

Dear Johnny

It's back-to-school time and as parents, we may be looking for the appropriate words and opportunities to discuss drugs and safety with our children. Dr. Marsha Rosenbaum wrote these two letters to her son, Johnny, as he entered high school in 1998 and as he went off to college this fall.

“A Mother’s Advice”

San Francisco Chronicle, Sept. 7, 1998

Dear Johnny,

This fall you will be entering high school, and like most American teenagers, you'll have to navigate drugs. As most parents, I would prefer that you not use drugs. However, I realize that despite my wishes, you might experiment.

I will not use scare tactics to deter you. Instead, having spent the past 25 years researching drug use, abuse and policy, I will tell you a little about what I have learned, hoping this will lead you to make wise choices. My only concern is your health and safety.

When people talk about “drugs,” they are generally referring to illegal substances such as marijuana, cocaine, methamphetamine (speed), psychedelic drugs (LSD, Ecstasy, “Shrooms”) and heroin. These are not the only drugs that make you high. Alcohol, cigarettes and many other substances (like glue) cause intoxication of some sort. The fact that one drug or another is illegal does not mean one is better or worse for you. All of them temporarily change the way you perceive things and the way you think.

Some people will tell you that drugs feel good, and that's why they use them. But drugs are not always fun. Cocaine and methamphetamine speed up your heart; LSD can make you feel disoriented; alcohol intoxication impairs driving; cigarette smoking leads to addiction and sometimes lung cancer; and people sometimes die suddenly from taking heroin. Marijuana does not often lead to physical dependence or overdose, but it does alter the way people think, behave and react.

I have tried to give you a short description of the drugs you might encounter. I choose not to try to scare you by distorting information because I want you to have confidence in what I tell you. Although I won't lie to you about their effects, there are many reasons for a person your age to not use drugs or alcohol. First, being high on marijuana or any other drug often interferes with normal life. It is difficult to retain information while high, so using it, especially daily, affects your ability to learn.

Second, if you think you might try marijuana, please wait until you are older. Adults with drug problems often started using at a very early age.

Finally, your father and I don't want you to get into trouble. Drug and alcohol use is illegal for you, and the consequences of being caught are huge. Here in the United States, the number of

arrests for possession of marijuana has more than doubled in the past six years. Adults are serious about “zero tolerance.” If caught, you could be arrested, expelled from school, barred from playing sports, lose your driver’s license, denied a college loan, and/or rejected from college.

Despite my advice to abstain, you may one day choose to experiment. I will say again that this is not a good idea, but if you do, I urge you to learn as much as you can, and use common sense. There are many excellent books and references, including the Internet, that give you credible information about drugs. You can, of course, always talk to me. If I don’t know the answers to your questions, I will try to help you find them.

If you are offered drugs, be cautious. Watch how people behave, but understand that everyone responds differently, even to the same substance. If you do decide to experiment, be sure you are surrounded by people you can count upon. Plan your transportation and under no circumstances drive or get into a car with anyone else who has been using alcohol or other drugs. Call us or any of our close friends any time, day or night, and we will pick you up, no questions asked and no consequences.

And please, Johnny, use moderation. It is impossible to know what is contained in illegal drugs because they are not regulated. The majority of fatal overdoses occur because young people do not know the strength of the drugs they consume, or how they combine with other drugs. Please do not participate in drinking contests, which have killed too many young people. Whereas marijuana by itself is not fatal, too much can cause you to become disoriented and sometimes paranoid. And of course, smoking can hurt your lungs, later in life and now.

Johnny, as your father and I have always told you about a range of activities (including sex), think about the consequences of your actions before you act. Drugs are no different. Be skeptical and most of all, be safe.

Love,
Mom

“Take Mom's advice on college and drinking”
San Francisco Chronicle, Sept. 9, 2002

Dear Johnny,

When you entered high school, I used my knowledge as a drug researcher to describe to you the drugs you were likely to encounter in the years ahead. As your mother, I am concerned primarily with your health and safety. I told you that staying away from drugs was always the safest choice. At the same time, I offered some way ... if you chose at some point to try drugs ... to navigate that risky terrain. I urged you to educate yourself about intoxicating substances, and that moderation and common sense are imperative. Finally, I assured you that your father and I would be there to help, not punish, if you found yourself in a compromising or dangerous situation.

Now, you are getting ready to go off to college. Legally, you are an adult. Nonetheless, like most parents, I will continue to worry. So to prepare for this transition (both yours and mine), I have investigated substance use on the college scene. Here's what I found:

The overwhelming drug of choice on college campuses all across America is alcohol . . . dwarfing the use of all other drugs combined. In fact, a culture of drinking seems to be embedded in college life. In surveys, only 20 percent of college students say they abstain completely, and of those who drink, 2 out of 3 admit to drinking regularly.

A 2001 American Medical Association study of parents with children in college identified "binge drinking" as their top concern. It is my top concern, too, because the consequences drinking too much can be dire.

A recent report issued by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism revealed that each year half a million college students are injured, and about 1,400 die as a result of drinking excessively. Other problems include impaired athletic and driving abilities, injury, physical illness, blackouts, unintended sexual activity and unprotected sex. Heavy drinkers are three times as likely to fall behind in their schoolwork as those who drink moderately. This is a no-brainer: The more you drink, the less you are able to perform academically.

There are also legal problems that can remain on your record. It is against the law for students under 21 to buy alcohol. While the fake ID industry proliferates, students sometimes forget that it is illegal to use such a card. Although the president's daughters got off with an embarrassing expose by the press, average college students can lose their driver's license, or worse.

There are no easy approaches to this issue. If you do choose to use alcohol, refrain from participating in drinking contests, and pay close attention to your companions while they are under the influence. If a friend becomes intoxicated, do not leave him (or her) alone. Too many young people have suffocated on their own vomit because their friends left them, assuming they had fallen asleep. If an individual cannot be awakened, call 911 . . . immediately.

Investigate "safe ride" programs on your campus, as well as public transportation. Walk to parties if you can, and do not go alone.

As I have said repeatedly, do not drive as, or get into a car with, an intoxicated driver. As I can no longer offer to pick you up, I am happy to provide cab fare, as are most parents.

Johnny, as you start college as a young adult, I urge you to understand how alcohol affects your body and mind, practice moderation, and most of all, be safe.

Love,
Mom