

**MetLife Foundation**



**Partnership for a Drug-Free America  
and  
MetLife Foundation**

*2008 Parents Attitude Tracking Study*

May 2009

# Table of Contents

	Page
Introduction	3
Partnership for a Drug-Free America	
MetLife Foundation	
The Parents Attitude Tracking Study	3
Report Highlights	4
Parents' Perceptions of Child's Drug/Alcohol Use	5
Parents' Self-Confidence	6
Perceptions of Risk in Prescription Medicine Abuse	9
Parents' Conversations	10
Implications	13

## **The Partnership for a Drug-Free America®**

The Partnership for a Drug-Free America is a nonprofit organization uniting parents, renowned scientists and communications professionals to help families raise healthy children. The Partnership motivates and equips parents to prevent their children from using drugs and alcohol, intervene when drug and alcohol use is present and find help for family and friends in trouble. The Partnership's site, <http://www.drugfree.org/>, translates current research on teen behavior, addiction and treatment into easy to understand tips and tools and connects parents with expert advice and support.

## **The MetLife Foundation**

The MetLife Foundation was created in 1976 by MetLife to continue its longstanding tradition of contributions and community involvement. The goal is to empower people to lead healthy, productive lives and strengthen communities. Underlying the Foundation's programs is a focus on education at all ages and a commitment to increasing access and opportunity. Information about the MetLife Foundation can be found on its website <http://www.metlife.com/about/corporate-profile/citizenship/metlife-foundation>

## **Partnership for a Drug-Free America/ MetLife Foundation Parents Attitude Tracking Study**

The 2008 Partnership / MetLife Foundation Parents Attitude Tracking Study measures attitudes and behaviors of parents with children aged 10-19 that relate to substance abuse. The Partnership is indebted to MetLife Foundation for its ongoing support of this survey, as well as other activities aimed at improving parents' ability to raise healthy families. This survey is supported by an unrestricted educational grant from the MetLife Foundation.

## **Methodology**

Conducted by deKadt Marketing and Research, the study is a door-to-door national probability survey with 1,004 caregivers of children in grades 4 through 12. Respondent confidentiality was maintained. Surveying was conducted during the summer and fall of 2008.

## Report Highlights

- **There has been significant year-to-year improvement in parents' acceptance of responsibility for preventing or stopping their child's drug use or drinking, and in parents' confidence that they can prevent or stop drug or alcohol use by their tween or teen.**

We see significant variations in these measures of responsibility and confidence, depending on whether the parent respondent is a mother or father, or in what region of the country they live.

- **Parents are increasingly apt to see risk in abuse of prescription drugs, which has emerged as a significant adolescent drug threat; according to the Partnership's annual in-school survey of teens, 19 percent of teens in grades 7-12 report they have used a prescription drug that was not prescribed for them by a doctor.**

Moreover, parents appear to be acting on these perceptions of risk, and talking more in general with their children about drug risks – for instance the risks of cough medicine abuse.

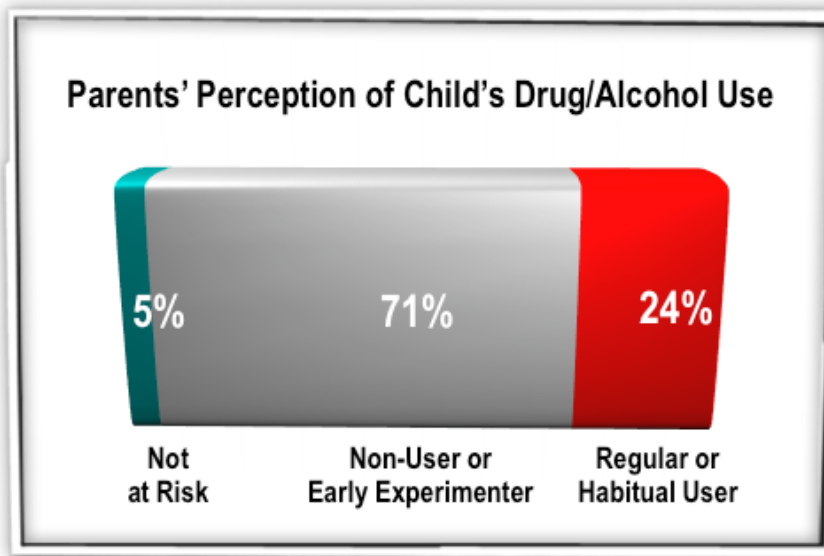
A number of factors may have influenced these improvements in parents' perceptions and behavior, including parent-targeted media efforts intended to raise awareness of teen prescription drug abuse and encourage parents to take preventive action. Examples of these parent-targeted media efforts include the Partnership's Time to Talk, a resource for parents that provides guides and tips for having ongoing conversations with children about the risks of alcohol and drug abuse, The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy's media campaign aimed at increasing parental awareness of the risks of adolescent prescription medicine abuse, and MetLife Foundation's annual parenting skills campaign conducted in cooperation with the Partnership.

# Parents' Perceptions of Child's Drug/Alcohol Use

Parents have many different perceptions about their child's alcohol and/or drug abuse. This research identified three segments or groups of parents based on their perceptions. The following graph demonstrates the span and size of each group from those:

- parents who do not believe that their child will be offered alcohol before turning 21 or ever offered drugs (5%);
- parents who think that their child will be offered alcohol or drugs but don't think that as of the present the child has tried either more than once or twice (71%);
- and, parents who are pretty sure that their child has consumed alcohol or used drugs more than just once or twice or parents who think that their child is a regular user of alcohol or drugs (24%).

The primary reason for the smallest group (5%) to feel their child is not at risk for substance abuse may be that their oldest child is still relatively young compared to the ages of the oldest child of the other two groups.



The largest group (71%), who believe that their child is potentially at risk (being offered alcohol or drugs and maybe trying a substance once or twice), corresponds roughly to the 72% of 12<sup>th</sup> graders reporting having tried alcohol at least once in their lives.

A quarter of parents (24%) perceive that their child is a regular user of drugs or alcohol. This is consistent with 12<sup>th</sup> graders' reporting past month illegal drug use (22%) or having been drunk (28%). (The 12<sup>th</sup> grade prevalences are from the 2008 Monitoring the Future survey.)<sup>1</sup>

Our challenge (at the Partnership and as a society) is to equip parents of regular users to intervene with or get help for their kids, and to provide parents of at-risk or early using kids with the tools and tips they need to prevent (further) use.

<sup>1</sup> Annual national representative survey of approximately 50,000 students in 403 secondary schools, grades 8, 10, 12.

## Parental Self-Confidence

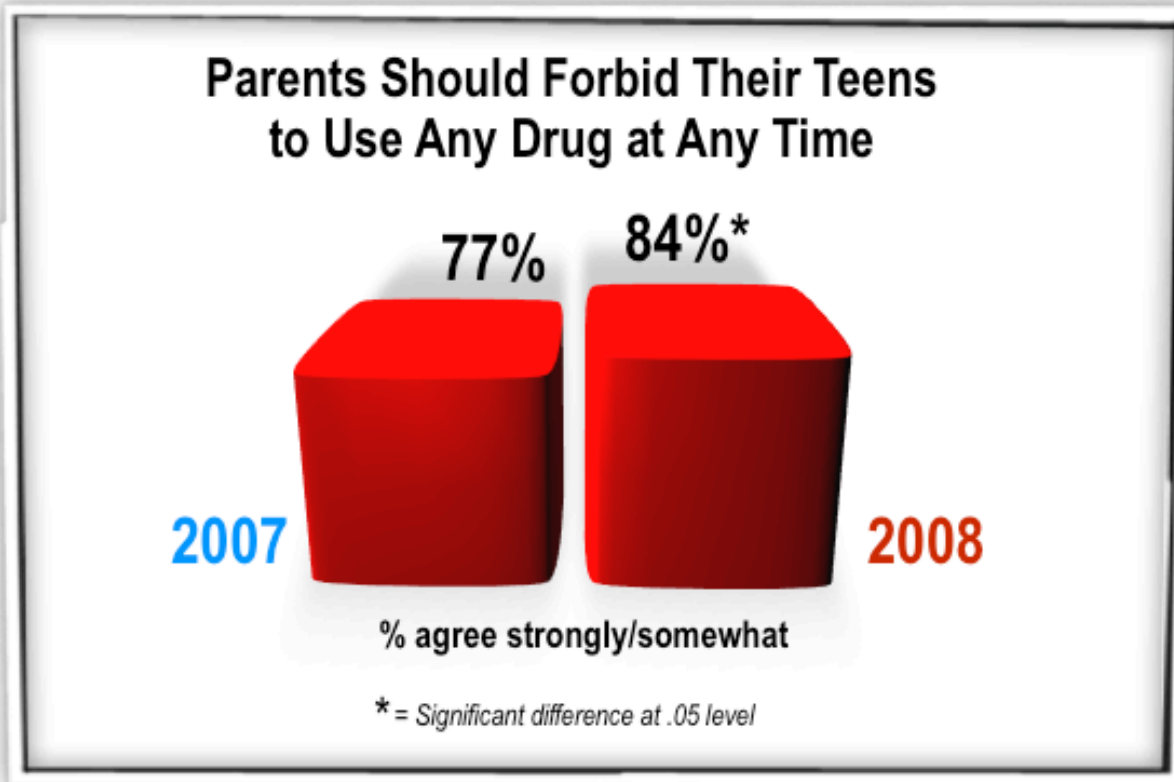
There has been significant year-to-year improvement in parents' acceptance of responsibility for preventing or stopping their child's drug use or drinking, and in parents' confidence that they can prevent or stop drug or alcohol use by their tween or teen.

In order to be effective, parents need to feel that they have the knowledge and the ability to affect their child's behavior. It's critical to the effective prevention and cessation of teen drug and alcohol use that parents understand the importance of their role, that they employ a few basic parenting practices, and that they're aware of the risks of drug and alcohol use and communicate those risks to their children.

- In 2008, we saw improvements in a few key measures pointing to a greater sense of parental responsibility and capability when it comes to keeping their children away from drugs and drinking.

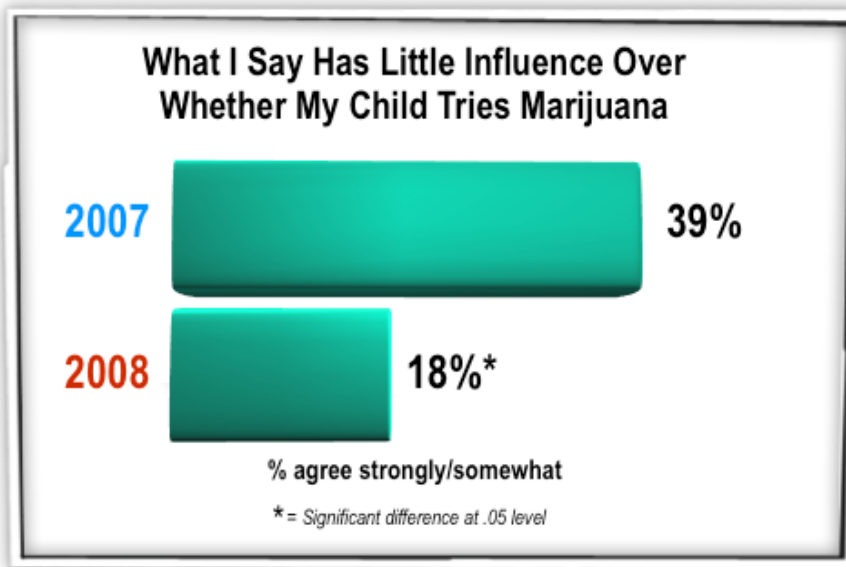
We saw significant increases in parents taking a clear position on drugs with their children, forbidding them to use any drug at any time. (Chart 1)

Chart 1



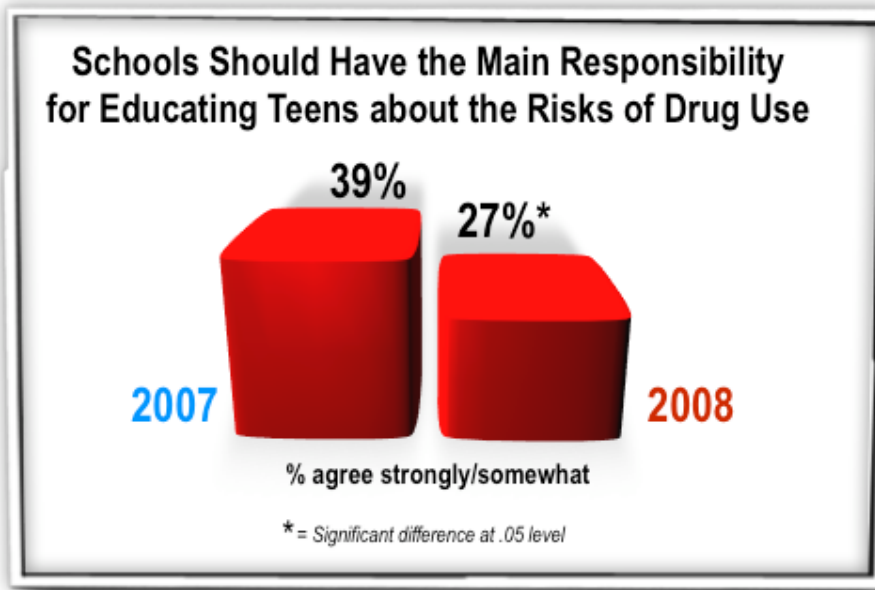
And we saw a significant decrease in parents reporting that what they say has little influence on whether their child tries marijuana (the most prevalent illegal drug behavior among teens). (Chart 2)

Chart 2



As parents gain confidence in their ability to educate their children about the risks of drug and alcohol use, they are more likely to accept the responsibility and less likely to see drug prevention as the duty of other institutions. The 2008 data show fewer parents believing that schools should be primarily responsible for educating kids about the risks of drug use. (Chart 3)

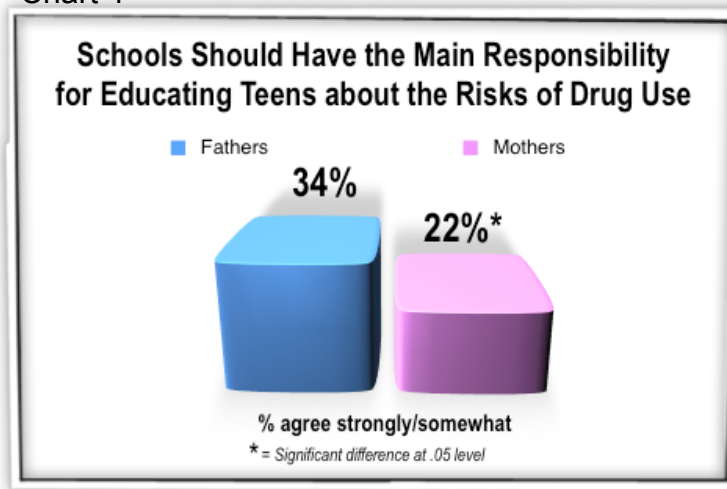
Chart 3



Interestingly, while parents as a whole say they are more confident and feel more responsible for educating their children about drug use, there are significant variations among different segments of the parent population when it comes to these and similar metrics.

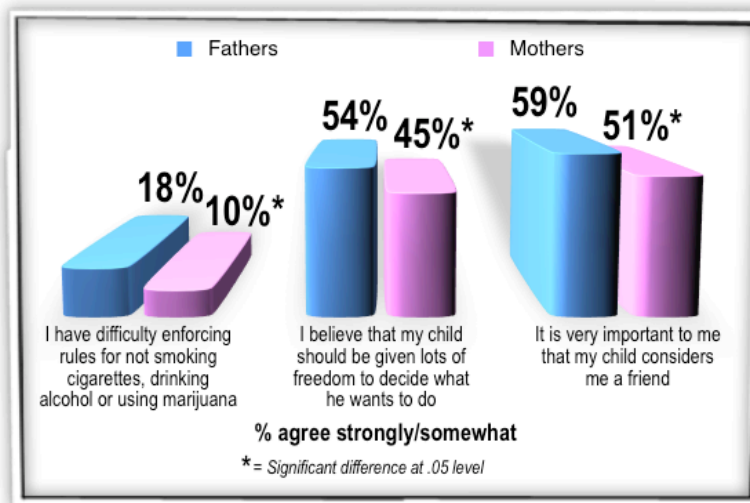
- Mothers and fathers, for example, differ dramatically in their reported belief that schools should take on the main responsibility for educating teens about the risks of drug use. (Chart 4)

Chart 4



- Fathers reported greater difficulty reconciling the desire to have their child see them as a friend with the need to set rules and monitor their teens. (Chart 5)

Chart 5





- Parents’ attitudes, including their feelings of confidence and capability, also vary by region of the country. The patterns that emerge as we look at a variety of different measures actually come close to the stereotype: “bicoastal parents” – in the Northeast and West—appear to be more permissive about teen drinking (or at least more resigned to it), while Midwest parents are more firm. Southern parents are more likely than others to feel they should be a parent, not a friend, to their child, and that it’s not the school’s responsibility to educate their kids about drugs. (Chart 6)

Chart 6

% Agree Strongly / Somewhat	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
There is very little parents can do to prevent their kids from trying alcohol	36*	17	18	24
It is ok if my teen drinks alcohol sometimes	26*	8*	13	17
I do not give in to my teen's demands, even when they cry, whine or nag	82	89*	76*	84
I'd rather my teen consider me a friend than a parent	30	27	20*	34
Schools should have the main responsibility for educating kids about the risks of drug abuse	40*	28	19*	27
I believe my teen should be given lots of freedom to decide what he/she wants to do	39*	53	46	59*
I monitor the behavior of my teen's friends	81	88*	81	67*

\* = Significant difference at .05 level

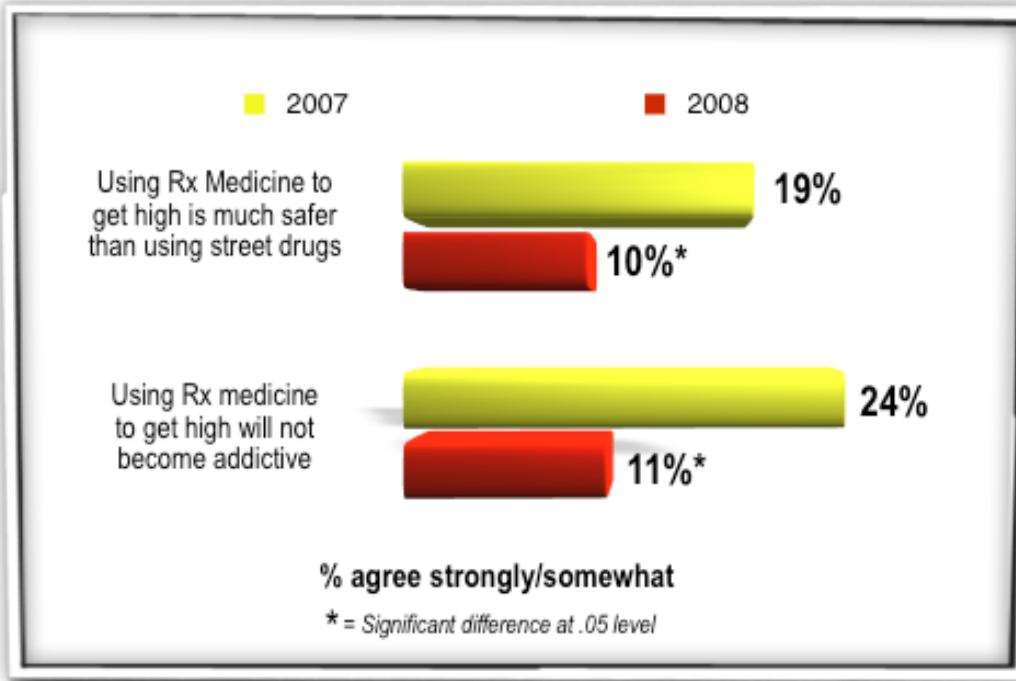
## Parents’ Perceptions of Risk Associated with Prescription Medicine Abuse

All national surveys of adolescent drug use agree that prescription drug abuse has become a major area of concern. While alcohol, cigarettes, and most illegal drugs have shown considerable decreases in use over the past decade, most prescription drugs have not. In reality, many of these prescription drugs have shown an increase in abuse, i.e., use without a doctor’s prescription. “As a result, they have become a relatively more important part of the nation’s drug abuse problem.”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> 2008 *Monitoring the Future* survey

Given the increasing trend in prescription medicine abuse among teens, it is positive that parents in 2008 appeared to be much more knowledgeable about the risks of abusing prescription medicines with nearly half the levels recorded last year regarding their safety. (Chart 7)

Chart 7



## Parents' Conversations with their Children about Drugs and Alcohol

	S	M	T	W	T	F	S		S	M	T	W	T	F	S	
JAN	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	2	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	JUL
FEB	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	AUG
MAR	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	SEP
APR	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	OCT
MAY	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	1	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	NOV
JUN	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	DEC
	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	1	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	
	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	1	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	
	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	1	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	
	29	30						1	28	29	30	31				

- Nine in ten parents discussed drugs with their child/teen during the past year, consistent with the 2007 level.
- These discussions occur approximately five times during the year, no change from 2007.

**Conversations about the dangers and consequences of using alcohol and drugs is an extremely important component of parental education and prevention.**

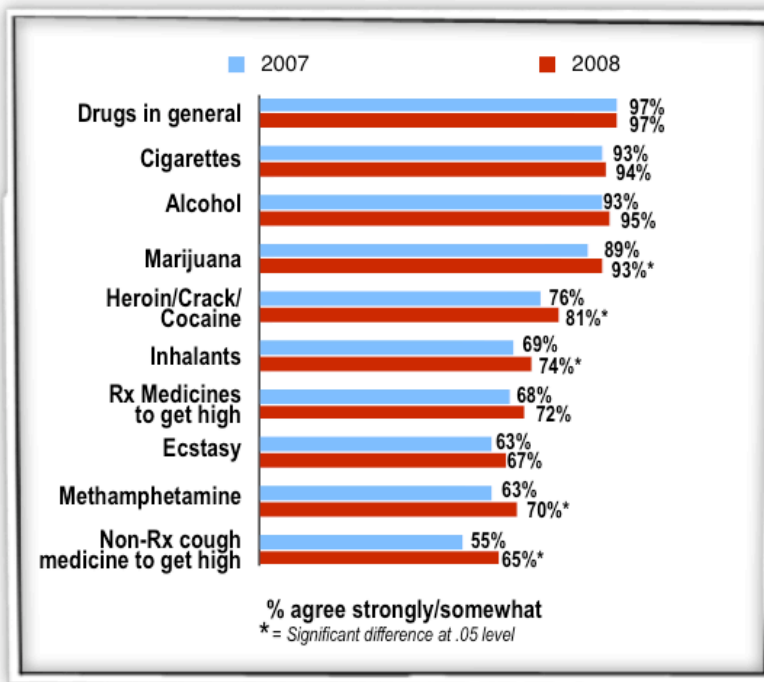
- However, more than just quantity of talks it is the *quality of these discussions that matters*.
  1. Research has shown that teens who learn a lot about the risks of drugs from their parents are up to 50% less likely to try drugs than are teens who report learning nothing about the risks at home.
  2. Parents need to be up-to-date on the latest substances that teens are abusing; today, that goes beyond the traditional beer and marijuana.

Consistently, the top three drug topics mostly likely to be discussed were drugs in general, cigarettes, and alcohol.

However, parents in 2008 were more apt to have discussed several individual drug types with their teen than they were in 2007.

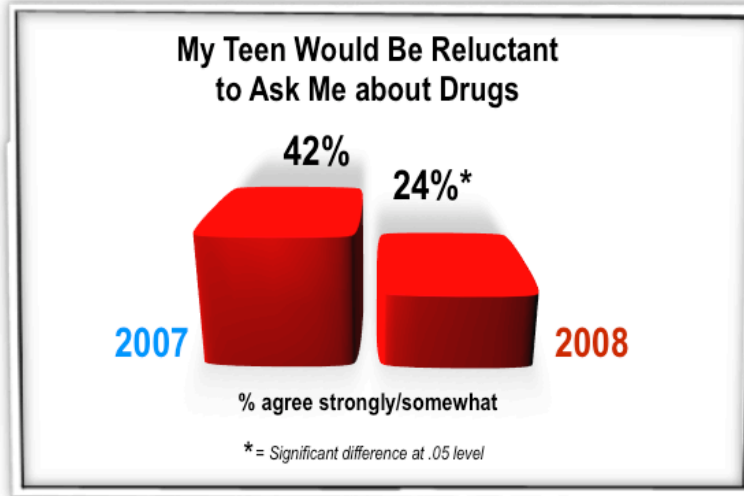
- By educating their teens about the specific drugs and their consequences, they will be better able to thoroughly educate them and make strides toward keeping their teens healthy.
- While discussions about the risks of over-the-counter cough medicine abused to get high significantly increased from 2007 to 2008, those discussions about abusing prescription medicines to get high only grew marginally. (Chart 8)

**Chart 8**



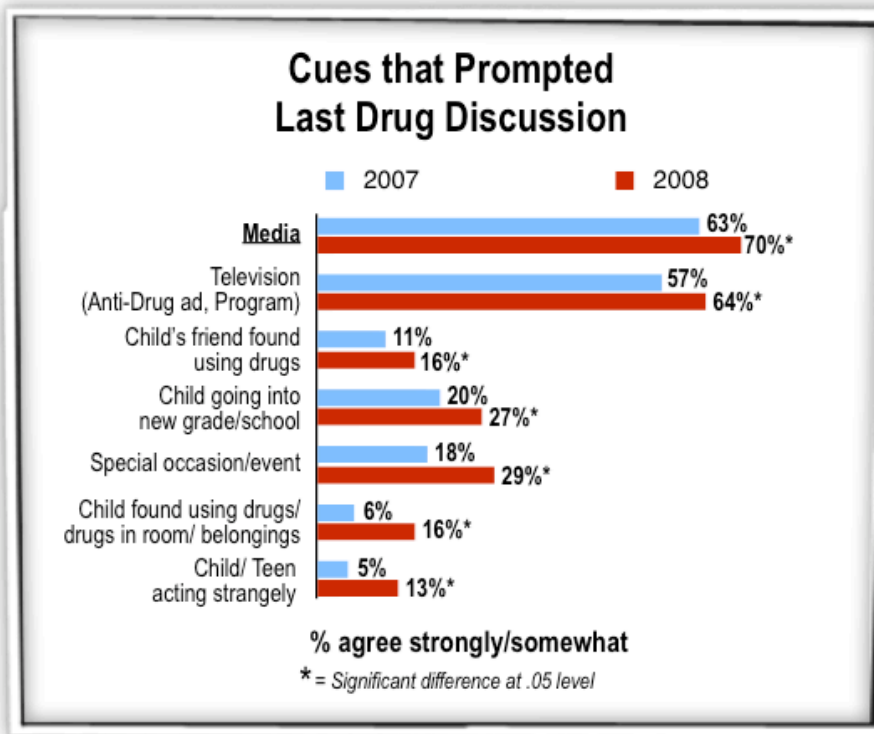
Importantly, parents are less likely to feel their teens would dismiss what they have to say about drugs and more likely to turn to parents for education about the risks of drugs. This correlates with parents' greater sense of self-confidence they feel about their abilities to affect their child's behavior. (Chart 9)

Chart 9



The media (particularly TV) had the most substantial impact on the initiation of a drug-related discussion between parents and children. Compared to 2007, parents have been influenced to a greater extent not only by TV, but also incidents related to the child/teen's life – either his/her behavior, drug use by child/peers, or a transitional/special event in his/her life. (Chart 10)

Chart 10



## Implications

1. While it is encouraging that parents feel more confident they can keep their children away from drugs and drinking, there is still room for improvement and more work to be done. In particular, fathers reported greater difficulty reconciling the desire to have their child see them as a friend with the need to set rules and monitor their teens. There is an opportunity for more fathers to recognize their important role in prevention and to engage more with their children on this important health issue.
2. Given the prevalence and danger of teen abuse of prescription drugs, it is encouraging that parents are now more apt to perceive the risks of this behavior. Nevertheless, this has not yet translated into more frequent parent-reported conversations with their children on the subject of prescription drug abuse. This is a critical gap that we must help address via continuing outreach to parents on the preventive value of parent-child conversations about drug and alcohol abuse in order to safeguard their children from this risky behavior. By educating their teens about the specific drugs and their consequences, they will be better able to thoroughly educate them and make strides toward keeping their teens healthy.
3. Media –especially television—continue to be the most likely cue for parent-child conversations about drugs. While public service announcements are included in this category, there are myriad opportunities in TV programming and news –“teachable moments”—which parents can use to initiate frequent and brief discussions about the risks of drug and alcohol abuse. “Teachable moments” can include steering conversational topics to why drugs are harmful or using every day events to start a conversation about them.
4. Adolescents can be particularly vulnerable to alcohol and drug abuse in periods of transition such as entering middle school or high school, or moving to a new town and a new school. Parents should be especially attentive to their child’s moods and behavior at these times, and be particularly alert for opportunities to initiate conversations about the risks of alcohol and drug abuse.