

The Challenges of Visionary Parenting

by Sophie, Earth, & Fire

In January 2002, Erowid received a grant that made it possible to initiate the Families & Psychoactives Vault. The following is an introduction to the issues we are trying to address with this project.

There are many disparate views on how to live in a world with an ever-increasing variety of psychoactive plants, chemicals, and medications. The prevailing model for the recreational and spiritual use of psychoactives is still one of “zero tolerance”. In this view, there is only one acceptable choice, and all others are unmentionable. Although many people have developed a great deal of sophistication about how to integrate the presence of these substances into a healthy life, it is virtually taboo (and potentially criminal) to teach these insights and skills to younger generations. The current cultural context accepts stories of what doesn’t work but not of what does. This has led to a glaring lack of published stories about successful interactions between young adults and their elders around the topic of drugs.

An important distinction exists between chronicling what hasn’t worked (i.e. “drug war failures”) and visioning what *can* work. Tangible, thoughtful stories can move people to examine their own attitudes and in some cases to learn new modes of thinking and behaving. The lack of positive role models and specific approaches to emulate means that many parents and adults will choose to remain silent rather than being forced to forge their own way into unknown territory.

Despite adolescent recreational drug use being the focus of harsh criminal penalties and strong social disapproval, it remains a persistent feature in the lives of many youth in global, technological cultures. With major national surveys reporting earlier and earlier onset of the use of psychoactives, many parents begin to face the challenges of how to communicate about psychoactives when their children are in junior high or high school (ages 11-18).

In the United States, more than half of students in their final year of high school acknowledge they have used an “illicit substance”.¹ Their initiation is most likely to happen around the age of 16, a time some might argue is a natural transition point from child to adult. Perhaps because our society

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lacks substantive rituals for marking this transition, many young people discover, whether consciously or unconsciously, that their experiences with licit and illicit substances act as *de facto* initiatory, or coming of age, experiences.

While initiatory experiences can be intentional and planned events at which the growing autonomy of the individual child is formally recognized by the parents and family, most initiatory experiences involving psychoactives in the United States are *ad hoc* initiations. These generally

involve teen peers, without parents or long-experienced adults to provide a sense of lifetime cycle. The profoundly important issue of consciousness-management is often left to the first chance encounter with a cute boy or girl with a joint or some ecstasy, the vagaries of rebellious inclinations, or the myriad other reasons teens decide to leap into the murky, fascinating pool of disapproved mind-alterants. But from an “official” standpoint, psychoactives are considered lurking evils that threaten teens and society, rather than being considered a part of the landscape of adolescence.

If we include alcohol and prescription psychoactives in the picture, the number of people in the U.S. who have tried a recreational psychoactive by the time they are 18 reaches more than 80 percent. With this in mind, it seems absurd that we are offered silence and calls of absolute abstinence as the only approved models. It’s clear that parents, adults, and society at large are afraid of the legal liabilities of assisting minors in their trials with psychoactives and that many parents are ignorant and/or scared of the entire concept of intentional consciousness alteration. Add these elements to the ever-present difficulty that adolescents face in navigating the shift from dependent child to independent adult, and we are left with a situation where a majority of people have to rediscover the well-known pitfalls and errors for themselves.

It is rare for parents or other adults to actively engage their younger relatives and children on this topic. Most people realize that it’s natural for kids to experiment, but they don’t want *their* kids involved because

of real and perceived dangers. And there is much to be concerned about: from catastrophic failures like addiction, accidents or bad trips, to discord with other family members over the issue, to arrest, prosecution and legal sanctions.

There are some resources—many subsidized by state and federal taxes—available for the parent who believes in “Just Say No”. Their primary message is that all disapproved psychoactives are functionally equivalent and that intentionally altering one’s consciousness is the moral equivalent of suicide.

But what about the parents, family friends, or older relatives who elect to play an active role in these initiations? Where does this leave the proactive parent? What resources are available that directly target someone who is facing the cross-generational challenge? Parents who want to “talk to their kids about drugs” in a way that moves beyond zero tolerance find themselves with limited outside resources. The resources that *are* available are often hard to find or too generic to meet the specific issues any particular family faces.

Some resources exist in models from traditional cultures, such as ayahuasca-using peoples, tribes with long histories of peyote use, and the like. Unfortunately, while they may offer many useful insights, it is not obvious how these models can be applicable for most people in the U.S. or other highly mobile, media-permeated societies. Powerful psychoactives are omnipresent in our culture, from academic performance-enhancing stimulants such as Ritalin (methylphenidate) and Adderall (amphetamine), to the universally available *Cannabis*, to ecstasy at parties and events. We, as a global society, are faced with a unique set of circumstances that are not likely to fit any previous solution.

It is the goal of Erowid’s Families & Psychoactives project to help publicly document non-prohibitionist role models that parents and families can utilize to make more informed choices. Perhaps accounts that illustrate the routes some families have tried can contribute to the construction of role models to help others through existing and future challenges. With this as the goal, Erowid has been speaking with people who have inspiring or challenging stories to share

about how their families have dealt with psychoactive use. While these efforts have not always been wildly successful, they do broaden the spectrum of the “families and drugs” topic from a non-prohibitionist standpoint.

What resources are available for someone who is facing the cross-generational challenge?

Following is a list of objectives for the first phase of the Families & Psychoactives project:

- 1) Conduct interviews with people who have been part of a family that has discussed or used psychoactives in an intentional manner. Where possible, include both generations involved. For example, where a parent-child interaction has happened, try to get perspectives from both the parent and child.
- 2) Focus on individuals who have had positive experiences in order to document role models and to counter the current imbalance towards stories of tragedy and failure.
- 3) Collect information about what legal and social risks parents and families face for sharing information or psychoactive

substances with younger members of the family.

- 4) Document the common ground that exists between prohibitionist and reform views on this issue; emphasize what people from different ends of the spectrum agree upon.
- 5) Compile links to interviews, articles and organizational resources for people inquiring about parenting, rites of passage, and other family-related topics as they pertain to psychoactives. Include links to both prohibitionist and reform websites.

Erowid is seeking individuals who have first-hand experience with these issues. People who grew up in a household where psychoactives were discussed, parents who have chosen to talk to their children about psychoactives, or others who have had related experiences, and those who are interested in exploring these issues further are invited to contact us at families@erowid.org or visit the Families & Psychoactives Vault.

[Erowid.org/psychoactives/families/](http://erowid.org/psychoactives/families/) ●

1. Monitoring the Future Study, the University of Michigan (2001). *Table 1. Trends in Lifetime Prevalence of Use of Various Drugs for Eighth, Tenth, and Twelfth Graders*. Retrieved August 14, 2002 from: <http://monitoringthefuture.org/data/01data/pr01t1.pdf>

New Books of Interest

- 1 *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics*, Allan Hunt Badiner, Editor.
A series of essays on psychedelics and buddhism by authors such as Huston Smith and Roger Walsh. Beautifully illustrated with visionary art. (Chronicle Books)
- 2 *Brugmansia and Datura*, Ulrike and Hans-Georg Preissel.
A comprehensive identification and cultivation guide for Angel’s Trumpets and thorn Apples. Includes more than a hundred beautiful photographs. (Firefly)
- 3 *The Simple Plant Isoquinolines*, Alexander Shulgin.
A dense reference book for isoquinolines found in cacti and other plants. Not the long-awaited follow-up to PIHKAL/TIHKAL, but a step closer. (Transform)
- 4 *Hallucinogens: A Reader*, Charles Grob, Editor.
A collection of essays from some of the leading writers in the field of psychedelics: Albert Hofmann, Ralph Metzner, Terence McKenna, and more. (Tarcher / Putnam)