

# A COALITION

## Helping Teens Avoid Substance Abuse

By Rona Trachtenberg

On any given day, teens across Massachusetts wake up and are confronted with a myriad of overwhelming decisions such as which outfit to wear, how to avoid the class bully, where to sit at lunchtime, and how to pass those pesky MCATs.

Then they have to contend with biological issues such as acne, dental braces, puberty, and hormones. They are constantly questioning and re-evaluating their self-worth. ‘Am I pretty enough to be accepted by the cool crowd? Am I rugged enough to make the sports team? How do I keep getting top grades and not be identified as a nerd or geek?’ And, of course, there is peer pressure to smoke, drink, do drugs and have sex.

The above scenario plays out across all economic backgrounds. More affluent teens may initially seek thrills in dangerous addictions to assuage boredom or to gain parents’ attention, while their less upwardly mobile classmates may be looking for an escape from their personal hell.

Sometimes even the home environment doesn’t provide solace. If the teen is byproduct of a divorce, blended family, feuding siblings, or abused/abusive parent, there may serious psychological repercussions. Depression, teen suicide and Columbine-like massacres are evidence that teens are having trouble coping.

### The best kept secret

Fortunately, parents and teens in Fall River have an ally in this struggle for maturity ... and it is free, easy to attain, and right in your backyard!

**Building Our Lives Drug-Free (BOLD)** is a substance abuse prevention coalition that is comprised of community volunteers, agency representatives, educators, city government, school representatives and youth all working together to create a healthy community for teens.

BOLD’s Advisory Board and five sub-committees achieve their goals of keeping teens addiction-free by using ‘evidence-based’ programs, which means that these programs have been tested, have shown effective results, and have proven successful in nationwide models. More importantly, though, these programs are for parents *as well as* their children. BOLD believes in adults are the strongest role model and that they need the proper tools to help their offspring become responsible citizens. Fall River exemplifies the “It Takes a Village” concept by including the entire community in this important endeavor.

In 2004, BOLD received a grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and was given a small workspace at 386 Stanley Street, on the campus of SSTAR.

Building support gradually, coalition leaders and staff conducted focus groups throughout Fall River to learn what the teens and adults needed to change behaviors and attitudes. They interviewed people from all walks of life. "It was a very rich experience," said BOLD Director Karen Fischer. "The data gave us an accurate picture of what we need to do and how we needed to get the word out."

A mere four years later, BOLD's staff and volunteers personally deliver their drug prevention message to the entire community, placing emphasis on middle school students. Studies show that this age group is the most impressionable, is the earliest to experiment with illegal substances, and is at greater risk for brain, learning development, and behavioral problems if they consume alcohol, drugs, tobacco, inhalants, and unauthorized prescription pharmaceuticals not prescribed for them.

BOLD utilizes educational skits, radio and television spots, word-of-mouth, fun events, meetings, programs, and peer-to-peer counseling to encourage teens to seek healthier outlets and to stay away from abusive substances.

## Scary Statistics

A youth risk behavior survey taken in Fall River Schools showed that, from 2003 to 2005, there was an increase in teen consumption of alcohol and marijuana, and that 30% of teens in Fall River drank alcohol or did illicit drugs.

More than 25% of 8th graders have used alcohol; nearly 8% have used marijuana; and 20% of students have smoked their first cigarette before age 13. (*Be the First to Talk with your Pre-teen about Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drugs: A Family Guide*)

Four out of ten youths who start drinking before the age of 13 will develop alcohol abuse or alcohol dependence at some point in their lives. (*Grant & Dawson, 1997*)

Four out of ten middle and high school students (ages 12-17) who drank alcohol in the past year had a serious problem related to drinking. Incidents of sexual assault, date rape, motor vehicle accidents, drowning incidents, and suicide can occur more commonly among these youths. ([www.health.org/govpubs/RP0990](http://www.health.org/govpubs/RP0990))

45% of 7th and 8th graders in Massachusetts said that it was easy to obtain alcohol. 78% of high school students reported that alcohol was easy to obtain. (*Massachusetts Youth Alcohol Prevention Task Force, 2002*)

Early substance abuse is related female teens becoming pregnant and male teens impregnating girls during their adolescence. (*SAMHSA - Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration*)

On a typical weekend in the United States, an average of one teenager per hour dies in a car crash. More than 45% of these crashes involve alcohol. (*MADD, 2002*)

Four out of five teens have the opportunity to drink alcohol; only three out of five parents believe children have access to alcohol. (*Liberty Mutual, 2001*).

A report by The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University noted that on an average day in 2006, the following number of adolescents, aged 12 to 17, used illegal substances for the first time:

- Nearly 8,000 adolescents drank alcohol for the first time;
- Approximately 4,300 adolescents used an illicit drug for the first time;
- Around 4,000 adolescents smoked cigarettes for the first time;
- Nearly 3,600 adolescents used marijuana for the first time; and
- Approximately 2,500 adolescents abused pain relievers for the first time

However, the scariest statistic, by far, is the number of parents who are in denial about *their* child using and abusing illegal substances.

In October 2007, *Science Daily* published results from the University at Buffalo's Research Institute on Addictions (RIA) stating, "Parents were less aware of the extent of the teen's substance use if the teen was younger (about 14 or 15), and if the parents did less monitoring of what their teens were doing after school, during the evening and on weekends." Also, "parents who are caught up in their own issues or problems, whether stressed, feeling depressed or using alcohol more frequently, also made less accurate reports" of their teens' substance usage.

Teens can get good grades, do their homework on time, complete their household chores and still keep a substance abuse secret from their parents. It's not always easy to discern if a child is using drugs because many of the symptoms are common for youth at this age. So, how can a parent protect his child if he doesn't even know this is going on? What is a parent to do?

## BOLD to the rescue

Fortunately, residents of Fall River can attend three free programs that will give them the proper coping tools and strategies to help their teens survive. These educational opportunities are called: Project Alert, TADA, and Parenting Wisely.

**Project ALERT** is a 12 lesson, one hour a week, program for teens ages 11-14. It is designed to prevent or curb drug use. The program focuses on the substances adolescents use first and most widely: alcohol, tobacco, marijuana and inhalants. The curriculum targets the causes of drug abuse among teens and also promotes personal development using a "hands-on" and interactive teaching approach. This program is the most extensively evaluated program of its kind. BOLD facilitators will come to your child's school or organization.

**TADA! (Teens Against Drug Abuse)**

This is a youth-led peer group that tackles the issues of substance use and raises community awareness through policy change and advocacy. TADA meets every Monday & Wednesday, from 3-5 pm.

**Parenting Wisely** is a 12 lesson, one hour a week, support group for parents (grandparents, guardians, stepparents) of school aged children. Participants learn effective parenting and communication skills including:

- Active Listening- Let your child know that you are listening and trying to understand.
- Using “I” Statements- Help your child understand how you are feeling.
- Assertive Discipline- Learn how to discipline effectively and fairly.
- Contracting- Explaining what you expect from your child and what rewards and punishments will be.

*Parenting Wisely* meets every Wednesday, at 5:30 p.m.

At one recent *Parenting Wisely* gathering, Michelle Medeiros, a pre-nursing student at BCC, explained how nutrition impacts children and active teens. The newest BOLD facilitator and parent of seven children - Barbara Lamonde - brought in specially prepared nutritional food for participants to sample. It was truly an inspirational session as parents shared their stories and suggestions with one another.

BOLD facilitator Karin Wood observed, “I haven’t met a parent who doesn’t love their child. But problems arise due to a lack of parenting skills. No one is given a ‘how to’ manual when children are born. At BOLD, we teach parents how to listen to their children and how to use “I” statements that avoid assigning blame. Once the parent-child relationship is formed using healthy communication, it is easier to deal with many other issues such as substance abuse.”

Mike Aguiar, another BOLD facilitator, added a final plea to parents of teens. “If you’re not able to attend our meetings or events, at least visit us to get some of our free literature that will help guide your conversations with your child:

- Keeping Your Teens Drug Free, A Family Guide
- Navigating The Teen Years
- 7 Ways to Protect Your Teen from Alcohol and Other Drugs
- Preparing Your Young Children for a Healthy, Drug-free Future
- The Science of Addiction
- It Feels So Bad, It Doesn’t Have To
- The Brain’s Response to Inhalants
- Marijuana: Facts Parents Need to Know
- Keeping Youth Drug Free
- To Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking

Doing so much with so little

“BOLD is far more than programs,” adds Director Karen Fischer. “Because of our close working partnerships with community partners and volunteers, we are able to influence changes in policies and procedures to reduce access and discourage use. To prevent use, we need compliance with laws and ordinances. BOLD works to encourage and build community support for enforcement. For example, Fall River Schools rigorously enforce the Massachusetts law prohibiting smoking by anyone on school property. The Fall River police rigorously enforce laws against sales of drug paraphernalia in retail stores. Southcoast Tobacco Control, based in the Fall River Department of Health & Human Services, rigorously enforces ordinances to prevent selling of tobacco products to underage youth.”

And BOLD accomplishes all of its goals with limited funding (only \$100,000) from the federal government, which BOLD has to match through fundraising to avoid losing that precious money. Fortunately, BOLD has received grants from local foundations that have been extremely generous.

“If the federal government were to double our funding,” wished Director Fischer, “we could double our capacity and needs and reach twice as many kids. But that is unlikely to happen because the Federal government wants recipients (like BOLD) to be weaned off their funding source in five years in the hope that the recipient will be independent and self-sufficient. This is a lofty objective for a non-profit, socially conscious group.

Moreover, right now BOLD is approaching its fifth and final funded year. They will have to compete with other organizations that will also be applying for five-year grants from SAMHSA. “Only about thirty percent of grantees receive awards,” warned Director Fischer. “Fortunately, due to BOLD’s progress, we have met and exceeded our requirements for applying, which puts us in good stead, but there are no guarantees.”

### Try this in your town

In towns across Massachusetts, community leaders are banding together to change attitudes and perceptions of parents and those influential in the community in the hope that teens take less risks. For example, there is the New Bedford Prevention Partnership. Its mission is to improve the quality of our neighborhoods by promoting prevention and treatment initiatives related to substance abuse, violence and crime.

The message is clear: If parents truly want their children to grow up free from substance abuse, they must get involved with BOLD’s educational process and participate in BOLD’s excellent programs. If your town doesn’t have this effective tool, talk to the BOLD staff and start one!

### Resources

BOLD ([www.boldcoalition.org](http://www.boldcoalition.org))  
386 Stanley Street, Fall River

Karen Fischer, director  
(508) 324-3537  
E-mail: [kfischer@sstar.org](mailto:kfischer@sstar.org)

New Bedford Prevention Partnership ([www.nbprevention.org](http://www.nbprevention.org))  
Carl Alves, director  
(508) 979-1580  
360 Coggeshall Street, New Bedford  
E-mail: [nbprevpart@aol.com](mailto:nbprevpart@aol.com)

Mass. Health Promotion Catalog Clearinghouse has over 15 different downloadable brochures to help parents say the right words to their children. A few are in Spanish and Portuguese. Visit ([www.maclearinghouse.com/CatalogSuabstanceAbuse.htm](http://www.maclearinghouse.com/CatalogSuabstanceAbuse.htm)) for this crucial information.

# SIDE BAR

## 7 Ways To Protect Your Teen from Alcohol & Other Drugs

((taken directly from brochure with same name, published by Bureau of Substance Abuse Services, Mass. Dept. of Public Health))

- 1) Be a role model for your teen
- 2) Be clear about your expectations
- 3) Set rules, limits and follow through
- 4) Be involved in your teen's life
- 5) Help your teen become well-rounded
- 6) Encourage your teen to try hard in school
- 7) Reach out and support your teen

FACT: The three ingredients needed for drug use are: money, cell phones, and cars

FACT: Alcohol can damage the developing teenage brain.

FACT: Marijuana can cause memory problems, decreases motivation and increases the risk of developing serious mental illness.

FACT: Drug dealers target youth and recruit them to sell to their peers.

FACT: Children imitate adults.