



Opinion: Venting about Vaping

Usually Taking the Escalator is focused on substance use and co-occurring treatment approaches. This paper will deviate from the norm as it comes more from a prevention focus. The reason that I am writing this paper is that I often do training for people who work directly with adolescents. Lately I have been getting asked my opinion on what I think should be done about the “Vaping” problem in among teens, particularly within the schools. Up until now, I really didn’t have an answer so I am writing this paper to provide my thoughts and views on the topic of vaping and kids in school. Before reading further keep the following things in mind:

- Although I have worked directly with adolescents for over 20 years, my background is in treatment, not prevention, so I am a little outside of my expertise here. Therefore this is an opinion paper as opposed to a carefully researched article or report
- For the sake of this discussion, when I refer to vaping I am referring to standard nicotine vaping and adolescents, not specifically to marijuana or cannabis use although that is often consumed by vaping these days as well. Marijuana use is and kids a totally different topic altogether whether it is smoked or vaped

With that said here is my viewpoint on how to handle the vaping problem among today’s youth, particularly in the schools:

First let’s get the obvious out of the way by saying that vaping prevention should start at home with parents, way before the vaping age starts. It is extremely important to talk about vaping with kids at a young age. Since many kids are vaping at early ages it is important to start early. The “scared straight” approach focused on fear tactics with kids by telling them “vaping is bad” is less helpful than focusing on the broader goal of working toward raising a kid who will make the self-choice not to vape when later given the opportunity. Learning about peer pressure, resilience and independence: especially empowering kids not to simply want to ‘follow the crowd’ can go much farther than attempting to instill a fear of the harms of vaping. The truth is that talking about harm goes much farther with cigarettes than with vaping because of the enormous amount of proof today that cigarettes are not only harmful, they are deadly. At this point that is an indisputable fact. With vaping, however, we do not have that data and we may never have data anything near what we have for the harms related to smoking tobacco. Although future studies may end up showing that vaping causes some potential health risks, for now there is not much solid evidence about serious health risks and vaping may never be seen as harmful as cigarettes simply because at this time, vaping appears to be much safer and it likely is when compared to smoking.

Consider the reasons why a kid may choose to vape. There are a lot of secondary gains from vaping as a teen, especially among peers and at school. When a kid chooses to vape, he or she gets to be part of a quasi “counter-culture” rebelling against society by breaking the rules; however, it is a much safer way to break the rules. For example, a kid who vapes at school gets to feel like a rebel yet ultimately other than possibly some calls home from teachers and principals and maybe a detention or suspension here or there, there is no real risk for long term consequences. A kid who is a good student is not going to be expelled for vaping. He or she is not jeopardizing their future by vaping. So by choosing to vape, a kid with an adolescent urge to push back against authority can achieve this by vaping without taking any serious long term risks. When you think of the problem this way it helps to see the powerful allure of vaping for many kids. There will always be the ‘rule followers’ who will choose not to vape simply by nature of their personality as some kids are less inclined to want to rebel as teens. However the vaping problem is likely so huge because so many kids do have an age-appropriate desire to resist authority as a teen and what better way to do so than by vaping. By vaping you can “fight the system” without really jeopardizing your future. We likely won’t be hearing stories of kids who got rejected for college admission because of vaping nicotine in High School, for example.

Another secondary gain of vaping is that the vaping subculture within systems such as schools can bring with it a degree of social inclusion. Discussing, sharing, trading, buying/selling, vaping products in adolescent social



circles can have huge social awards. Participating with other youth in the “underground” subculture of sneaking vaping at school can be very rewarding. Vaping with someone in the bathroom or other secret spot at or near school, for instance, can be a huge bonding experience between two kids who otherwise may not even have spoken much to each other. Approaching someone else who vapes may open doorways to conversations that otherwise may have been completely avoided by youth with less social skills for fear of rejection. Being part of the vaping subculture, therefore can be a powerful social reward for youth.

I believe that these secondary gains: fulfilling the adolescent urge to rebel in a safe manner, and social inclusion through the vaping subculture, are at the heart of the vaping issue itself among today’s use. Yes there is an addictive component to vaping but for many, that issue is secondary to these other gains otherwise many kids would not try vaping in the first place, the same way fewer kids these days smoke cigarettes. Cigarette smoking once had the same secondary gains for youth however for cigarettes, the decades of negative press about the severe health risks as well as the vastly increased prices has changed most kids’ view of smoking. Vaping is not currently in the same situation as it is still viewed as new and relatively harmless by most youth

Therefore it is important to keep everything discussed thus far in mind if we are going to tackle the vaping problem. We cannot punish our way out of this problem. Vaping is way too easy to get away with as it is difficult to detect, difficult to smell, and difficult to confiscate, unlike cigarettes. We are not going to scare our way out of the vaping problem as currently there are no real facts strong enough to frighten most teens away from vaping. Plus the scared straight approach has poor outcomes anyway. The popcorn lung example may help deter more health-conscious younger kids before they start. However when it comes to the “popcorn lung” example no one is dying currently from popcorn lung so the vast majority of kids who are already vaping most likely will not stop simply out of fear of popcorn lung.

Based on all of this analysis this would be my plan for addressing the youth vaping issue:

“Money talks” – One lesson we can learn from cigarettes is that the rising prices of cigarettes is definitely a deterrent. There is research to show that raising cigarette prices is directly correlated to a reduction in smoking rates, especially among kids <https://www.tobaccofreekids.org/assets/factsheets/0146.pdf> - It is logical to reason that this would hold true with vaping as well. If it becomes too expensive, that will rule some kids out who simply cannot afford it. Historically financial impact can help with motivation. Making vaping less affordable for kids likely would show some positive results. There is a point where vaping can become financially “not worth it” to many kids if the price outweighed the secondary rewards of vaping

Motivational incentives for not vaping at school – Although there should be generally enforced consequences for vaping at school, punishment should not be the primary focus. Some schools have attacked the vaping problem by going full force with enforcement, surveillance and punishment. Although there should be reasonable consequences for a kid caught vaping at school, treating the vaping issue the same like the “war on drugs” is a losing proposition. Vaping is a problem but it is not severe enough to warrant more serious punishments. For example, it is difficult to imagine a kid who is an A student who is generally a cooperative kid at school, but then suspending him or her simply because of vaping. Instead, why not come up with system for positive reinforcement for kids who choose not to vape? Keep in mind that there will always be a more challenging group of kids that are going to vape no matter what incentives are out there. However, schools can turn the tide in their favor with kids on the fence about vaping by developing some kind of reward system for making the choice not to vape. By attaching some kind of privilege to not vaping that is theirs to lose by vaping, it would likely sway some of the kids who are ambivalent about vaping toward not going that route. Also, if this was done in some kind of creative way that resonates well with the student as a whole, then there potentially could be a culture shift among the students toward viewing vaping at school as a “stupid” choice. To get kids to openly reason among each other: “Why would I want to vape, then I would lose _____ (Insert appealing privilege or motivational incentive here)”



In conclusion, as stated earlier, although some degree of discipline should be part of the picture, we likely are not going to punish our way out of the teen vaping problem, nor is it a matter of increasing surveillance tactics because that does not get to the heart of the issue. Financial deterrents combined with motivational incentives for choosing not to vape seems like a much better strategy. Getting kids to choose on their own not to vape and to sway the school culture toward choosing this wiser course, will likely have a lot more long term influence than repeating the cat and mouse game of “catch me if you can” that only may be serving to increase the rebellious lure of vaping and thereby serve to increase the problem itself.