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Teens take big risks with drugs, alcohol

Dangerous mixtures mirror cultural trend toward extreme behavior

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Some teenagers are gulping down handfuls of random prescription drugs, while others mix alcohol with energy drinks or over-the-counter medicines.

More teenagers in Petaluma and other parts of the nation are living in the fast lane with their health, and some are suffering the consequences, says Pat Landrum, executive director of the Healthy Community Consortium.

“Consistent with the whole ‘extreme’ culture that has developed nationwide, we are seeing a trend toward more extremism in the use of drugs and alcohol,” Landrum said. “And more young teens are joining the party scene, where these substances are being consumed.”

Landrum and Dick Sharke, executive director of the McDowell Drug Task Force, say that skittle parties, named after small candies, have begun occurring in Petaluma. At these parties, teens typically bring prescription medications from their homes and throw them in a bowl. Each teen then grabs a handful of drugs from the bowl, and ingests them, often using alcohol.

“Certainly, it can be dangerous, both in the short term and long term, for people to take drugs not intended for them,” said registered nurse Wendi Thomas, the nurse manager of emergency services at Petaluma Valley Hospital. “For example, if more narcotics are taken than intended, this can (cause a person to) stop breathing.”

Thomas said that she has seen a rise in cases involving teen abuse of prescription drugs at PVH.

“We have seen cases of teens taking their parents’ medications,” she said.

“Prescription drug abuse has risen in prevalence, even as the abuse of illicit drugs has declined,” Sharke added. “Children don’t have to go to the streets or to a dealer to find prescription drugs — the biggest threat is an unsecured medicine cabinet in our own home. Gaining access to its contents typically calls for nothing more difficult than sliding a mirrored door.”

Teens find it easier to get their hands on prescription drugs than on a can of beer, according to a recent study by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, and 70 percent of children who abuse prescription drugs say they obtained them from friends and family members, often without their knowledge.

Over-the-counter drugs also are sometimes brought to teen parties, and can be just as dangerous.

“Young people are using over-the-counter antihistamines, depressants and cough medicine with alcohol. These combinations have very bad side effects. That’s why the bottles warn against combining them,” Landrum said.

Mixing alcohol with high-caffeine drinks also can be dangerous.

“This is really scary, because the caffeine can mask how intoxicated the teens actually are,” Landrum said. “Lots of young people have been mixing Red Bull and vodka for the past few years. Now alcohol companies are

marketing drinks that look like these high-energy drinks, but have alcohol in them. It is hard to tell from looking at the can if they are energy drinks or alcohol drinks.”

The danger of these party-scene trends is exacerbated by the presence of increasingly younger teens.

“Now, the party scene has a lot more younger people in it, and some of them are getting very intoxicated,” Landrum said.

The portion of Petaluma seventh-graders who have consumed alcohol rose from 13 percent in 2005 to 18 percent in 2007, according to the California Healthy Kids Survey. The fall 2007 survey also showed that 12 percent of seventh-graders responding had consumed alcohol within the past 30 days, and that 3 percent of them had done binge drinking (five or more drinks in a row for boys, and four or more for girls) within the period.

Local specialists in drug- and alcohol-abuse contend that the recent trends suggest that teens often are not aware of the dangers involved.

Combining alcohol and illegal drugs such as methamphetamines has been widely recognized as a dangerous practice, but Landrum says many teens don’t realize the hazards of mixing over-the-counter or prescription drugs with alcohol, and ingesting random combinations of prescription drugs.

“But some of them are drawn to the danger, which for them is part of the excitement of mixing,” she said, adding that to them, it can be likened to Russian roulette.

Many local groups — including the Petaluma Coalition to Prevent Underage and High-Risk Drinking, McDowell Drug Task Force, Healthy Community Consortium, Petaluma Police Department and Petaluma Health Care District — have helped to address teen drinking and drug problems.

Also, Petaluma’s Clean and Sober Classroom integrates drug and alcohol education and treatment for high school students who have drug- or alcohol-related issues that have impaired their ability to be successful in other school settings.

School teachers and counselors at local high schools and junior high schools also have played an active role, and new federal funding for a counselor at each elementary school in the Petaluma City School District is helping to address the spread of alcohol and drug use to younger children.

“And as a response to the rise in alcohol and drug use, Petaluma City Schools, the city of Petaluma and the county have responded with new support for intervention and prevention programs to help raise awareness and keep students safe,” said Dave Rose, the coordinator of student services for PCS, adding that the district utilizes two programs, Project Alert in junior high schools and Project SUCCESS — or, Schools Using Coordin-ated Community Efforts to Strengthen Students — in high schools.

Several of the people who have been focusing on teen alcohol and drug issues emphasize that parents need to take a more proactive role.

“First, it clearly is important for parents to recognize the problems, and understand the issues,” Thomas said. “Second, parents need to make a commitment to not support or tolerate things that are illegal or dangerous. And third, they should sign a parent pledge.”

The Petaluma Coalition to Prevent Underage and High-Risk Drinking has sought to get parents of Petaluma’s 7,500 high school and junior high school students to sign a Parent/Community Pledge that commits them to keeping minors from consuming alcohol at home parties and at other properties for which they are responsible, and to be at home, visible and aware of what is going on when hosting a party.

“So far, about 2,000 parents have signed the pledge,” Landrum said. “It’s a start, but it’s way short of the number we would like to have.”

Landrum says that she is trying to understand why some parents are reluctant to recognize or address teen drinking and drug problems.

“I’ve seen a pattern, in which parents first will say that there isn’t a problem. Then, one of their kids will get into trouble, and they’ll recognize that there’s a problem, but say that it’s too much to deal with. Later, the parents will recognize that it’s their problem, but say that they don’t have any idea who to talk with,” she said.

Many parents are reluctant to report that their own or other children are drinking or using drugs, she says.

“They are fearful that their kids’ peers then will cut them out, socially,” Landrum said.

She emphasizes that one of the main ways of addressing the issues is for adults to become more involved in their children’s lives.

“Adults have high expectations of young people, but these youths often feel that adults want them to do well so that they themselves will look good. Petaluma young people sometimes feel adults don’t really care about them, and need to have caring relationships with them,” Landrum said.

She offers some basic guidelines for parents.

“Talk to your kids, set limits they can live up to and discuss (concerns) with them before the party — and if they miss the mark, acknowledge this, and trust that they can live up to it next time,” Landrum said.

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