



SADD Op-Ed:

Cat and Mouse

Trust, truth and drug testing teens

By Stephen G. Wallace

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President Bush's call for increased federal funding of school drug testing programs has already reignited debate over the efficacy and ethics of intrusive remedies for a country at war with drugs. Given the easy availability of illegal substances, and their widespread use by teens, it's a debate worth watching.

Random drug testing in schools began with student athletes and a "pay to play" philosophy holding that participation in sports is a privilege extended on the condition of abstinence from substance use. In a practice upheld by the US Supreme Court, this privilege principle quickly migrated to other competitive activities, from cheering to chess. And now, in its latest iteration, drug testing is being applied more broadly to students enrolled in some private and parochial schools.

The current debate, anchored on one side by conservatives and on the other by civil libertarians, threads age-old arguments of privacy with newfangled applications of technology poised to detect and designed to deter. In the middle remain a vast number of "undecideds" and the fundamental question of effectiveness. And here the data conflict.

- University of Michigan researchers found virtually identical rates of drug use in the schools that have drug testing and the schools that do not (although a study author concedes that one "could design a drug testing program that could deter drug use").
- A Ball State University/Indiana University researcher reported that 73% of Indiana high school principals with random drug testing programs in their schools reported a decrease in drug usage (compared to a period without such a program) among students subject to the policy.

Supporters of random drug testing argue both the ethics (if we expect students to study and test them to find out, can't we also expect them to remain drug-free and test them to make sure?) and the outcomes (the Office of National Drug Control Policy cites the results of drug testing programs in Oregon and New Jersey as proof positive that they work). They also note the positive role that testing can play by giving young people "an out," blunting negative peer pressure with the threat of being caught. Not enforcement but, rather, reinforcement.

Detractors, on the other hand, claim that such programs are ineffective as deterrents and fly in the face of civics classes on the appropriate balance between authority and individual rights.

In *Making Sense of Student Drug Testing, Why Educators are Saying No*, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Drug Policy Alliance maintain that not only is testing ineffective in deterring young people from using drugs, it also can undermine relationships of trust between adults and children. While that could be true, *Teens Today* research from SADD and Liberty Mutual Group suggests that the undermining may already be well underway: while 95% of parents say they trust their teens in making decisions about drugs, only 28% of teens report being completely honest with parents on the issue. And that says nothing of the often elaborate steps teens will take to conceal, not just lie about, their drug use.



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In more than a few families, evasion blends with obfuscation – commencing a high-stakes game of Cat and Mouse that pits parents against teens and cripples the very trust and truth on which those relationships are based.

What seems to be lost in this debate is the perspective of those with the most at stake: the students themselves. Encouragingly, most teens (70%) say they are concerned about drug use. Yet, understandably, many see drug testing as a violation, not so much of civil liberties as much as of trust – at least absent some evidence of wrongdoing. They also seem to doubt its saliency as a deterrent, even when applied by Mom or Dad. In one *Teens Today* study, only 8% of students said that testing by parents would be effective in keeping them away from drugs, while 93% indicated that other parental measures would be effective.

The good news in all of this is that young people recognize the dangers of drug use and seem to share adults' urgency in finding answers that keep teens safe. The better news is a solution that's been right in front of us all along: parents who talk regularly with their children about drugs.

According to *Teens Today*, adolescents in grades 6-12 say that parents are their biggest influence not to use drugs. And the methods they report as most effective are, perhaps, the simplest: discuss the dangers and explain the expectations. Indeed, teens who have open and honest communication with their parents are more likely to avoid drugs, to try to live up to their parents' expectations regarding drug use, and to say that their parents' methods of keeping them away from drugs are effective. These teens also report that they are less likely to use drugs when their parents make clear that such behavior won't be tolerated.

Whatever the outcome of the spirited public discourse over random drug testing in schools, a surer bet may be some not-so-random drug prevention at home. Open communication and clear expectations are already proven deterrents to drug use among teens – just ask them. So too is good old-fashioned vigilance. After all, while the cat's away ...

Stephen Wallace, national chairman and chief executive officer of SADD, Inc., has broad experience as a school psychologist and adolescent counselor. SADD sponsors school-based education and prevention programs nationwide and makes available at no charge the *SADD Contract for Life* and the *Opening Lifesaving Lines* brochure, both designed to facilitate effective parent-child communication. Toll-free: 877-SADD-INC For more information on the SADD/Liberty Mutual *Teens Today* research, visit www.saddonline.com or www.libertymutualinsurance.com.

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