured about the dangers and instead be steered away from such actions with alternative opportunities; extracurricular activities where they can help the community and themselves simultaneously.

The human brain develops from back to front. Unfortunately for adolescents, the brain is not fully developed until 25 years old and the cognitive aspects of the brain develop last (Brain Development). Peer pressure, stress, and the desire to test the limits are pillars of being a teen which, combined with the fact that teenagers really are poor decision makers, can lead many into drugs and alcohol (NIDA). Rhode Island teens are no exception to the temptations. In a comprehensive report put together by the WalletHub comparing all fifty states as well as the District of Columbia, Rhode Island did not fare well. Ranking fifth out of fifty-one for the highest amount of teenage drug users (Kiernan), the problem is clear. However, it does not stop with adolescence, as Rhode Island also ranked third out of fifty-one for the highest amount of adult drug users. As for overdose deaths per capita, Rhode Island ranked fifth on the WalletHub study, as well as on a list put together by the CDC (Sullivan).

This is not a problem unique to Rhode Island. In one of the most comprehensive

long-term studies by the National Institute of Health called Monitoring the Future, it was clear that drug use is a problem for adolescents all over the country. The study, conducted annually, showed that marijuana use in high schoolers has stayed relatively constant in the last ten years. However, the attitude towards marijuana was concerning, with 71% of twelfth graders reporting that they did not believe regularly smoking marijuana was dangerous (Monitoring). There has been progress, but with a catch. The number of teens smoking cigarettes has declined and the amount of teens binge drinking has stayed constant, yet e-vaporizers seemed to fill the gap for teens. One out of every three high school seniors have used an e-vaporizer in the last year according to the study, and a significant amount of teens did not even know what they had been smoking when using one.

Though on a national, if not world-wide, scale, the problem starts with the community. In the Ocean State itself, tourism is a huge part of the culture for locals. Rhode Island's tourism is a \$5.2 billion-dollar industry and creates over 40,000 jobs (Tourism). The caveat is that especially in a tourism-oriented state, the needs of residents can be overlooked. For instance, local teens do not have many opportunities during the colder months, which means they may find their "fun" in other ways. Teens, who may enjoy themselves by accessing the opportunities tourists have during the summer, don't have much to do for the rest of the year. Boredom and teens can be a dangerous combination, and teens that may not be as lucky to live in a place where a quarter of the year is filled with constant activities are at even more of a risk.

In Iceland, there was a program conducted to help teenagers in a particularly dangerous area simply not get involved with drugs and alcohol in the first place. Harvey

Milkman, an American professor who helped start the program, believed in focusing on "behavioral addiction" as an alternative to addiction to harmful substances. Researchers tried focusing instead on what they had found were direct factors in teens that did not use drugs: strengthened teenage/parent relationships, participation in organized sports and clubs, and a curfew. While it did succeed tremendously in Iceland, that program did not face a lot of what the United States does, like gangs, a large homeless population, not to mention the sheer amount of people (Young). However, it is an interesting example of a community-targeted approach.

So, could Rhode Island help their teenagers the way that Iceland did? Not exactly. However, there are certainly lessons to be learned from their methods. One way that the program in Iceland helped keep teens out of trouble was getting them involved in more extracurricular activities. If a teen knows he or she has a big game coming up, they might not go to a big party the night before. Or if a student is staying after school for drama or robotics or art club, then they couldn't be out making questionable choices. In Iceland, they increased funding for extracurricular activities to get teens to be involved. Here, it may not be an issue of resources, but instead of participation. Many teens are swamped just with keeping up with their schoolwork and friends. Unless you have a particularly outstanding talent or are inclined to participate, the draw of clubs and sports is just not there. Also, most schools have a policy about having at least about a 2.0 GPA to stay in clubs, which ensures the academic success of students. But this makes clubs a reward for people who are already doing well, instead of a tool to keep those who are not doing as well out of trouble.

As an athlete, I can say from experience how much time even playing just one sport a year can take up. As a high school student, I can also say that for the most part, the people

who get into things they shouldn't be are the ones who spend their six hours a day at school doing the bare minimum and leaving when the bell rings. Those people are the same people who do not have a good support system in place for themselves, and those are the people schools should be worried about. Every single high school student has sat through hours of talks, lectures, horror stories, and speakers aimed at scaring teens away from drugs. The problem isn't that teens are uneducated; instead, the problem is that teens are going to make risky decisions without a deterrent.

Schools could be pushing for teens to be on teams and in clubs to be that deterrent. Other than keeping teens out of trouble, the benefits of afterschool involvements are immense. Leadership, time management, and communication are all invaluable things that the normal school day does not consist of and would enrich the students of schools and as a result, the community. For high schoolers, being involved at all would be an immense help in getting their resumes together for jobs and colleges. Schools should make involvement in extracurricular activities a priority with students. Being on a sports team or part of a club for all the years you are at the school could be a graduation requirement, for instance. Why not make such a beneficial opportunity for students just as important as community service hours or a Capstone? Not only could that get students who could otherwise be out smoking or drinking out of trouble, it could also uphold a higher standard in schools. Being part of a team, a member of a cast, or a participant in a club gives kids an outlet where they can be proud of what they accomplish.

Educating teens about drugs and alcohol is not the issue. In fact, teens are more educated than ever, of the dangers of illicit substances. Of course, reinforcement is never something to be discouraged, but there are very few physical ways that communities in Rhode

Island encourage teens to say no to drugs. Assemblies, fliers, and programs are all informative, but it is old news for teens now. Making afterschool curriculars mandatory, offering "late" buses and giving teens something to focus on and look forward to and fall back on could be a huge factor in lowering Rhode Island's number of teens who use drugs. To physically keep students in every town from being another statistic, people need to stop talking at them and start giving them ways to stay relevant in the community while helping themselves at the same time.

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