



# SADD Op-Ed:

## Triple Threat

### Madness, myths and adolescent risk-taking

**By Stephen G. Wallace**

"Madness may be as old as mankind," wrote noted historian and broadcaster Roy Porter. Sadly, it may also be as new as the latest act of adolescent anarchy. Luckily for teens, recent neurological research – not to mention decades of developmental study – forestalls a marked increase in institutional admittals. But what brain scans don't reveal are three fallacies that often precede the risky practices of millions of young people populating the outer edge of childhood: the myths of inevitability, invincibility and immunity. A triple threat.

Left unchecked, these unreliable, unreasonable perceptions will propel endless generations toward self-defeating thought and action.

*The myth of inevitability* portends an adolescent experience inextricably linked with drinking and other drug use. Aided and abetted by many a mom and dad (original research from SADD and Liberty Mutual Group reveals that many parents consider these behaviors to be just a part of growing up), such social-norming leaves teens with the false impression that "everyone does it." Who doesn't want to try what everyone else is doing?

In truth, not all teens will drink or use drugs. Statistics may make that argument hard to sell, but if three-quarters of 12th graders "do," that means the rest "don't." And that's a whole lot of kids. Young people making good decisions need to be told by adults that they are not alone. Communicating otherwise underestimates their capacity for critical thought and diminishes the extraordinary efforts of peers and parents seeking to provide alternative choices that promote adolescent health and safety. Research makes clear that:

- The activities of peer-to-peer programs have positive effects on the drinking and driving-related attitudes of students; and
- Parents are a major reason that teens choose not to drink or use drugs.

Well, if not predictable, at least kids are invincible. Or so says yet another generation of untouchable teens.

*The myth of invincibility* reflects a developmentally driven faith in one's own immortality and a propensity to believe that bad results are unlikely. But that self-deception comes at considerable cost.

- Even low levels of alcohol can impair brain functioning.
- Underage drinking is associated with violence, suicide, and educational failure.
- Thousands of teens are killed each year in alcohol-related automobile crashes.
- Marijuana use is addictive, directly affects the brain, and has been linked to increased apathy, loss of ambition, diminished ability to pursue long-term goals, and a drop in school performance.

This myth also persuades more than a few rule breakers that detection is similarly unlikely, espe-



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cially given the intricate means of concealment employed by many modern day adolescent practitioners: Only 23% of teens cite fear of getting caught as a reason not to drink, and only 18% list it as a reason not to use drugs.

Delusion and evasion notwithstanding, the job of adults is to make very real – very often – the very likely outcomes of bad choices. Extra vigilance wouldn't hurt, either (a staggering 70% of teens surveyed, for example, said that having their parents wait up for them to come home would make it less likely that they would drink).

Last but not least, a more recent myth seems to be reaching epic proportions: *the myth of immunity*. This myth suggests that personal responsibility, accountability and, dare I say, restitution are the purview of those less clever, less fortunate, or less able to mount an effective (if ridiculous) parent-led defense aimed at undermining institutional authority. Of course, try as we might, it is tough to convince kids that owning up to poor decisions pays lasting dividends in the bank of self-respect and self-discipline. But try we must. Parents, on the other hand, are a different story. While they are right to insist on due process, compelling "evidence" of wrongdoing, and consistency in the application of punishment, they are wrong to blindly defend children whose behaviors warrant consequence. Rules should have reason. Let's get rid of those that don't and enforce the rest.

Shielding kids from timely and appropriate discipline, however severe, hampers their ability to learn from experience, establish internal controls over personal behavior, and assume responsibility for their own actions. None foreshadows healthy functioning later in life.

Breathtaking displays of surprising teen behavior abound from all corners of the country ... behavior born not really of madness but, moreover, of an inability, or unwillingness, to link behavior and outcome. Understandably, young people need guidance to appropriately evaluate risk and support to embrace the positive choices sometimes obscured by the shadow of destructive decisions. They also need help to accept the myths of inevitability, invincibility and immunity for what they are.

Then they can decide on their own.

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](http://www.saddonline.com) or [www.libertymutualinsurance.com](http://www.libertymutualinsurance.com).

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