



Mat Anderson: Teens aren't as bad as most depictions

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— As a teenager, I remember reading innumerable news stories about how crazy my peers and I were and how teens were a troubled group of sexually promiscuous, drug-addicted party animals that cared about nothing but themselves.

I always found this to be a little off-putting because I knew that I wasn't crazy, sexually promiscuous or drug-addicted, and I was pretty sure that the majority of my peers weren't either. But I still wondered if I was an abnormal teen who was just out of the loop about what was cool. This bothered me, because like most teenagers, I desired to fit in and be normal. I wondered, "Am I expected to experiment with drugs and have sex? Am I uncool if I don't?"

Now that I'm older, I've realized that it's probably unlikely that those behaviors are the norm for most teens. However, it's often the negative behaviors of the minority that make headlines and shape the way society views all teens. Experts say that the way teens are portrayed in the media is often far from what is true about their age group. They say false impressions are negatively affecting how parents parent and teachers teach, and how young people think about themselves.

If young people grow up hearing the stereotype that it's normal for them to get drunk or high, have sex, get pregnant or vandalize property, then that may be what they'll end up doing. Experts say this is because during adolescence, teens are trying to find their identity, and a big part of that is fitting in and being part of the crowd.

But according to the Centers for Disease Control, the majority of the crowd hasn't had an alcoholic beverage in the past 30 days, has never tried marijuana, and only 50 percent have had sex.

This reality can be leveraged to promote healthy choices through "social norming." Social norming operates on the notion that if the general impression is that most kids don't drink alcohol, then those who do drink will drink less, and fewer will start drinking in the first place. Several colleges, high schools and middle schools have found this to be highly effective in limiting risky behaviors among young people, and parents can incorporate this same strategy into their parenting style. Here are some tips:

- * Keep the lines of communication open. It's important to have regular conversations with teens that provide them with accurate information about the issues that they face. Remind them that the norm for most teens isn't to go out partying and drinking.

- * Be mindful of the messages you're sending. During prom and graduation season, many parents say things like, "I know everyone else may be drinking but ..." It's important for parents to be aware that the majority of teens won't be drinking and that parents may be subtly sending the message to teens that those behaviors are the norm.

- * Communicate values and morals. It's important for teens to know what the norm is for your family. If teens understand that they are expected to live up to certain shared morals and values regarding behaviors like sex and drinking, then that will affect how they act when outside of the home as well.

- * Be an example. The most important influence on teens is parents, so it's important to demonstrate appropriate behaviors. Your teen will often "do as you do," so it's vital that your actions mirror the behaviors you desire from your teen.

Teens aren't crazy, they're merely trying to find their identity as they transition from childhood to adulthood. While we should be mindful that they will make some mistakes along the way, parents shouldn't sit by and accept a harmful and destructive lifestyle as the norm from anyone they love,

especially their children and the future of our society.

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