



Gina Addis, SADD
(617) 348-4413

Laura Barrett, LIME
(212) 352-4520

STUDY SHATTERS “MYTH OF INEVITABILITY” REGARDING TEEN DRINKING, DRUG USE AND SEX

SADD/Liberty Mutual Research Reveals Parents Have More Influence Than They May Think

BOSTON (January 8, 2002) – Parents play a critical role in guiding their children’s decisions regarding drinking, drinking and driving, drug use and sex, according to new research conducted by SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions/Students Against Driving Drunk) and Liberty Mutual Group. The *Teens Today* study results released today reveal that, contrary to the popular “myth of inevitability,” such behaviors are not unavoidable rites of passage in teen life. The *Teens Today* report also suggests strategies that parents can employ to help keep their children safe.

Significantly, this original research reveals psychographic profiles reflecting behavioral trends among teens. Three specific decision types emerged among the 500 teens surveyed, reflecting the degree to which they choose to engage in destructive and potentially destructive activities. These decision types, “Avoiders,” “Experimenters,” and “Repeaters,” were heavily influenced by parental attitudes and behavior. Teen decision types are defined as follows:

- Avoiders** - Tend to avoid destructive decision-making
- Experimenters** - Tend to occasionally engage in destructive decision-making
- Repeaters** - Tend to regularly engage in destructive decision-making

“These findings offer encouragement to parents to continue to talk to their teens about good decision-making,” said Stephen Wallace, chairman and chief executive officer of the national SADD organization. “We’ve shattered the ‘myth of inevitability’ that so often mirrors parents’ attitudes about teen behavior and their uncertainty about being able to influence decision-making.”

According to the study, many parents either do not believe that their teen participates in destructive behaviors or think that such behaviors are a normal part of growing up. Many also believe that there is little, if anything, they can do to influence teen choices. For example:

- More than half (53 percent) of parents agree that drinking is a part of growing up and that teens will drink no matter what.
- Approximately one quarter (22 percent) of parents say they let their teens make their own decisions regarding drinking.
- More than one third (37 percent) allow their teens to make their own decisions regarding sex.

Yet the data suggests that parents can take an active role in determining which decision type their teen is likely to resemble. Specifically, the *Teens Today* research included these findings:

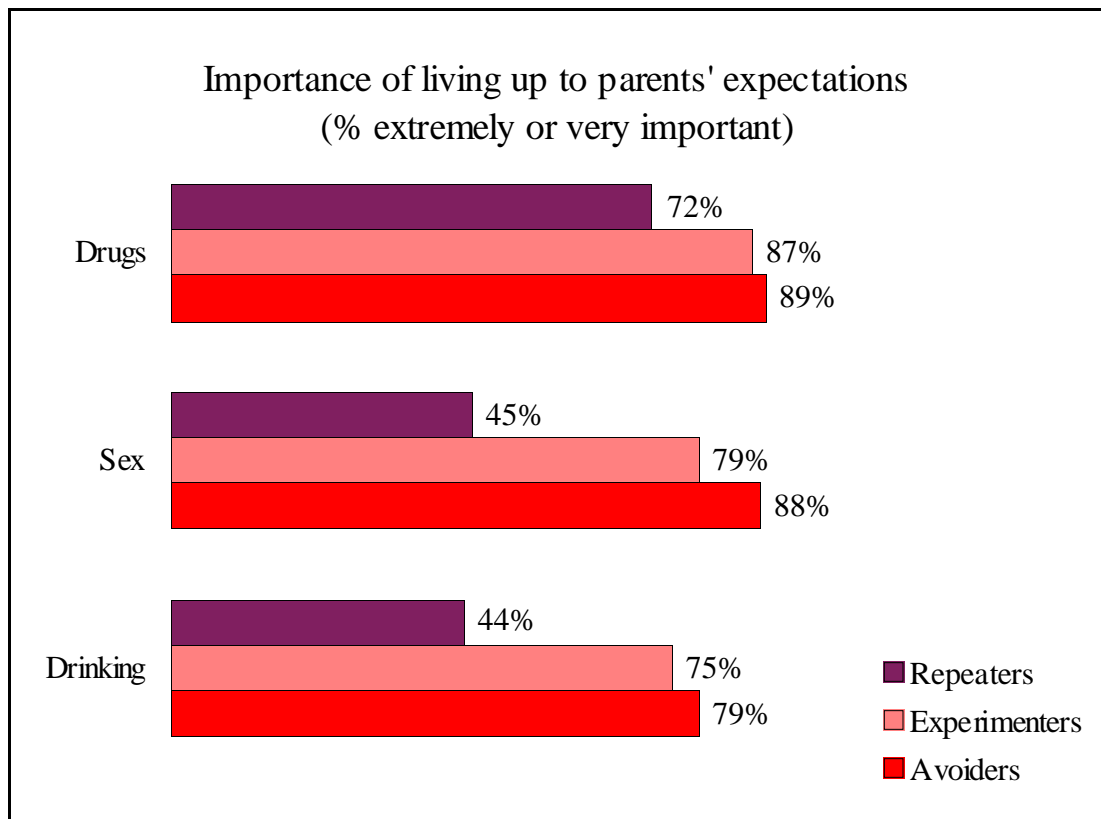
- Avoiders are more likely than Repeaters to say they have open and honest communication with their parents (80 percent vs. 68 percent);
- Teens who have open and honest communication with their parents are more likely than those who do not to say that their parents' methods of preventing them from using drugs are effective (96 percent vs. 81 percent);
- Teens who have open and honest communication with their parents are more likely than those who do not to say their parents influence their decisions about sexual activity (31 percent vs. 21 percent); and
- Teens who have open communication with their parents are significantly more likely than those who do not to say that punishment has kept them from doing the same thing again (80 percent vs. 46 percent).

“The important message for parents is that ‘you do make a difference,’” stated John Connors, executive vice president and manager of Liberty Mutual’s personal insurance operations. “In the face of media and peer pressure, many parents feel their role in influencing their children’s choices is marginalized. Clearly, this is not the case.”

Indeed, the *Teens Today* report amplifies prior SADD/Liberty Mutual research indicating the importance of parent-child communication in teen decision-making and reinforces the influence parents can have by conveying their expectations for teen behavior. This new data reveals that:

- Repeaters are significantly less likely than Experimenters or Avoiders to say that it is important to them to live up to their parents' expectations regarding drinking, sex and drugs (see following Chart 1);
- Teens who have open communication with their parents are significantly more likely to try to live up to their parents' expectations; and
- Teens who do not have open communication with their parents are significantly more likely than those who do to say that they wish their communication with parents were different (37 percent vs. 20 percent).

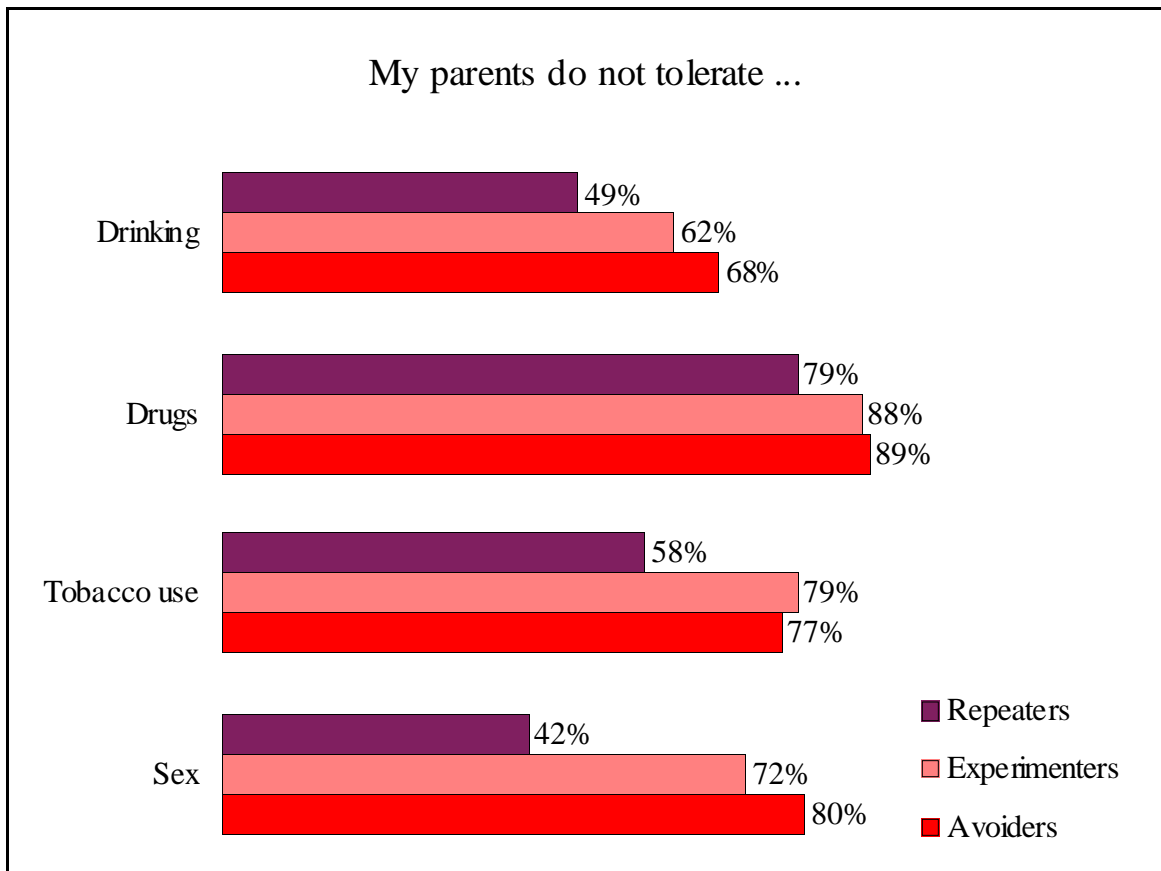
Chart 1:



The *Teens Today* research also suggests that parents who adopt “zero tolerance” attitudes about destructive decision-making by their teens may be more effective in helping their children avoid trouble.

- Avoiders and Experimenters are significantly more likely than Repeaters to say that their parents do not tolerate drinking, drug use or sex (see following Chart 2).

Chart 2:



Teens themselves offered specific advice for parents as to how they might best help their children make healthy choices.

- Initiate dialogue about decision-making.
- Stay up until teens return home.
- Enforce curfews.
- Require that teens sleep at home.
- Call friends' parents to ensure supervision.
- Ask teens to “check in” by phone during the evening.
- Enforce consequences for misbehavior.

According to Penelope Wells, SADD president and executive director, “All of this data strongly reinforces how important a role parents can play in shaping teen attitudes and behavior. Parents who vigorously embrace that role are less likely to have teens who make destructive decisions.”

SADD, Inc. (Students Against Destructive Decisions/Students Against Driving Drunk) sponsors peer-to-peer education and prevention programs in middle schools and high schools nationwide.

Liberty Mutual Group is one of the largest multi-line insurers in the property and casualty industry. Offering a wide range of products and services, including private passenger auto and homeowners insurance, Liberty Mutual Group employs 37,000 people in more than 900 offices throughout the world.

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Editor’s Notes:

SADD and Liberty Mutual make available a number of important family communication tools:

- SADD’s Contract for Life and “Opening Lifesaving Lines” brochure
- SADD’s Family Focus speakers program
- Liberty Mutual’s “Avoiding Collisions: How to Survive the Teenage Driving Years” video and brochure
- SADD/Liberty Mutual “Guidelines for Good Family Communication”

For more information or to receive materials, contact:

SADD, Inc.
255 Main Street
Marlborough, MA 01752
1-877-SADD-INC
www.sadd.org

Liberty Mutual Group
1-800-4-LIBERTY
www.libertymutualinsurance.com