**Is youth substance use “normal’?**

Parents are all about safety, we require our children to wear seatbelts in the car, and we remind them to wear sunscreen and to always look both ways before crossing the street. So why, when it comes to drinking alcohol or smoking cannabis do some parents shrug it off as a “rite of passage” or “ just experimenting?”

Changes in mood and pushing boundaries are all very normal during the teen years, but experimenting with substance use isn’t. It is important to rethink our perception when it comes to youth substance use and stop using it an excuse. It’s **not** true that “everyone vapes” or “everyone drinks.” Understanding why some teens drink or use other substances is a key in helping youth set boundaries and expectations as they grow into young adults.

While the reasons vary for each teen, 2 that I hear a lot are, are “to fitting in” and “relieving stress”. Some teens see substance use as an easy path to making friends or being accepted by a new peer group, this is especially true in early high school. If the kids your teen wants to be friends with, or is hanging out with, are drinking or using substances, they may feel that they need to participate as well or risk being left out.

Also teens may use substances to relieve emotions or stressors. Whether it’s the pressure of everyday teen life or the emotional toll of larger problems and stress, some teens use substances to dull the pain in their lives. Loneliness, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety disorder and other mental health issues are commonly associated with teen substance use. If your teen is using substances, it is important to talk to them about the reasons and seek support for them if needed. Please reach out to Candi Davenport MS LADC at cdavenport@relatemn.org for support or more information.