



A WARNING TO FRANKLIN PARENTS

If you have teenagers, you may have established a system to keep them out of your liquor cabinet or wine fridge. But experts are now saying you should lock up something else -- your medicine cabinet.

The painkillers you take when your back pain flares up? It's no secret that teens are popping those for fun. The Xanax you take to calm down before a long plane ride? They're into that too. And let's not forget the Ritalin your younger child with ADHD takes, because that's another popular one among the adolescent and college set.

While prescription drug abuse isn't new, it's on the rise. One in every five teens were using them in 2009, then one in every four teens were in 2010, according to [Smart Moves, Smart Choices](#), an awareness initiative.

There's been such a huge surge in the abuse of prescription drugs. How did we get here?

Kids aren't dumb: if they have a genuine perception that something is harmful to them, they're less likely to use it. But, their pre-frontal cortex -- the part of the brain that perceives consequences -- isn't fully developed. The casualness with which pills are used in our houses is sending a message to them.

How so?

Our general attitude toward prescription drugs is that they're going to make our lives happier and better. Pills are designed to treat medical problems, not to make life easier. [Adults think] you can use these things without consequences, and adolescents don't see the long-term horizon.

[Among teens] there's a general note of, What's the big deal? They're given by doctors, mom and dad use them, how harmful could they be? And oh by the way, they really do get me high. They work, and I can steal them right out of my own medicine cabinet. I don't have to go get them from the guy on the street corner!

Then how are teens getting their hands on the pills?

Sixty-four percent of [drugs come from] from a friend or relative. There are a lot of pills out there lying around. Sometimes [kids are] stealing from a friend. It's so pervasive and handled so causally in the home that kids can steal an entire bottle of pills and no one notices.

Take us through the drugs of choice -- what are the kids into these days?

Different cultures have different drugs of appeal. The general classes are benzodiazepines (like Xanax and Valium), psychostimulants (Adderall and Ritalin) and opiates (Oxycontin, Vicodin and codeine).

The psychostimulants -- meds used to treat ADD and ADHD -- are big on college campuses. They're widely available because many [students] are on them for functional purposes to study. They're dangerous because they can trigger manic episodes and depression.

The most problematic class is the opiates. These are the painkillers, a giant class. You name the painkiller, it's abused by kids.

Can you tell us more about the kind of trouble kids get into by abusing these meds?

The health risks are the consequences we are trying to address with teenagers already. Keep in mind, every unwanted outcome you can think of for a teenager -- unwanted pregnancy, STDs or violent acts -- you name the event, and you will always find drugs and alcohol involved. Just because it's doctor prescribed doesn't mean it's safe.

[Prescription drugs] can also trigger depression and manic episodes, and suicidal thinking. ... People often don't even connect the fact that they were suicidal on Tuesday with the fact that they took a Xanax on a Sunday night.

[Other consequences] are intoxication, death... Many of these [drugs] are highly sedative. You don't have to take much to stop breathing. They can easily cross over to a fatal dose without knowing it. These days when drug addicts die in my world, they die on prescription drugs.

So, if mom or dad is on medication, how can they convey how dangerous it is to take for fun?

Get a lock-down box: a plastic box with a lock on it. Send a message. Your alcohol should be behind a lock door, and your pills should be in a locked box. Nevermind they [might be able to break into it]; you're saying something about these substances when you do that. [You're saying] these need to be handled carefully. That's really important and nobody does this.

How will we know if our own kids are popping pills?

There are almost no signs. That's the really difficult part about this. Mental health issues, including substance abuse in adolescents, have the same constellation of symptoms.

The things to know to watch for are changes in sleep patterns, appetite, their dress, [who] they hang out with... The number one sort of sign that something's going on is a sudden drop in grades; there's something going on.

If you suspect your kid has a habit, what's the best way to bring it up?

Do not go at it alone, because here's what you're going to get from your kid: "I'm fine." There's not a 15- or 17-year-old out there who is going to completely open up to their parents. Quickly get help if you have any signs that something's really wrong. Start at school. So many people think of the school as the problem, but the school is your friend. They're professionals with specialized training.

[When you] bring it up, say, "Maybe I've been remiss. I just became aware this stuff is being used by kids. I've been giving you the wrong message, this stuff is dangerous."

What's the one thing you want parents to know?

That [prescription drug abuse] is a much bigger problem than they know and that we're contributing to it by our causal attitudes.

For more information on the free tool kit Smart Moves, Smart Choice created to help parents and schools prevent prescription drug abuse, visit their website, Smarmovessmartchoices.org. or you can contact your Franklin Police Department.