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National Survey: Parents Report Increased Awareness of Risks of Teen Prescription Drug Abuse, But Preventative Action Lags

~Media Plays Major Role in Prompting Parent-Teen Discussions about Substance Abuse~

~Mothers Take the Lead in Monitoring, Dads Have Opportunity to Engage More with Kids~

New York, NY (May 4, 2009) – The 14th annual national survey of parents’ attitudes about teen drug and alcohol use was released today by the nonprofit Partnership for a Drug-Free America and MetLife Foundation. The Partnership/MetLife Foundation Parents Attitude Tracking Study (PATS) reveals a strong increase in parental awareness of the dangers of one of the most troubling and persistent trends in teen drug use – teen abuse of prescription medications.

This nationally projectable survey of 1,004 parents of children in grades 4-12 was conducted in-home by the Partnership with major funding beginning in 2008 from MetLife Foundation.

The study highlights remarkable year-over-year progress in increasing parents’ perception of the risks posed by teen abuse of prescription (Rx) medications – an entrenched behavior that nearly 20 percent of teens admit to engaging in during their lifetime.

According to the PATS 2008 survey, in a single year’s time, the number of parents who mistakenly believe that abusing prescription medicines is “much safer” than using illicit street drugs dropped by nearly half—from 19 percent in 2007 to just ten percent in 2008. The same level of progress was reported regarding beliefs about the addictive potential of some prescription medicines when misused. In 2007, 24 percent of parents believed that intentional abuse of prescription medicines would not be addictive. In 2008, that number decreased significantly to 11 percent.

The heightened awareness has yet to translate into increased parental action to prevent the behavior, however. The data show a small, yet statistically insignificant, percentage gain in the number of parents who say they have discussed the dangers of Rx abuse with their teens, from 68 percent in

2007 to 72 percent in 2008. The top three drug topics parents report discussing with teens are drugs in general, cigarettes and alcohol.

“One of the most important things for parents to realize is the immense influence they have in their children’s lives,” said Michal Kane, MIAA Director of Student Services. “It’s encouraging to see that more parents are now aware of the very real health risks of abusing medications, but now parents must take the next step— having frequent, open conversations with their teens to protect them from this dangerous behavior.”

In a related finding, PATS 2008 indicated that parent-teen discussions about the risks of abusing over-the-counter cough medicine have increased nearly 18 percent, with 65 percent of parents reporting these discussions, versus 55 percent in 2007.

Media Prompts Parent-Teen Conversations

The primary – and increasingly influential – cue for parent-teen discussions about drug and alcohol issues is the media, particularly television. In 2008, 70 percent of parents surveyed reported that something portrayed in the media prompted a conversation with their child about drugs or alcohol, and 64 percent specified that they were motivated to start a discussion by seeing something drug-related on television. This represents a significant increase from 2007, when 63 percent and 57 percent of parents, respectively, reported the media in general or television specifically as a cue to talk to teens about substance abuse.

The PATS data also revealed that more parents are prompted to address teen drug or alcohol use before special events, like graduation, and at key transition times when teens are most vulnerable, including starting a new grade or moving into middle or high school. Significantly more parents in 2008 (27 percent) versus 2007 (20 percent) talked to their child or teen as they were preparing to enter a new grade in school, and nearly 30 percent of parents in 2008 used special occasions including prom and graduation as an opportunity to have the conversation, up from just 18 percent in 2007.

“As parents feel more confident talking with their kids about the risks of drug and alcohol use, it is crucial for them to capitalize on opportunities to keep the conversation going,” said Dennis White, President and CEO of MetLife Foundation. “Parents and caregivers can use ‘teachable moments,’ such as a relevant local news story or a show featuring a drug topic, as a natural conversation starter.”

Mothers Take the Lead in Monitoring, Dads Have Opportunity to Engage More With Kids

The 2008 PATS study reveals a jump in the number of parents who are aware of their ability to influence their teens’ decision to use drugs or alcohol. The percentage of parents who agreed with the statement “there is very little parents can do to prevent their kids from trying drugs (other than alcohol)” dropped nearly 40 percent since 2007 to just 21 percent in 2008. More parents believe that

they can help prevent alcohol use as well, with just 23 percent agreeing that there is little parents can do to prevent drinking, down from 34 percent in 2007.

As parents gain confidence in their prevention abilities, they are less likely to view educating kids about the risks of drug use as the responsibility of their child's school. Fewer than 1 in 3 parents (27 percent) in 2008 agreed that schools should be primarily responsible for drug education, down from nearly 40 percent the previous year.

Within the home, however, there are dramatic differences in attitudes between mothers and fathers. Fathers were nearly three times as likely to believe that drug education should take place in school (34 percent of fathers versus 10 percent of mothers). Additionally, fathers report greater difficulty reconciling the desire to have their child see them as a friend with the need to set rules and monitor their teens. Fathers were far more likely (18 percent) to report having difficulty enforcing rules about alcohol, cigarette or drug use than mothers (10 percent). Fathers also placed greater value on being their child's friend (59 percent of fathers, 51 percent of mothers) although the majority of parents thought friendship with their child was important. As mothers take the lead role in monitoring their teens, this creates a unique opportunity for fathers to engage their children on this important health issue.

“Research consistently shows that teens who learn a lot about the risks of drugs at home are up to 50 percent less likely to use, yet many parents have difficulty [talking with their kids about drugs and alcohol](#),” said Michal Kane, MIAA Director of Student Services. “Parents and caregivers have real power in influencing the decisions teens make for themselves.”

The Partnership/MetLife Foundation PATS study is an in-home, anonymous survey conducted for the Partnership and MetLife Foundation by deKadt Marketing and Research with a margin of error of +/- 3 percent. For more information and the full PATS Parents report visit www.drugfree.org.

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The Partnership for a Drug-Free America is a nonprofit organization uniting parents, renowned scientists and communications professionals to help families raise healthy children. The Partnership motivates and equips parents to prevent their children from using drugs and alcohol, intervene when drug and alcohol use is present and find help for family and friends in trouble. The Partnership's site, drugfree.org, translates current research on teen behavior, addiction and treatment into easy to understand tips and tools and connects parents with expert advice and support. For parents who need help starting and maintaining conversations with their kids about drugs and alcohol, Time To Talk, a nationwide parents' movement, offers empowering tips and tools at TimeToTalk.org. The Partnership depends on donations from individuals, corporations, foundations and government.

For over 20 years, MetLife Foundation has provided support for initiatives focusing on substance abuse prevention and education. Since 1999, the Foundation has collaborated with the Partnership for a Drug-Free America on a national public awareness campaign to help parents and caregivers communicate with children about the risks of drug use. MetLife Foundation was established in 1976 by MetLife to carry on its long-standing tradition of corporate contributions and community involvement. For more information about the Foundation, visit www.metlife.org.