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GUEST COLUMN: Listening to Colorado teens about substance abuse

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Teens are watching and listening to the adults in their lives. Are we listening to them?

Colorado teens navigated years of unprecedented challenges so it's important to check in on them and see how they're doing.

This is something parents and other trusted adults can do every day on an individual and community level.

But what's the bigger picture? What are the key issues affecting Colorado youth? And how can we apply these insights to our dialogue with young people?

To determine that, we asked teens across the state. The Rise Above Colorado online survey of 718 teens, conducted from March-May by HealthCare Research, offers a demographically representative biannual snapshot of the mindset and behavior of Colorado youth 12-17.

This year's findings provide reason for optimism but also cause for concern. Anyone who cares about the future of Colorado youth — from policymakers to educators to parents — will want to take a closer look.

Two out of five youth now say they have lived with an adult with a substance use issue, up from just a quarter of teens who reported that two years ago. They are watching and it's influencing their behavior. These youth are twice as likely to have recently misused substances.

Female youth are disproportionately feeling the effects of these challenging home environments. The percentage of female teens who report that they live with an adult affected by substance use disorder more than doubled since 2020 from 22% to 47%; this is significantly higher than for their male counterparts. In addition, the survey results provide warning signs about our youngest teens.

Many more youth aged 12-13 reported experiencing challenging mental health days compared to two years earlier. Three of five report experiencing at least three poor mental health days in a given month.

Younger teens perceive less risk in regularly using substances compared to 2020. One in three say substance use is just part of being a teen and can help manage stress, significant increases from two years earlier. A lower perception of risk is linked with higher rates of future use of substances.

Youth ages 12-13 report significantly more direct offers to use substances compared to 2020, including offers of marijuana (49%), cocaine (21%), and prescription drugs not prescribed to them (29%). These attitudes among the youngest teens more closely resemble those of older teens than ever before, making Colorado's prevention efforts with middle school-aged youth even more critical.

As much as this data fills a parent of three youths like me with trepidation, we must not miss an important storyline. Despite the challenges that youth are facing, the vast majority are NOT regularly using substances. Large majorities of youth 12-17 reported that in the past 30 days they did not use marijuana (87%), did not vape (83%), and did not drink alcohol (81%).

Why would we highlight the percentage of youth who aren't engaging in substance use? It seems counterintuitive when headlines tend to focus on the negative.

It all comes down to the science of social norming. Research shows that teens who recognize that most of their peers aren't using substances feel more empowered to make the same healthy choices.

So, another important finding of the survey is that fewer youth are overestimating their peers' use of marijuana and vaping products. Although middle school-aged youth are displaying concerning attitudes in some areas, they were the group to show the biggest declines in overestimating peer use, a positive trend.

This offers a call to action to work together to build on this progress.

Teens who can talk to a parent or other trusted adult are better protected against the risks they face and more than eight in ten say there's an adult in their life that fulfills that role. Are we ready to open that conversation and listen?

There seems to be progress on this front, at least for the emerging threat of fentanyl. Nearly half of teens report having a conversation with a parent or guardian about the overdose risks of fentanyl and contaminated pills.

It's likely not coincidental that concern is relatively high among teens about the possibility of receiving laced substances, with 90% seeing at least a "moderate amount of risk" associated with taking pills that were purchased online or on the street and 91% at least "somewhat concerned" that a pill may be laced with other substances.

We encourage parents and other adults who interact with teens to check out the results on our website. Spread the word among youth and adults that most young people are making healthy choices. If we debunk the "everyone's doing it mentality," teens can feel confident that they're in good company when they make good decisions about substances.

Once we've done that, let's sit back and listen so we can give them the support they need, whatever that may be. Are you ready?

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