

*Bio: The following is a guest post by Saint Jude Retreats, an alternative to traditional substance use treatment. Saint Jude Retreats provides a program for people with substance use problems that concentrates on self-directed positive and permanent change. Through the program, we offer the opportunity for individuals to self-evaluate and explore avenues for life enhancement.*

## **Teen Substance Use And Sex Education: Are We Doing Enough?**

When I was in high school, there were a few “special” classes. One was about sex, the other was about drugs and alcohol. What was talked about in one wasn't discussed in the other. Even then, I found that a bit strange and always wondered if the connection between both is not apparent to other people as it was to me. [Illegal substance use affects everyone's ability to make healthy choices](#) when it comes to their sexual behavior, and that's especially true for teens. If you're a sex educator, a parent, or just interested in the topic, here's what you can do to help teens stay healthy both above and below the belt.

### **Provide Information, Don't Issue Orders**

The teens years are a time when young people are developing their own identity, distinct from that of their parents, families, and peers. Teens are learning to think for themselves, and rebelling against strict authority is a normal part of that process. However, when given accurate, up-to-date information, teens do have the capacity to make healthy choices about their substance use and their sexual behavior. In fact, the academic journal PLOS One reports that abstinence-only programs, because they withhold contraception information, actually contribute to higher instances of teen pregnancies (Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011). Scholarly research also shows that teens who are given the best information about substances such as marijuana are least likely to exhibit pro-drug attitudes (Vogl, Newton, Champion, & Teesson, 2014).

### **Teach the Correlation Between Substance Use and Sexual Assault**

Teen use of alcohol is a major problem in our society, and in addition to the well-known dangers associated with drunk driving (and the less-well-known risk of alcohol poisoning), excessive consumption of alcohol is a known risk factor in sexual assault. According to the National Institute of Justice, at least half of sexual assaults among college students occur after the perpetrator, victim, or both consume alcoholic beverages (National Institute of Justice, 2008).

Fortunately, there are things that can be done to minimize the risk. Sex education classes are often the ideal venue in which to help teens learn to protect themselves.

### **Make it About Relationships, Not Just Sex**

Though it's vital that teens be provided with accurate and up-to-date information about the physical processes of sexuality (including how sexually transmitted infections and pregnancies occur), parents and schools do them a great disservice by failing to include information about healthy relationships. Ideally, teens learn about partner respect, healthy communication and body autonomy by observing their parents. However, given that 15.5 million American children live in families where partner violence occurred at least once in the past year (Family Violence Prevention Fund, 2008), educators can't rely on family mirroring to teach healthy relationships. All sex education programs need to make sure their students understand that they are in charge of their own bodies, and should never allow themselves to be pressured to do anything (sexually or substance use related) that they do not want to do or don't feel ready for.

### **Be a Safe Confidant**

Finally, it's vital that whether you're a parent or an educator, you be a person teens can come to for help with sexual or substance issues. Far too many children and teens feel they won't be believed if they report sexual (or any other) type of abuse, and far too many teens are too ashamed to talk honestly about their sexual concerns with those a generation older than them. By being supportive, caring listeners we can help teens avoid problems in the first place or failing to get the help they need.